



Karl Polanyi against postcolonial theory: beyond Eurocentric anti-Eurocentrism

Eren Duzgun¹

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Abstract

Postcolonial theory has been at the forefront of attempts to remedy the problem of Eurocentrism. This article argues that postcolonial theory has not progressed far enough in successfully treating the problem of Eurocentrism, for it has not sufficiently abided by its own methodological underpinnings, i.e., it has not satisfactorily developed its own critique of the “presentist” conceptions of history. More precisely, postcolonial theory has not shown how to make a complete departure from the methodologically presentist conceptions of capitalism, which, in turn, limits our ability to overcome hierarchical readings of global modernity. To problematize and fill this gap, I take an unconventional tack, turning to a seldomly cited figure in debates on Eurocentrism: Karl Polanyi. I contend that although Polanyi places the origins of capitalist modernity in Europe, his historical sociology provides an alternative and more definitive solution for presentism and Eurocentrism. Polanyi’s rejection of the “economistic” and “dualistic” understandings of human life, his insistence on the commonality and diversity of human degradation in the face of capitalist modernity, and his historically specific conception of the “counter-movement” enable a decidedly non-presentist, non-triumphalist, and non-hierarchical narrative of the genesis and development of the modern present.

In a letter to an old friend in 1958, Karl Polanyi wrote that “my life was a “world” life. I lived the life of the human world...my work is devoted to serve to Asia, to Africa, to the new people” (quoted in Block 2001: p. xxi). Polanyi’s words, written towards the end of his life, may sound rather exaggerated or even ironic because Polanyi lived most of his life in the West and rarely wrote about *contemporary* Asia or Africa. Polanyi was raised in Budapest within a Jewish household during a period marked by intense discrimination. Like many others in his generation, he had to migrate several times in search of security and jobs, yet his migrations took him not to the east or south but progressively westwards, first from Budapest to Vienna, to

✉ Eren Duzgun
duzgun.eren@ucy.ac.cy

¹ University of Cyprus, Nicosia, Cyprus

London, then to the USA, and ultimately to Canada. Furthermore, his magnum opus, *The Great Transformation*, does not involve, except some brief remarks on the colonized populations, any systematic treatment of the social and international dynamics of the non-Western world. His subsequent historical and anthropological reflections include analyses on the ancient states of the Middle East and precolonial Africa, but there is only little in these works that can readily explain why Polanyi thought that his “work [was] devoted to serve to Asia, to Africa, to the new people.” What made Polanyi believe that he was in the service of the peoples of the non-Western world although the bulk of his work did not directly address their contemporary concerns?

Few scholars have already hinted that Polanyi’s “substantivist” methodology and specific political vision transcend western, unilinear conceptions of progress, hence countering the epistemology of capitalist modernity (Escobar 1995; Inayatullah and Blaney 1999; Hann 2015; Topik 2001). In this article, I will further develop this line of critique by systematically engaging Polanyi against the background of postcolonial theory. Drawing on Polanyi, I will try to overcome the paradoxes of the postcolonial understanding of anti-Eurocentrism, and by doing so, I will demonstrate the necessity and possibility of an alternative anti-Eurocentrism.

My choice of postcolonial theory is not coincidental. After all, if Eurocentrism is one of the most perennial questions of the social sciences, postcolonial scholars have been at the forefront of attempts to remedy it. Surely, postcolonial theory is a broad church. Its proponents have drawn inspiration from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, such as literature, history, and the social sciences, and have contributed to a multiplicity of thematic debates ranging from the political and aesthetic aspects of postcolonial agency to the possibility of politics, history, and ethics free from the epistemology of the “empire” (Young 1998: p. 5; Gandhi 2019: p. 25). Yet, despite its diversity, one can identify a common concern running through the analyses grounded in postcolonial theory. From the key theoreticians such as Edward Said (1979) and Gayatri Spivak (1999) to the historians affiliated with subaltern studies, such as Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000), and then to the more recent postcolonial interpretations in sociology and International Relations, the postcolonial scholarship has invoked a temporally and spatially sensitive conceptual vocabulary, and by doing so, it has resisted the tendency to read the past in terms of the present, i.e., it has adopted what may be called an “anti-presentist methodology.” Understandably so, for the unitemporal conceptions of time tend to “deploy the present of liberal, capitalist states as the ground for judgement of all pasts, presents and futures” (Hutchings 2008: p. 170). This means that the analytical categories and concepts which the social sciences presume to be universal are not universally and transhistorically applicable; instead, their relevance (especially for the non-Western world) has to be qualified with a view to spatial and temporal specificities (Chakrabarty 2000: p. 4; Seth 2009; Grovogui 2002). As such, postcolonial scholars have rejected presentism and Eurocentrism by defying “the secular, empty, and homogenous time of history” (Chakrabarty 2000: p. 23), i.e., they have insisted on the importance of world-historical time as the key to digesting the multilinear, hybrid, and contested character of global modernity.

Postcolonial theory’s emphasis on world-historical time is thus firmly connected to their stance against Eurocentrism. Presentism reads back in history the spatial

consequences of capitalist modernity, and in doing so, it establishes the west as the privileged locus of modernity. The West is seen to have developed in line with an internal and universal logic, while others are stored away as developmental laggards or sociological exceptions from this general standard of “progress” (Chakrabarty 2000: p. 238). In short, the diagnosis is clear: existing narratives of modernity, “many of which read contemporary (‘standard’) concepts back into history end up reinforcing Eurocentrism” (Bilgin 2016: p. 494). Therefore, Eurocentrism is first and foremost a methodological problem; and the strength of postcolonial theory lies precisely in its effort to transcend methodological presentism, in its attempt to “sketch a world beyond the epistemic limits of the present” (Go 2016: p. 9).

In this article, I will ask to what extent postcolonial theory has accomplished the task it has set out for itself, namely, to formulate a non-Eurocentric understanding of global modernity on the basis of a non-presentist methodology. My argument proceeds in seven sections. In the “Postcolonial theory: problematizing presentism and Eurocentrism” section, I discuss postcolonial theory with respect to the question of presentism and Eurocentrism. In the “Postcolonial theory and global history: beyond presentism?” section, I engage postcolonial theory with a particular brand of global history known as the California School. I argue that while the postcolonial scholarship aptly pinpoints the potentially contradictory aspects of the California School narratives of global history, it has not sufficiently problematized its presentism. Postcolonial theory has not shown how to make a complete departure from the methodologically presentist conceptions of capitalism, which, in turn, limits our ability to overcome hierarchical readings of global modernity. In “Capitalism as rupture: from Chakrabarty to Polanyi,” I show that Dipesh Chakrabarty’s emphasis on the importance of “ruptural” historical narratives in challenging presentism and Eurocentrism can be used as an entry point to Karl Polanyi’s historical sociology. In “Beyond the “economistic fallacy”: overturning Eurocentric priority and diffusionism,” I argue that although Polanyi locates the origins of capitalism in Europe, his critique of the “economistic fallacy” enables a decidedly non-presentist and non-hierarchical narrative of the genesis of the modern present. In the “Beyond the “dualistic fallacy”: overturning Eurocentric epistemologies” section, I contend that Polanyi’s critique of the “formalist” readings of the economy and “dualistic” readings of humanhood poses a fundamental challenge to Eurocentric epistemologies. By refusing to reduce our conception of humanhood to the market shape of things and by countering the compartmentalization of human life into the “material” and the “spiritual,” Polanyi’s historical sociology highlights the unity and diversity of what it means to be “human,” hence facilitating a more variegated understanding of human demands and aspirations. In the “Capitalism and colonialism as “cultural catastrophe”: the universality and diversity of human degradation” section, I demonstrate that although Polanyi’s empirical focus was on the West, he made several analytical and historical observations regarding the commonality of the deteriorating human condition in the face of capitalism and colonialism, which are helpful to comprehend the diversified unity of the human experience under the conditions of capitalist modernity. In “The “counter-movement”: enacting the non-Western agency,” I argue that Polanyi’s notion of the “counter-movement,” if properly read, forces us to shift our analytical focus from the West to the non-Western world. For, while the logic of

counter-movement has been largely (but not wholly) eviscerated in the West in the contemporary world, the non-West has remained its hotbed, more likely to activate the radical political vision embodied in Polanyi's double movement. In conclusion, I provide a summary as well as discuss the implications of my overall argument.

Postcolonial theory: problematizing presentism and Eurocentrism

In his seminal book, *The Making of the English Working Class*, E.P. Thompson writes that his book is an attempt to “rescue” ordinary men and women “from the enormous condescension of posterity” (Thompson 1991: p. 12). Many conventional narratives of English history, according to Thompson, project the present social forms into the past, failing to see the common people in their own terms. The result is the transformation of the present-day *homo economicus* into an anthropological behemoth: a utilitarian beast that constantly lurks from the interstices of history, distorting our understanding of the “moral economies” of the past. Against such homogenizing teleologies, Thompson offers a “history from below,” a history that refuses to view the commoners of the past through the prism of the present. Thompson's effort to turn to “real” historical time mirrors postcolonialism's call for a distinct temporality and conceptual framework to build a non-Eurocentric social science and humanities.

