
Review

Beyond reason: Postcolonial theory and the social sciences

Sanjay Seth

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Aided by the operations of colonialism and imperialism, disciplinary knowledge has spread far beyond its modern western origins to achieve a global domain. An inquiry into the presuppositions of this globalized form of knowledge, Sanjay Seth's *Beyond Reason* steers between two alternatives to develop an original and nuanced contribution to postcolonial theory. First, Seth denies that western knowledge is universal and superior to non-western forms of knowledge. Accordingly, a major effort of the book is to demonstrate that modern knowledge is parochial, limited by contingent historical and cultural presumptions. Secondly, despite this argument, Seth does not recommend rejecting and replacing modern knowledge with non-western alternatives. Instead, recognizing that modern knowledge has succeeded in becoming global despite its provinciality, *Beyond Reason* uncovers the parochial presuppositions of the disciplines that compose this knowledge, especially the social sciences, to reveal what these disciplines enable and obscure.

While acknowledging postmodern critiques of the purported universality of modern western knowledge, Seth's case for the parochial status of this knowledge (Part I) is novel for its identification of a common thread among distinct disciplinary challenges to the core presuppositions of modern western knowledge. Chapter 1 argues that developments within the fields of science studies, social history, and anthropology undermine these presuppositions, according to which knowledge requires a relation between a subject who represents an external object, that nature and society are distinct domains, and secular or disenchanted explanations of phenomena. One consequence of these developments is that knowledge is understood not as the explanation or representation of an independent object but rather as the construction or production of its object. From this perspective, knowledge—as a product of academic disciplines—embodies the (historically and culturally specific) presuppositions