Postcolonial theory refuses to view the past in terms of the present. It calls for a non-presentist methodology for a non-Eurocentric social science, i.e., a methodology that does not read back the socio-spatial parameters of the western-led world order, hence countering the superimposition of “Western” categories onto the non-Western world. For example, Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1979) was by and large driven by a curiosity to uncover the ways in which the Western literary, historical, and political discourses on the Middle East, i.e., Orientalism, were used to justify and rationalize colonialism and imperialism in the present. Critical to the “orientalisation of the orient,” according to Said, was the production of a form of “objective” knowledge that extrapolates back in time the hierarchies of the present (Said 1979: p. 122). Orientalist representations shape the collective memory and modes of understanding between the “East” and the “West”; hence, they “are frequently, if not always, manipulated and intervened in for...purposes of the present” (Said 2000: p. 179).

Said's anti-presentism and his warning about the imposition of western ways of knowing on the orient also find strong echo in the works of other postcolonial theorists. For example, Gayatri Spivak argues that the lexicon and concepts that underlie the modern idea of “development” are Eurocentric by default. The conventional notion of “development” rests on a presentist, stagist, and teleological understanding of history, in which the West is seen as the “ethico-political subject,” whereas the rest are categorized as developmental inferiors, as the “less developed,” the “undeveloped,” or the “underdeveloped.” The unilinearism of the notion of development, therefore, “confirms... (modernity's) disciplining of history as the “(auto)biography of the West”” (Spivak 1999: p. 208). Of course, this is not to deny that “development” may bring certain economic gains. Yet, to justify “development” based on

presumed future benefits is like “a rape that produces a healthy child, whose existence cannot be advanced as a justification for the rape” (Spivak 1999: p. 371). In this sense, “the general ideology of global development” is nothing but “racist paternalism,...its broad politics the silencing of resistance and of the subaltern” (Spivak 1999: p. 373). Spivak, therefore, draws attention to the presentist and Eurocentric bias of “development” as a social science concept. “Development” perpetuates the western/liberal understanding of progress: it has been shaped in the context of European modernity, closely tied to unilinear conceptions of time, and linked to colonial practices of western powers, nationalist elites, and developmental NGOs that systematically erase the (legacy of) non-European ways of being and knowing. Likewise, according to Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000: p. 9), Europe has been able to maintain the ideology of civilization through “stagist theories of history.” Informed by metanarratives of progress, these unilinear histories project the present-day hierarchies back into history, thereby creating the image of Europe as the “primary habitus” of all things modern. Accordingly, the non-West is relegated to a perpetual state of “not-yet,” trapped in the “imaginary waiting room of history” (ibid: pp. 43, 8).

Using social science concepts in a presentist way thus imposes Western ways of knowing and being onto differently constituted pasts, silencing the particularities of the non-Western experience with modernity. Phrased differently, as Achille Mbembe (2006: p. 147) notes in the African context, “presentism...construct[s] an image of Africa as a figure of lack,” i.e., it generates and reproduces “a form of misrecognition which tells us what Africa is not and hardly says anything about what it actually is.” For example, due to their presentism, “political science and development economics...have undermined the very possibility of understanding African economic and political facts.” For, despite the countless critiques leveled against evolutionary narratives of economic and political development, “the academic output in these disciplines continues, almost entirely, in total thrall to these two teleologies” (Mbembe 2001: p. 7).

Postcolonial theory, therefore, counters the naturalization and eternalization of Western categories to underline the importance of “difference” in world history and politics. Reimagining the social sciences from the postcolonial perspective thus forces us to rethink and move beyond the presentist conceptions of history, and as such, it has the potential to activate a powerful critique of Eurocentrism. That said, in my view, it remains debatable to what extent this potential has been fully enabled by postcolonial scholars themselves. Postcolonial theory has not shown how to make a complete departure from the methodologically presentist conceptions of capitalism, which, in turn, limits our ability to overcome hierarchical readings of global modernity. The next section discusses this shortcoming by engaging postcolonial theory in a critical dialog with the California School of global history.

Postcolonial theory and global history: beyond presentism?

In his book *Europe and the People without History*, Eric Wolf (1982: p. 3) notes that “many of us even grew up believing that [the] West has a [distinct] genealogy, according to which ancient Greece begat Rome, Rome begat Christian Europe,

Christian Europe begat the Renaissance, the Renaissance the Enlightenment, the Enlightenment political democracy and the industrial revolution.” According to Wolf, such narratives of the “rise of the West” reproduce not only the false image of autonomously developing societies in history. It also turns history into “a moral success story, a race in time in which” the West as the “virtuous” agent of history wins over the rest, and each step in the development of capitalist modernity is seen only “a precursor of the final apotheosis and not a manifold of social and cultural processes at work in their own time and place.” Against this “myth-making scheme,” Wolf seeks to reverse unilinear conceptions of development. He places both Europe and the non-European world in the context of world-historical time, focusing on the spatial interconnections that made the modern capitalist world. He argues that once these temporal and spatial connections and specificities are recovered, will “the people who claim history as their own and the people to whom history has been denied emerge as participants in the same historical trajectory” (Wolf 1982: pp. 3–4, 23).

Wolf’s theorizing of the development of capitalist modernity, albeit praised for its richness, has been criticized by postcolonial anthropologists for a latent Eurocentrism. Talal Asad (1987), for example, draws attention to a paradox in Wolf’s non-Eurocentric narrative. He argues that even though the West and the non-West “co-authored” the conditions that shaped world capitalism, it is very hard to assume that the West and the non-West played “symmetrical” roles in this process. That is,

It is true that in the innumerable conflicts throughout the world encouraged or initiated by Europe’s expansion the results have not always been what Europeans have wanted... But in the formation and growth of industrial capitalism the main story has been written by Europe, and later also by those who have adopted Europe’s historical project as their own. Of course, this story has always involved struggle. But the struggle has been an unequal one (Asad 1987: p. 604).

By problematizing the assumption of agential equality in the making of capitalist modernity, Asad thus points to a potential contradiction in Wolf’s attempt at overcoming Eurocentric narratives of world history. He warns that given the inevitable differences in agential weight in the making of capitalist modernity, Wolf’s work may inadvertently reinforce a hierarchical reading of world history. Indeed, one may argue that Asad’s early critique of Eric Wolf anticipated much of the postcolonial skepticism towards more recent renditions of “global history.” Take the California School of global history as an example.

The California School has criticized the Eurocentric assumptions about the emergence of capitalism by stressing the existence of highly developed markets, institutions, and technological infrastructure in the non-Western world. For instance, James Blaut seeks to undermine the “uniqueness” of pre-1492 Europe by arguing that Asia and Africa possessed “the same potential for evolution towards capitalism,” i.e., they had most of the preconditions for the development of capitalism, such as long-distance trade, monetized economies, and commercialized rural and urban markets (Blaut 1993: pp. 160–165). Similarly, Kenneth Pomeranz writes that technologically advanced market actors, commercial agriculture, and proto-industrial growth were equally available in certain parts of Asia (mainly China) and Western Europe

(mainly England); therefore, there was no “great divergence” between the West and the East until 1800 (Pomeranz 2000: pp. 16–24). Given that the West and the East were more-or-less at the same level in terms of the sophistication of their economic capabilities, the post-1800 “divergence” can be explained only through the accidental and “extra-economic” factors enjoyed by the West, such as its relative proximity to colonial/natural resources, its colonial and aggressive “identity,” and the existence of favorable “trade winds” facilitating European colonialism (Blaut 1993: pp. 180–182; Pomeranz 2000: pp. 437–445).

Despite sharing similar concerns, however, postcolonial theory is not in complete agreement with the California School. Sanjay Seth, who advanced, to the best of my knowledge, the most systematic engagement with the California School from a postcolonial perspective, raised a three-fold critique. First, according to Seth, “such a strategy...[of] bringing the non-West into the account of the emergence of modernity need not, in and of itself, undermine the Eurocentrism of the conventional account.” For, this position continues to “assign a pivotal role to Europe,” while acknowledging “the “co-production”, as it were, of modernity.” Second, “even if the non-West is made part of the story of modernity..., this only pushes back, or reframes, the question of European exceptionalism: why was it Europe that exploited others, rather than vice versa?” In other words, “even where the normative valence changes – where Europe’s “dynamism” begins to look more like “rapacity” – what is it about Europe that made it unique? can still remain the question.” Third, this intellectual strategy seeking to map out the non-European contributions to modernity is “hostage to (empirical) fortune.” That is, empirically speaking, there is always the risk that non-Western societies may turn out to be not as central to the constitution of modernity as their western counterparts. Of course, “this is...an exceedingly unlikely hypothetical”; yet at least “in principle,” there is such a possibility, which, in turn, according to Seth, points to the limits of existing anti-Eurocentric theorizing in global history (Seth 2016: pp. 5–6).

As such, similar to Asad, Seth draws attention to the potential conundrums of anti-Eurocentrism in global history. Yet, it is debatable if Seth provides a tangible alternative to what he thinks is problematic in the California School narratives of global modernity (cf. Duzgun 2022). He argues that “any intellectual strategy that seeks to delink modernity from Europe principally on historico-empirical grounds may be following a strategy not best suited to its aims” (Seth 2016: p. 6) The way out of this conundrum, he suggests, requires a critical reconsideration of the power relation “between modernity and the knowledge by which we know and describe it” (Seth 2016: p. 9). In other words, this critical rethinking entails an awareness that “modernity and the knowledge that accompanies and constitutes it is not privileged, and is not seen as revealing underlying truths.” Instead, it is “seen as one way of knowing and inhabiting the earth. Only then will our categories, explanations and imagination become as rich, capacious and diverse as the world(s) we actually inhabit” (ibid: p. 12).

It is hard not to concur with these insights; but the point still remains. Seth aptly identifies potentially contradictory premises of the dominant anti-Eurocentric narratives in global history; yet he does not explicate what happens after we acknowledge that power and knowledge are mutually constitutive. Likewise, Chakrabarty (2000:

p. 96) says his aim to “take history...to its limits in order to make its unworking visible,” but it is not clear what the next step is after we register the western bias inherent to history writing. In lieu of explanation, postcolonial scholars emphasize the “heterogeneous,” “intertwined,” “entangled,” “interconnected,” and “hybridized” nature of the global experience with modernity. Yet, hybridity, inter-connectedness, or heterogeneity alone does not adequately address the questions raised by Seth above, nor are they proper substitutes for a macro-historical narrative that systematically defeats presentism and Eurocentrism. At this juncture, I suggest that postcolonial theory would have been able to offer a more effective solution to Eurocentrism if it had pursued its own methodological goals, i.e., if it had developed more systematically its critique of presentism. Let me explain by re-problematizing the California School.

As discussed earlier, the anti-Eurocentric narratives associated with the California School refuse to see the rise of capitalism in terms of the “abilities/advantages” Europe possessed and “blockages” that existed in the non-Western world. They emphasize that the skills, ideologies, and political infrastructure associated with capitalism (such as long-distance trade, monetized economies, private property, technological inventiveness, and commercial actors) were, in fact, present in (some parts of) the non-Western world. Sanjay Seth has already pointed to some of the potential contradictions in the California School rendition of world history. Yet, what Seth tends to overlook is that the California School narratives, albeit empirically extremely rich, have attempted to overcome the pitfalls of the old Eurocentric model without challenging the presentist interpretations of capitalism’s origins. That is, the California School has taken the existence of commerce, merchant classes, and private property as necessary precursors of capitalism in history. Yet, the problem is that all these phenomena, in different yet comparable forms, existed almost throughout history, i.e., they can be dated back to ancient societies. Therefore, their unqualified equation with capitalism risks capitalism’s transhistoricization and naturalization. In other words, by uncritically associating commerce, private property, technology, and etc. with the existence of capitalism in history, the California School tends to presume the prior existence of capitalism to explain the emergence of capitalism. As a result, capitalism boils down to “just more of the same thing” (more markets, more trade, and more technology), i.e., it turns into a teleological, circular, and self-explanatory phenomenon, as if it were something intrinsic to human nature. As such, the California School risks seeing capitalism present at all times and at all places (in embryo form), hence extrapolating back in history the logic and dynamics of the present economic order, that is to say, capitalism (Polanyi 1977; Wood 2001).

The implication is that the circular and presentist explanations of the emergence of capitalism have rendered the California School susceptible to hierarchical readings of world history. For, while extending the “preconditions” of capitalism from the West to *some* parts of the non-Western world, California School has inadvertently created new spatial hierarchies. The California School stops seeing the “antecedents” of capitalism as exclusively Western, thereby undermining the crudest versions of Eurocentric exceptionalism and diffusionism. Yet, it also considers these background conditions to be available only in “some” regions in the non-Western world. For example, Pomeranz adds only early modern China, Japan, and North

India into the same group of economically promising regions as early modern Western Europe (Pomeranz 2000: p. 27). Likewise, according to John Hobson (2004), only China, India, and the Islamic world, alongside Western Europe, had a proto-capitalist potential in history. James Blaut, differently from Hobson and Pomeranz, assumes that all civilizations had a potential to develop capitalism in world history; yet he then confesses that his assumption rooted in the “equal capability of human beings... in all cultures and regions” led him to “theorize well beyond available evidence” especially concerning his argument about precolonial Africa (Blaut 1993: pp. 42, 153). In short, the California School either universalizes capitalism based on (fictional) spatial similarities or offers a non-Eurocentric history only by creating new spatial hierarchies. Few regions or areas from the non-western world are elevated to the same league as Western Europe, yet this is done without supplanting hierarchical readings of world history. Furthermore, the assumption that everyone could be or could have been capitalist tends to perpetuate the problematic assumption that capitalism is better than other modes of life and represents the ultimate understanding of progress, so that everyone must have a potential to develop capitalism in history (Wood 2001; Wallerstein 1997). As such, the California School turns anti-Eurocentrism into a self-defeating exercise (Duzgun 2020).

The contradictions of the California School signal that escaping the trap of Eurocentrism requires postcolonial theory to assert more systematically its own claim for a non-presentist methodology. Postcolonialism needs to challenge the evolutionary view that capitalism is just more of the same thing: capitalism is *not* just more trade, more markets, or more private property. It did *not* emerge once certain European and non-European resources, technologies, or commercial abilities combined and accumulated. A shift from “continuous” to “discontinuous” readings of capitalism is needed. As I will show below, some postcolonial theorists indeed tend to concur with such an analytical strategy, yet without elaborating how to achieve it.

Capitalism as rupture: from Chakrabarty to Polanyi

I have so far argued that postcolonial theory has not sufficiently disturbed presentist narratives of the rise of capitalism, which in turn limited its ability to offer a non-Eurocentric theorization of global modernity. Precisely here we encounter a dilemma, though. For, on the one hand, the argument that capitalism is not a transhistorical and natural phenomenon implies that capitalism must have a spatio-temporal beginning. One the other hand, however, such an intellectual strategy seeking to postulate a specific birthday and birthplace for capitalism runs the risk of “internalism” and Eurocentric exceptionalism. Gurminder Bhambra (2011), for example, argues that any attempt at locating the origins of capitalism in Western Europe inevitably presupposes “internalist” “idea-types,” hence leading to the problematic assumption of European “priority” in history. Such efforts, according to Bhambra, unavoidably feed into hierarchical narratives of world history in which Europe is considered more progressive than and developmentally prior to the non-Western world. Against the depiction of Europe as the sole proprietor of rationality and institutions conducive to capitalism, Bhambra emphasizes the role of colonialism, hence that of the non-Western world in contributing

to the rise of capitalism Europe. Also, she notes, in the same spirit as the California School, that “any logic of...capitalism that can be isolated has been demonstrated to have existed in other places and at other times [such as in India] and so can never be regarded as unique or causal in itself” (Bhambra 2011: p. 138).

I have already discussed the contradictions of such attempts at “equalizing” the world based on the assumption of a universal proto-capitalist past. Likewise, emphasizing the colonial or non-Western “contributions” to the rise of European capitalism falls into a similar logical trap. For, unless one can demonstrate that everyone “contributed” equally to the emergence of European capitalism, this mode of argument tends to build “less important” historical cases, and hence new spatio-temporal hierarchies (Duzgun 2020; 2018). In short, trying to overcome Eurocentrism based on “all-inclusive” narratives of capitalist modernity thus generates logically problematic and normatively unexpected results. That is to say, a “non-internalist” methodology emphasizing the inter-connectedness of world history alone does not deliver a non-hierarchical narrative of global modernity.

Is an alternative anti-Eurocentrism possible beyond this paradox? Postcolonial theory is at pains to depart from presentist and teleological frameworks of explanation, but shies away from providing a truly non-presentist narrative of the rise of capitalism on the grounds that such an explanation would place Europe at the center of world history, hence perpetuating Western exceptionalism and triumphalism. Yet, does it have to be like this? Is it possible to formulate a non-presentist narrative of the rise of capitalism without being enmeshed in Eurocentric triumphalism? Dipesh Chakrabarty suggests that if we could theorize capitalism’s emergence as a “rupture,” perhaps we would have been able to move beyond this dilemma. However, he quickly adds that there have indeed been attempts made in this direction, but to no avail:

Ideas, old and new, about *discontinuities, ruptures, and shifts* in the historical process have from time to time challenged the dominance of historicism, but much written history still remains deeply historicist...This is...what underlies descriptions/explanations in the genre “history of”—capitalism, industrialization, nationalism, and so on (Chakrabarty 2000: p. 23, my emphasis).

In the rest of this paper, I will argue that Karl Polanyi’s historical sociology disproves Chakrabarty’s pessimism regarding the impossibility of a non-historicist narrative of the rise of the modern world. Polanyi’s anti-presentist methodology, his rejection of the “economistic” and “dualistic” understandings of human life, and his insistence on the commonality and diversity of human degradation in the face of capitalist modernity enable a decidedly non-Eurocentric interpretation of the development of the modern present.

Beyond the “economistic fallacy”: overturning Eurocentric priority and diffusionism

Karl Polanyi calls the methodological tendency to project capitalism back in history as the “economistic fallacy.” In this section, I argue that Polanyi’s critique of the economistic fallacy enables him to do precisely what postcolonial theory shies away

from: by emphasizing the ruptural nature of the origins of capitalism, Polanyi helps us advance a historical narrative that does not build spatial or civilizational hierarchies between the West and the non-West.

Polanyi writes the idea of a market functioning according to its own laws has become the organizing principle of our economies since the nineteenth century (Polanyi 2001 [1944]: p. 70). This was a very radical idea, says Polanyi, because “self-regulating” markets could arise only when hitherto never systematically commodified aspects of human life, most notably land and labor, were systematically turned into commodities. Without the systematic commodification of land and labor, it is impossible to assume the operation of a self-regulatory mechanism of demand and supply. However, subjecting labor and land to the competitive compulsions and uncertainties of the marketplace brought about an unprecedented shift in the way in which human beings came to live their lives. For, what appear to be two technical terms, “labor” and “land,” are, in fact, “no other than the human beings themselves of which every society consists and the natural surroundings in which it exists” (Polanyi 2001 [1944]: p. 75). That is, “labor” is just another word for human beings, whereas land is the living substance of our planet, the site of our habitation, the source of our psychical safety and generational stability (Polanyi 2001 [1944]: pp. 79, 187). Therefore, “to include them in the market mechanism means to subordinate the substance of society itself to the laws of the market” (Polanyi 2001 [1944]: p. 75).

Labor and land were not born/made for sale, nor can anyone expect them to behave like commodities when put on the market. Therefore, they can, at best, be “fictitious” commodities (Polanyi 2001 [1944]: ch. 6). Yet, despite their fictitious character, market society’s very existence hinges on its ability to continuously reproduce this fiction. For, without treating and thinking of human beings and nature as “factors of production,” i.e., without treating the planet’s living substance as commodities, it would have been impossible to view the “economy” as an institutionally and motivationally self-regulating sphere of life.

According to Polanyi, self-regulating markets is an anomaly in human history. The conception of the “economy” as an autonomous sphere dictating its own rules over society did not exist in non-capitalist societies anywhere in the world. “Neither under tribal, nor feudal, nor mercantile conditions was there [...] a separate economic system in society” (Polanyi 2001 [1944]: p. 74). For example, “[T]here was nothing in mercantilism, the distinctive policy of the Western nation-state, to presage” the development of self-regulating markets. For, even “where markets were most highly developed, as under the mercantile system,” the economic system, as a rule, “was absorbed in the social system” and showed “no tendency to expand at the expense of the rest” (Polanyi 2001 [1944]: p. 71). In all non-capitalist contexts, the economy either “remained nameless” or had “no obvious meaning,” for the economic process and prices were ultimately limited by human beings’ subsistence requirements. Human economies were organized through different principles such as “reciprocity” and “redistribution,” each of which invoked historically specific economic strategies (e.g., exchange of gifts), relationships (e.g., mutual obligations encoded in “custom,” “religion,” or law), and personal attributes (e.g., honor, dignity, and morality) to ensure the subsistence of the individual and survival of the community as a whole (Polanyi 1957c: pp. 250–252). Relatedly, political and cultural notions constituted the very

basis of economic life, because the sale, status, and function of “property” were not determined by the market, but by customary rules and regulations vital to the reproduction of the society as a whole (Polanyi 2001 [1944]: pp. 52–53).

Neither the principle of reciprocity nor that of redistribution embodied capitalism in itself as a developmental tendency. In neither type of society was there a systematic commodification of land and labor, nor were there “institutionalized markets” to compel and induce economic action driven by a distinctive market rationality in an institutionally separate sphere of the economy (Polanyi 2018 [1947b]: p. 249). In this sense, self-regulating markets are “entirely unprecedented...in the history of the [human] race” because for self-regulating markets to rise the millennia-old motives of subsistence have to be substituted by that of “gain” (Polanyi 2001 [1944]: pp. 43–45).

previously to our time no economy has ever existed that, even in principle, was controlled by markets. In spite of the chorus of academic incantations so persistent in the nineteenth century, gain and profit made on exchange never before played an important part in human economy. Though the institution of the market was fairly common since the later Stone Age, its role was no more than incidental to economic life (Polanyi 2001 [1944]: p. 45).

In this sense, the market system with a distinctive logic, autonomy, and dynamic of its own was completely unknown to our ancestors both in and outside Europe. “[N]ever before our time were markets more than mere accessories of economic life” and, indeed, the emergence of the idea of “self-regulating” markets represented a complete reversal of the way in which past economies functioned (Polanyi 2001 [1944]: p. 71). In order for “self-regulating” markets to self-regulate, a variety of political and institutional arrangements had to be initiated to progressively eliminate the non-market survival strategies that humans previously relied upon (Polanyi 2001 [1944]: p. 92). Most notably, the age-old communal systems of social and moral regulation needed to be eradicated, a process that systematically subordinated the “natural and human substance of society,” i.e., land and labor, to market relations for the first time in history (Polanyi 2001 [1944]: p. 44). In this regard, the transition to market society “resembles more the metamorphosis of the caterpillar than any alteration that can be expressed in terms of continuous growth and development” (*ibid.*). Phrased differently, “pre-dominance of markets emerged not as a matter of degree, but of kind” (Polanyi 2018 [1947a]: p. 203) and the rise of market society represented “a violent break with the conditions that preceded it” (Polanyi 2018 [1977b]: p. 268).

But, how did we end up with capitalism, then? Polanyi (2001 [1944]: p. 32) says “market society was born in England,” but does not provide a detailed narrative of this historical transition. Indeed, at times he tends to make technologically determinist and contradictory arguments by explaining the initial momentum towards capitalism in England with the invention of “machine” (Polanyi 2001 [1944]: pp. 42–43). Furthermore, Polanyi’s discussion of the emergence of capitalism in England involves almost no discussion of Britain as a colonial and imperial power. Yet, despite these problems, his main focus regarding the origins of capitalism is undoubtedly on the creation of a competitive labor market, which he repeatedly says could not be achieved without the use of political and coercive means. In other words, if there is one thing Polanyi stresses the most in his narrative of the transition

to capitalism in England, it is that the emergence of “self-regulating” markets was “nowhere created by mere random acts of exchange,” but was an “institutional setup” (Polanyi 1957b: pp. 240; 1957c: pp. 250–251, 255). The rise of capitalism was not an outcome of the culmination of some evolutionary logic of development, nor could it be a natural result of market actors’ pursuit of self-gain. Put differently, “the gearing of markets into a self-regulating system of tremendous power was not the result of any inherent tendency of markets towards excrescence” (Polanyi 2001 [1944]: p. 60). For, the reduction of human beings and nature to commodity status would have been hardly possible without the use of coercive means. “The road to the free market was opened and kept open by an enormous increase in continuous, centrally organized and controlled interventionism” (Polanyi 2001 [1944]: p. 146). In this sense, “the market has been the outcome of a conscious and often violent intervention on the part of government which imposed the market on society for non-economic ends” (Polanyi 2001 [1944]: p. 258).

As must be clear by now, Polanyi understands the ascendancy of capitalism in a strongly anti-presentist way that does not already contain capitalism’s logic or dynamic as part of historical explanation.¹ Otherwise, he argues, we would fall into the methodological trap of “economistic fallacy.” “The nineteenth century—whether hailing the fact [of market society] as the apex of civilization or deploring it as a cancerous growth—naïvely imagined that such a development was the natural outcome of the spreading of markets” (Polanyi 2001 [1944]: p. 60). In other words, Polanyi accuses liberals (and Marx) of turning market imperatives and principles into permanent features of human history. “Dogmatic evolutionists,” Polanyi (2001 [1944]: p. 60) says, extrapolate back into history the dynamics of market society, and by doing so, they naturalize and universalize “self-regulating” markets, turning them into self-referential and self-birthing phenomena (Polanyi 1977: pp. 14–15). This narrates a world history in which past economies appear to be “miniatures or early specimens of our own” and markets seem to have “come into being unless something was there to prevent it” (Polanyi 1957a: p. xviii, 1977: pp. 14–15). Immediately lost in this narrative is not only the insight that the advent of capitalism represented a historical watershed, but also the possibility of appreciating the diversity of human aspirations and demands.

Economic liberalism labored under the delusion that its practices and methods were the natural outgrowth of a general law of progress. To make them fit the pattern, the principles underlying a self-regulating market were projected backward into the whole history of human civilization (Polanyi 2001 [1944]: p. 280).

Polanyi’s anti-presentist position has two immediate and interrelated implications for a non-Eurocentric understanding of global modernity. First, although he places the origins of capitalism in England, Polanyi’s understanding of the rise of capitalism had nothing to do with the gradual development of commercial, entrepreneurial, environmental, or technological factors. In other words, the existence or absence of these phenomena tells us hardly anything about the specific processes, relations, and

¹ Polanyi’s anti-presentism crystallized in the context of the “oikos debate,” for a lucid discussion, see Dale 2010a: chp. 4.

institutions that led to the initial emergence of capitalism. Instead, once we pursue further Polanyi's emphasis on the institutional foundations and qualitative distinctiveness of capitalism, we can infer that the initial emergence of capitalism can be conceived only as a "contingent" affair. As mentioned above, Polanyi himself did not provide a narrative of the question of origins, but several contemporary studies, which are more explicitly engaged with the "when" and "where" of the origin of capitalism, argue along similar lines, seeing the initial emergence of capitalism as an "unintended" consequence of social and geopolitical struggles in early modern England (e.g., Brenner 1985). They emphasize that (geo)political actors in and outside England acted to reproduce themselves as they were, and while doing so, this led to a contingent process of changing the rules of accessing land, subjecting peasant tenants to competition for market-determined leases in England. In order to ensure their subsistence and generational security, peasants could no longer rely on the age-old custom, but had to continuously transform and "improve" the space and scale of production. Expropriating customary rights and subjecting the peasantry to market imperatives were not a peaceful process, but achieved through violence, threat of eviction, intimidation, and political interference into the viability of peasant production (cf. Polanyi 2001 [1944]: p. 37). Therefore, the implication is that given the unintended emergence and politically driven nature of capitalism, there is no point in building spatial or civilizational hierarchies between the West and the non-West according to the level of development of pre-existing entrepreneurial abilities, rationalities, creative technologies, and so on. Seen in this light, neither the West nor the non-West can be subjected to the hierarchical readings of the transition to capitalism. Emphasizing the ruptural nature and contingent origins of capitalism pre-empts the charge of developmental priority and hierarchical diffusionism in world history.

Second, once we depart from the transhistorical conceptions of capitalism's origins, we begin to register the qualitative sameness of the West and the non-West until quite recently in world history. Polanyi (2001 [1944]: p. 31) writes that "nineteenth-century civilization alone was economic in a different and distinctive sense, for it chose to base itself on a motive only rarely acknowledged as valid in the history of human societies." This is to say that while capitalism emerged in England "unintentionally," in the rest of the world, including continental Europe, capitalist social relations were by and large absent until recent times. Prior to the nineteenth century, the subsistence logic of the economy prevailed both in the West and the non-West. Nowhere in the world was the economy organized in such a way that the motive of gain and "improvement" could override the motive of subsistence and "habitat" (Polanyi 2001 [1944]: chp. 3). In this sense, what marks human history prior to the nineteenth century is "the changelessness of man as a social being. His *natural endowments* reappear with a remarkable constancy in societies of all times and places; and the necessary preconditions of the survival of human society appear to be immutably the same" (Polanyi 2001 [1944]: p. 48, my emphasis). In other words, that what came to be considered "natural" throughout human history both in the West and the non-West was the "embeddedness" of economy in society, to which the market society, as a "disembedded" form of life, constituted the only exception. From this angle, "the differences existing between civilized and "uncivilized" peoples have been vastly exaggerated, especially in the economic sphere,...[as] the

forms of industrial life...[and] the methods of agriculture remained substantially unaltered over the major part of Western and Central Europe until the beginning of the modern age” (Polanyi 2001 [1944]: p. 47).

The economy was thus socially “embedded” until very recently in world history. Furthermore, when capitalism began to spread outside Britain in the nineteenth century, neither in the West nor in the non-West were there “organically” developing capitalisms. In other words, “the emergence of national markets was in no way the result of the gradual and spontaneous emancipation of the economic sphere from governmental control.” Instead, capitalism was developed from “above” both in the West and the non-West “as the outcome of a conscious and often violent intervention on the part of government” (Polanyi 2001 [1944]: p. 258). Furthermore, everywhere in the world did the control of the economic system by the market signal unprecedented changes at social, moral, and psychological levels. Both in and outside Europe the rise of market society required wholesale restructuring of pre-existent values, relations, and institutions, which Polanyi sees not as progress, but as social and cultural “catastrophe” (more on this below).

In short, Polanyi refuses to give in to the presentist readings of history, which, he believes, not only distorted the image of the non-West, but also “fatefully warped Western man’s understanding of himself” (2018 [1947a]: p. 200). Since Polanyi does not read back the logic of market society, he leaves no room for the hierarchical readings of our common non-capitalist past. His critique of the economic fallacy enables an appreciation of the unitary legacy of humankind. By emphasizing the universality of social patterns rooted in our common non-capitalist past, Polanyi defies the use of market mentality as a transhistorical yardstick according to which the richness of human existence in history is conventionally judged and usually found wanting.

Beyond the “dualistic fallacy”: overturning Eurocentric epistemologies

In addition to helping us discover the unity of humankind, Polanyi’s critique of presentism facilitates a defense of “difference” in the face of the homogenizing readings of capitalist modernity (Inayatullah and Blaney 1999). Through Polanyi, we develop a consciousness of our own historically and culturally bounded concepts. Polanyi counters the universalization and transhistoricization of the “market mentality,” which he sees as a “baneful inheritance” of the nineteenth century and a “formidable obstacle” to our understanding of the past, present, and future (Polanyi quoted in Berthoud 1990: p. 177). The rise of “market mentality” went hand in hand with the rise of market society in early nineteenth century, and since then “our social consciousness was cast in its mold” (Polanyi 2001 [1944]: p. 87).

The form in which the nascent reality came to our consciousness was political economy. Its amazing regularities and stunning contradictions had to be fitted into the scheme of philosophy and theology in order to be assimilated

to human meanings... This was the mainspring of the metaphysical forces that secretly sustained the positivists and utilitarians (Polanyi 2001 [1944]: p. 88).

Therefore, not unlike postcolonial theory, Polanyi questions the “epistemological limits of the present.” Social science categories and concepts bear the legacy of the market mentality; hence, their uncritical use risks imposing a utilitarian strait-jacket and capitalist notions of progress on differently constituted societies, preventing a more variegated understanding of human demands and aspirations. In other words, in a market society, “everything [has] to comply with the utilitarian pattern or at least not interfere with the working of the market mechanism,” including “the organization of science, education or religion and the arts” (Polanyi 2018 [1947a]: p. 206). The universalization of concepts and categories derived from the market society obscures the fact that “our views of man and society were violently adjusted to this most artificial of all social settings. Within an almost incredibly short time fantastic views of the human condition became current and gained the status of axioms” (Polanyi 2018 [1947b]: p. 248). As a result, the whole human history began to be understood in terms of the evolutionary growth of a pre-given market rationality. Alternative meanings, rationalities, and ways of organizing our economies are erased. Put differently, “narrow[ing] the sphere of the genus economic specifically to market phenomena...eliminate[s] the greatest part of man’s history from the scene” (Polanyi 2018 [1977b]: p. 264).

Another implication is that such “formalist” readings of the economy distort our understanding of what it means to be “human.” Polanyi argues that capitalism “annihilates all organic forms of existence” by “subjecting land and labor to the laws of the market” (Polanyi 2001 [1944]: p. 171). What this means is that in the course of capitalist transformation, previously existing conceptions of the political and the cultural lose their centrality in people’s social reproduction, which results in a qualitative rupture with the prevailing conceptions of humanity. This constitutes the very basis of the modern split of individuals’ lives into the “private” vs. the “public,” the “professional” vs. the “moral,” and the “economic” vs. the “non-economic.” In other words, under market economy “the fear of starvation” and “the lure of profit” are the only motives considered “economic” and “rational,” whereas “all other incentives, such as honour, pride, solidarity, civic obligation, moral duty or simply a sense of common decency [are] regarded as being motives not related to everyday life, but a rare and more esoteric nature, fatefully summed up in the word “ideal”” (Polanyi 2018 [1947b]: p. 248). As a result, “human society itself [is] organized on dualistic lines, everyday life being handed over to the material, with Sundays reserved for the ideal” (Polanyi 2018 [1947b]: p. 249). Therefore, by confining our conception of humanity to the market shape of things, the formalist understanding of the economy leads to the “dualistic fallacy” (Polanyi 2018 [1947b]: p. 250): it not only reduces the study of human history to a series of apologetic explanations for the aberrations from homo economicus in history (i.e., economic fallacy), but also represses both the unity of life experience and the diversity of what it is to be human both in the past and the present. Thus, the dualistic fallacy, combined with the economic fallacy, institutionalizes the “dehumanization” process rooted in the commodification of human life and nature (Özel 1997: pp. 13–14).

In transcending the transhistorical assumptions of economics and social sciences, Polanyi takes what is called a “substantivist” approach. Polanyi does not take any economic rationality for granted, nor does he presume any transhistorical logic of economic action. Instead, he examines the ways in which economic processes and motives are instituted at different times and places. For example, the rise of capitalist rationality, i.e., the relentless push for commodification, competition, and profit-maximization, is closely tied to the systematic elimination of non-market survival strategies. In this context, as the market becomes the main determinant of income and status, the “threat of hunger” and the competitive pressures and uncertainties of the marketplace render ineffective the pre-existent and alternative logics of economic survival. Endless commodification and gaining profit for profit’s sake becomes the most rational strategy for maintaining and expanding one’s income and status.

The [economy]...has been “separated out” of society as the realm of hunger and gain. Our animal dependence upon food has been bared and the naked fear of starvation permitted to run loose. Our humiliating enslavement to the “material,” which all human culture is designed to mitigate, was deliberately made more rigorous (Polanyi 2018 [1947a]: p. 207).

By contrast, “in the Indian village community and, we might add, under almost every and any type of social organization...in Europe” until recently, societies were organized in such a way that neither societal nor individual existence rested on the commodification of the means life (Polanyi 2001 [1944]: pp. 171–172). The means of subsistence (e.g., land) were not a “need” because people could just take them for granted. In the absence of the “threat of hunger,” people were not compelled to accumulate for accumulation’s sake. Of course, just as in the market society, individuals had their own material interests and wanted to protect and improve their social status and economic assets. But, unlike the market society, economic rationality lied not in the “motive of gain” per se. Social recognition and approbation was obtained in ways starkly different from the gain-for-gain’s sake logic of capitalism. People could achieve their material and social goals only by mobilizing, facilitating, and contributing to the prevailing channels of “reciprocity” and “redistribution” encoded in, say, the relations of religion, state, and kinship (Polanyi 2001 [1944]: p. 48).

The implication is that by acknowledging the multiplicity of economic rationalities in history, Polanyi’s substantivism removes the non-western world from the “waiting room of history.” Polanyi explicitly rejects historical stagism and points to the need for a radical shift from the transhistorical and universal logic of the marketplace to a context-specific understanding of the economy and humanity, hence better accommodating the question of difference in world history. Combined with his emphasis on “social embeddedness” as a universal condition prior to the nineteenth century, Polanyi thus allows us “to ponder simultaneously over the unity of humankind and its obvious diversity” (Berthoud 1990: p. 172).

Furthermore, Polanyi not only overturns the hierarchical readings of the past, but also uses differently constituted societies of the past to think about how to build alternative social orders in the present.

The history of mankind and the place of the economy in it, is not, as the evolutionists would have it, an account of unconscious growth and organic continuity. Such an approach would necessarily obscure some aspects of economic development vital to men in the present phase of transition. For the dogma of organic continuity must, in the last resort, weaken man's power of shaping his own history (Polanyi 2018 [1977a]: p. 261).

In this sense, as Inayatullah and Blaney argue, in Polanyi's thought different forms of economy are "not simply earlier stages of our contemporary market society. [To the contrary] these forms appear as alternatives, throwing our image of market society into relief and raising doubts about its necessity" (Inayatullah and Blaney 1999: p. 326). Polanyi undermines the dominant tendency to reify current social arrangements as natural, and in doing so, he uses the non-capitalist past and the non-western "other" as a source of critical dialog with the modern present, and then mobilizes them all together to imagine post-capitalist ways of being and knowing. In Polanyi's thought, "there is no reason to believe that what is most recent is best [and, for example] the indigenous peoples of the Americas are not remnants, stragglers of history, but rather rich reservoirs of knowledge and practice" (Topik 2001: p. 85).

In short, in attempting to move beyond the two fallacies, i.e., the "economistic fallacy" and the "dualistic fallacy," Polanyi searches for a way to be "fully human" again (to borrow a term from Marx) (Rogan 2017: p. 56). Being fully human is not an invitation to go back to a romanticized pre-modern past, but requires us first to go beyond the "calamity" brought about by capitalism and colonialism, and then try to realize freedom through a new "counter-movement" in the context of a "new civilization" (Polanyi 2018 [1947b]: p. 249). These two steps are what I will probe in the next two sections.

Capitalism and colonialism as "cultural catastrophe": the universality and diversity of human degradation

Polanyi saw both the transition to capitalism in the west and the colonialization in the non-west as "catastrophe." Without losing sight of their temporally specific differences, he considered capitalism and colonialism regressive steps that eroded simultaneously the social embeddedness of our economies and the universal traits of what it means to be human. As such, his perspective is not only an antidote for Euro-centric triumphalism, but also helps to excavate in a temporally sensitive way the universal aspects of human experience under the conditions of capitalist modernity.

At the heart of the "movement" towards industrial capitalism in England, notes Polanyi, "there was an almost miraculous improvement in the tools of production, which was accompanied by a catastrophic dislocation of the lives of the common people" (Polanyi 2001 [1944]: p. 35). Reminiscent of Spivak's "rape" analogy, he argues that no economic "improvement" can justify a system that brings human society to the point of extinction in physical, psychological, and ecological senses (Polanyi 2001 [1944]: p. 76). Not surprisingly, for, "in disposing of a man's labor power, the system would, incidentally, dispose of the physical, psychological, and

moral entity “man” attached to that tag” (Polanyi 2001 [1944]: p. 76). Likewise, human beings carrying on their lives without land are like “being born without hands and feet” (Polanyi 2001 [1944]: p. 187); therefore, when they began to be divorced from land during the transition to capitalism in England, the social fabric was disrupted, with vast populations turning from “decent husbandmen into a mob of beggars and thieves,” “from settled folk into shiftless migrants” with no “social status” and “self-respect” (Polanyi 2001 [1944]: pp. 37, 164, 84). Of course, under the threat of hunger, people would ultimately begin to concede wage labor, but, according to Polanyi, this would not cure but deepen their “degradation.”

In economic terms the worker was certainly exploited: he did not get in exchange that which was his due. But important though this was, it was far from all. In spite of exploitation, he might have been financially better off than before. But a principle quite unfavorable to individual and general happiness was wreaking havoc with his social environment, his neighborhood, his standing in the community, his craft; in a word, with those relationships to nature and man in which his economic existence was formerly embedded. The Industrial Revolution was causing a social dislocation of stupendous proportions, and the problem of poverty was merely the economic aspect of this event (Polanyi 2001 [1944]: pp. 135–136).

In Polanyi’s view, therefore, in the West the de-humanizing impact of capitalism was clear. The Industrial Revolution caused a social and cultural “calamity,” the impact of which no “income figures” or “population statistics” could capture. What is more, Polanyi points out the continuity and expansion of the similar process of social and cultural degradation from the West to the non-Western world through colonialism. He writes “the condition of some native tribes in Africa today carries an unmistakable resemblance to that of the English laboring classes during the early years of the nineteenth century,” “the detribalized, degraded natives of their time” (Polanyi 2001 [1944]: pp. 165, 301). Just as in nineteenth century Europe, in the colonies today the problem is more “cultural” than “economic” per se. In a passage worth quoting at length, Polanyi explains:

The catastrophe of the native community is a direct result of the rapid and violent disruption of the basic institutions of the victim (whether force is used in the process or not does not seem altogether relevant). These institutions are disrupted by the very fact that a market economy is forced upon an entirely differently organized community; labor and land are made into commodities, which, again, is only a short formula for the liquidation of every and any cultural institution in an organic society. Changes in income and population figures are evidently incommensurable with such a process. Not economic exploitation, as often assumed, but the disintegration of the cultural environment of the victim is then the cause of the degradation. The economic process may, naturally, supply the vehicle of the destruction, and almost invariably economic inferiority will make the weaker yield, but the immediate cause of his undoing is not for that reason economic; it lies in the lethal injury to the institutions in which his social existence is embodied (ibid: p. 167).

Besides the liquidation of existing moral economies, human degradation in the colonies hardly disappeared with the advent of the factory system. Just as the “early laborer” in England who “abhorred the factory, where he felt degraded and tortured..., the native [in the colonies]...often resigned himself to work in our fashion only when threatened with corporal punishment, if not physical mutilation.” In this sense, various forms of coerced wage labor as in England and “indentured labor as in the early Americas were the prerequisite of the “willing worker”.” Yet, in either case, what broke the back of the camel was the imposition of ““nature’s penalty”, hunger.” In both contexts, “organic society, which refused to let the individual starve,” had to be annihilated to unravel the fear of hunger (Polanyi 2001 [1944]: p. 173).

All that said, none of this is to suggest that Polanyi simply equates the colonial situation to nineteenth century Europe. Indeed, he is well aware of the temporally and spatially specific differences both within and between the two milieux. For example, Polanyi emphasizes that western imperialism vastly accelerated the pace and scope of capitalist transformation in the colonies, so much so that, for example, a process that may have taken “centuries” in Western Europe was “compressed into a few years or decades” in the colonized regions (Polanyi 2001 [1944]: p. 188). Relatedly, imperialism massively debilitated the ability of colonized peoples to protect themselves from European trade policies and the vagaries of international market competition. For, “the protection that the white man could easily secure for himself through the sovereign status of his communities was out of the reach of the colored man as long as he lacked the prerequisite, political government” (Polanyi 2001 [1944]: p. 192). Likewise, Polanyi acknowledges that the working classes in continental Europe, at least initially, were able to “escape the cultural catastrophe which followed in the wake of the Industrial Revolution in England.” Partly due to the timing of industrialization and partly to the hard lessons learned from the English experience, the continental laborer did not have to go through “the degrading pauperization” experienced by the English working class. “From the status of a villain he changed-or rather rose-to that of a factory worker, and very soon to that of an enfranchised and unionized worker” (Polanyi 2001 [1944]: p. 184). The heyday of social and cultural degradation on the continent was yet to come; it had to wait until the crushing rise of fascism.

In short, placing the origins of capitalism in Europe no way prevents Polanyi from providing a deeply non-Eurocentric account of the transition to capitalism (cf. Holmwood 2016). He does not understand the transition to capitalism as “progress.” He compares and integrates the European and colonial situation, shedding light on the commonality of human degradation caused by the dynamics of capitalist modernity. He reveals that “racial debasement” in the colonies and “class degradation” in the West were just different sides of the same coin (Polanyi 2001 [1944]: p. 303). Both were the direct or indirect products of a “utopian experiment” to make the “market mechanism the sole director of the fate of human beings and their natural environment” (ibid.: p. 76). Polanyi’s analysis of the commonality of human degradation is thus diametrically opposed to the conceptual arsenal and normative assumptions underlying the conventional interpretation of the rise of the West.

The “counter-movement”: enacting the non-Western agency

We have already scrutinized the way in which Polanyi analyzed the “movement” towards the establishment of self-regulating markets. What awaits examination in this section is the other side of his grand narrative of the “double movement,” i.e., his conceptualization of the counter-movement and its implications for a non-Eurocentric reading of global modernity. Polanyi was adamant that the market society, which might be considered economically beneficial in the long run, could not be born in the present without threatening the destruction of the social and cultural fabric. No wonder society resisted its reduction into a mere appendage of the market. For example, the reactions of the working class and the peasantry led to factory laws, agrarian tariffs, and universal suffrage, whereas capitalists tried to protect themselves from the vagaries of the marketplace through customs tariffs and monetary policies (Polanyi 2001 [1944]: p. 136).

However, according to Polanyi, it was very hard, if not impossible, in the long run to sustain the co-existence of protective measures and the imperatives of the marketplace. In particular, from the end of the nineteenth century, the working classes in Europe began to obtain voting rights, hence becoming influential political actors within their respective states. While the working class influence on statecraft led to attempts to interfere with and restructure the operation of the self-regulating markets, these efforts often curbed profitability, to which capitalists responded by investment strikes and job cuts. Therefore, capitalists could not get rid of the working class radicalism entrenched in parliaments. But the working class could not force capitalists to invest and create jobs either. In other words, as long as the working class remained loyal to the institutional structure of the market society (instead of seeking its complete overhaul), their radicalism, at least in the long run, backfired, producing unemployment, inflation, and further chaos. Indeed, according to Polanyi, precisely this dilemma brought the western world to a “perilous deadlock” during the interwar years, from which fascism sprang. “Society took measures to protect itself, but whatever measures it took impaired the self-regulation of the market, disorganized industrial life, and thus endangered society in yet another way” (Polanyi 2001 [1944]: pp. 3–4, 140, 244). The bottomline, therefore, is that although Polanyi recognized the need of taming the markets, he also pointed to the impossibility of such an endeavor. Instead of defending protective interventions per se, he argued that radicalizing protection and democracy without seeking to overthrow the market society in toto led to nothing but a grave social and institutional impasse, ultimately giving birth to fascism in Europe.²

Two important consequences ensue from these analyses. On the one hand, the counter-movement is potentially a global phenomenon; it arises wherever societal reactions seek to go beyond the logic of the market system based on a new repertoire of social mobilization and in quest of an alternative mode of life. Capitalism, according to Polanyi, paralyzes our social imagination: it distorts “man’s essential wholeness,” reducing us to restless mice running on a treadmill. Thus, Polanyi charges the

² Surely, the counter-movement is not an unambiguous term; the questions as to how the markets can be “tamed” and what the processes of taming really entail in Polanyi’s thought have led to widely differing interpretations of what is meant by “counter-movement.” A detailed overview of this discussion is beyond the scope of the present article. For a discussion, see Lacher (2019); Block and Somers (2014); Dale (2010b); and Duzgun (2024, 2021).

counter-movement “with the vital task of restoring the fullness of life to the person, even though this may mean a technologically less efficient society” (Polanyi 2018[1947a]: pp. 207–208). Given his insistence that human degradation caused by capitalism and colonialism cannot be reduced to monetary concerns, no wonder Polanyi’s counter-movement entails a global strategy to reclaim people’s status and self-respect in the context of a new moral economy. At stake is a “new civilization” that seeks to restore the unity of life, re-absorb the economic system in society, and readjust our creative potential in the context of a new industrial environment. In other words, this is a new social order in which “the property system” should be subordinated “to the requirements of human values,” i.e., “land, money and labour should not be left to the market” (Polanyi quoted in Lacher 2020: p. 168). Thus, the counter-movement is potentially a global strategy to become “fully human” again.

On the other hand, Polanyi hints that the potential for the counter-movement, however global in principle, may be historically changing and shrinking as well.

Since the market was permitted to grind the human fabric into the featureless uniformity of selenic erosion has man’s institutional creativeness been in abeyance. No wonder that his social imagination shows signs of fatigue. It may come to a point where he will no longer be able to recover the elasticity, the imaginative wealth and power, of his savage endowment (Polanyi 2018 [1947a]: p. 207).

Indeed, Lacher’s recent work on Polanyi lends indirect support to this interpretation. Lacher draws attention to the fact that in *The Great Transformation* Polanyi’s narrative of the double movement is overwhelmingly about Britain and Western Europe, whereas he barely mentions the USA, which was, via the New Deal, undoubtedly one of the most innovative theaters of market “regulation” during the interwar period. This curious omission, according to Lacher, was because Polanyi, writing towards the end of World War II, saw only little, if any, chance for a socialist transformation in the USA. Polanyi thought (perhaps rather misguidedly) that capitalism was already firmly consolidated in the USA for a number of reasons, including, first and foremost, the complete assimilation of the American working class into the culture of capitalism. By contrast, he devoted the *Great Transformation* to the analyses of the double movement in Europe, because that was the only place in the West, where, he hoped, following the impending defeat of fascism, a new momentum towards socialism could develop (Lacher 2019; 2020). In short, while Polanyi excluded the most “advanced” capitalist country in the world from his grand narrative of the great transformation, he concentrated his empirical focus on Europe, where, he thought, the working class would draw lessons from the calamities of the past century and establish a new mode of life beyond the orbit of capitalism. More specifically, while showing the self-defeating nature of the “efforts to reform and humanize capitalism,” Polanyi’s *Great Transformation* was intended to serve as

a reminder for the European working class that in the post-war period they “must not fall for the illusions that capitalism could be tamed and overcome from within” (Lacher 2019: p. 704).

Therefore, Polanyi did not use the counter-movement to capture the institutional and developmental variations in a firmly entrenched international capitalist order. Instead, he used the concept to make sense of the social dynamics in a historically specific time and space, which, according to Polanyi, was before the consolidation of capitalism in the West, hence in a context in which “embeddedness” still had an entirely different meaning. Put differently, for Polanyi, the radical dynamics of “re-embedding” were still active in Europe during his lifetime; therefore, the counter-movement did not mean mere reform or modification of national capitalisms, but their overthrow.

This insight, in turn, entails a critical consequence to re-enact the non-Western agency in the making of alternative modernities. With hindsight, we can conclude that Polanyi has been proved both wrong and right. He was wrong with respect to his prediction that Europe would be the bastion of a new counter-movement in the world. Nor could he foresee the fact that the market society and social democracy would be successfully stabilized in Europe—at least in the short run. Of course, Polanyi has been proven right in the longer run; for, even these “harmless” forms of social democracy are no longer conceived as a viable option after the neoliberal turn in the global political economy.

Yet the point still remains: the working class in Western Europe has lost its drive for the kind of counter-movement Polanyi would have expected. Following the disappearance of earlier cultural codes, a hypercompetitive, consumerist, and politically docile subjectivity, fortified and controlled by new technologies of surveillance and debt, has eventually prevailed among the working classes, rendering almost impossible to imagine a world beyond capitalism in the *core* countries of the West.

The implication is that although Polanyi’s empirical focus was on the West, the inner logic of the double movement forces us to shift our analytical focus from the Global North to the Global South. For, in the contemporary world, while the radical logic of the double movement has been largely (but not wholly) eviscerated in the core countries of the West, the Global South is more likely to activate the radical vision of Polanyi’s double movement. Given the relative instability of capitalist social relations, alongside the inequalities related to global climate injustice, the Global South has long been the hotbed for the kind of counter-movement Polanyi would have hoped for. For one thing, while none of the successful revolutions of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries took place in the West, the Global South has become the breeding ground for the emergence of a variety of counter-movements under new spatial and temporal circumstances (e.g., Goodwin 2018; Zayed 2022). From the revolutions of the first half of the century in Iran, Mexico, Russia, Turkey, and China to the anti-colonial uprisings of the Cold War years in Egypt, Algeria, Cuba, Vietnam, Ethiopia, and Angola and then to the post-cold war riots and revolutions in Oaxaca, the Middle East, and Rojava, the peoples in the Global South have breathed, to varying degrees, new life into the global culture of counter-movement, giving birth to novel ways of being and knowing in the face of the universalist market criteria (Scott 1985). In the Middle East, for example, the postcolonial states could gain popular legitimacy only through generous subsistence

guarantees and land reforms. Indeed, the social contract that characterized these popular/authoritarian developmental regimes has been eroded since the 1970s; yet the recent wave of revolutions and riots associated with the Arab Spring show us that the memory of lost rights is still fresh and that the earlier notions of subsistence and justice, alongside the indigenous notions of moral economy, are still seen legitimate and invoked to advance novel forms of struggle (Heydemann 2013).

Of course, political and economic elites of the Global South, often allied with western imperialism, have brutally suppressed the radical spirit of the counter-movements which they originally led. Yet, the brutality of these nationalist regimes is just another testimony to the intensity and radical nature of the counter-movements in the Global South. In this context, no wonder several anti-colonial philosophers, revolutionaries, and bureaucrats of the recent past from Cabral, Fanon, and Che Guevara to the évolués of African or Asian origin have emerged as the new agents of the Polanyian counter-movements whose impact went much beyond the Global South. Just as Polanyi who rejected to identify “democracy with capitalism and progress with colonialism” (Polanyi quoted in Polanyi-Levitt 1990: p. 260), anti-colonial thinkers proclaimed allegiance to egalitarianism, critical humanism, and democracy while distancing themselves from the strictures of capitalist modernity (Grovogui 2006: p. 11; Bogues 2011: p. 200). As such, they not only dramatically “extended the boundaries of liberal procedural equality” but also led to new derivations of the cumulatively developing heritage of the counter-movement. Indeed, as their defense of equality and humanity translated into demands for independence from all forms of economic and political as well as colonial oppression, anti-colonial ideas became popular among dissidents in the West, who used them extensively to re-radicalize their own vision of the counter-movement (Grovogui 2006: p. 14).

All that said, however, the point I have initially raised remains. Although Polanyi was alive at the time of some of these anti-colonial or anti-capitalist upheavals in the non-Western world, he chose not to write about them. Yet, the discussion above shows that regardless of his lack of empirical focus on the non-West, the inner logic of Polanyi’s counter-movement inevitably shifts our analytical gaze from the West to the non-Western world. Polanyi envisioned that the “counter-movement” could initiate a learning process between the past and the present, as well as between the Western and non-Western perspectives. The ultimate goal was to nurture novel global horizontal solidarities against capitalism. In some regions of the Global South, it seems that radical ideals associated with the counter-movement are not only persisting but are also more dynamic compared to the Global North. These regions are actively contributing to the type of counter-movement that aligns with Polanyi’s aspirations. Perhaps, this is precisely why Polanyi could still think that his work “was devoted to serve to Asia, to Africa, to the new people” although he himself did not directly address their contemporary concerns.

Conclusion

One of the main takeaways from the postcolonial critique of global history is that Eurocentrism cannot be undone simply by adding more insights from the world's marginalized regions. In other words, adding in new voices from the Global South, however plausible, does not necessarily problematize the Eurocentric biases of global history. Eurocentrism, therefore, is an empirical and methodological problem at once. Underlying the postcolonial critique of capitalist modernity is a temporally sensitive methodology that refuses to view the past in terms of the present. "Presentism" obscures that the core categories and concepts used to analyze world-historical "development" have their origins in an ideal-typical understanding of the European experience with modernity. Utilizing these categories in a way that disregards their socio-temporal specificities, therefore, introduces a Eurocentric bias to our analysis of world politics. Yet, to what extent postcolonial theory has been able to fully apprehend this non-presentist potential remains debatable. In particular, I have argued that postcolonial scholars have not sufficiently problematized the historical narratives that propel capitalism backwards into history, which, in turn, limits their ability to overcome hierarchical readings of global modernity.

In this article, I have brought in Karl Polanyi to interrogate the possibility of an alternative anti-Eurocentrism. I have shown that although Polanyi's work did not sufficiently engage with the non-Western world on an empirical level, it provided important analytical tools to deepen sociological imagination in ways that help to overcome the paradox of anti-Eurocentrism diagnosed in this article. My argument has had four pillars. First, I have contended that Polanyi's critique of the economic fallacy refuses to see the emergence of market society in an evolutionary way. A non-presentist conception of capitalism allows us to conceive of capitalism as a contingent rupture in human history whose origins cannot be understood as a cumulative process. As Polanyi does not see capitalism as constantly present in the interstices of history, he does not hierarchically categorize the world according to the presence or absence of the so-called precursors of capitalism in history, namely, trade, private property, and wage labor. This, in turn, enables a non-hierarchical understanding of the question of the origins and expansion of capitalism. From Polanyi's perspective, therefore, the non-West no longer develops as a deviation from or replication of a conventionally understood Western "path" to modernity. Non-Western societies were never poor imitations of capitalism; nor are they appreciated solely for the extent of their contribution to the rise of capitalism in Europe. Second, Polanyi's adoption of a substantivist notion of the economy, alongside his critique of the "economic" and "dualistic" fallacies, poses a fundamental challenge to Eurocentric epistemologies, as it refuses to reduce our conception of humanity to market rationality and seeks to overcome the split of human life into the "material" and the "ideal." As such, it facilitates a deeper understanding of the unity and diversity of what it means to be "human," hence shedding light on the multiplicity of human demands and aspirations in the constitution of global modernity. Third, although Polanyi locates

the origins of capitalism in Europe, I have demonstrated that he made several analytical and historical observations regarding the unity and diversity of human suffering in the face of capitalism and colonialism, which, in turn, pre-empt the charge of Eurocentric triumphalism and diffusionism. His understanding of capitalism and colonialism as cultural catastrophe and his emphasis on the “human” cost of this unprecedented transformation enable a radical shift from the usual interpretations and indicators of progress such as growth in productivity, wages, and consumption to such questions as “what did we lose in the past?” and “how can we recover and re-interpret it in the present context?” Such questions, in turn, propel a constant dialog between the past and the present and between the West and the non-West to rethink and cultivate the conditions of global solidarity and resistance in the contemporary context. Lastly, Polanyi hoped that the “counter-movement” would lead to a process of learning between the past and the present, the West and the non-West, ultimately fostering new horizontal anti-capitalist solidarities across the world. Yet, I have contended that the homo economicus eventually prevailed in the core countries of the West, with social atomism coming a long way in “grind[ing] the human fabric into the featureless uniformity of selenic erosion.” By contrast, in most places in the Global South, it appears that the radical vision of the counter-movement is still alive, or at least, more active than the Global North, contributing more energetically to the kinds of counter-movement Polanyi himself would have hoped for. Therefore, Polanyi’s counter-movement enacts the Global South as the engine of the making of alternative modernities in the contemporary world.

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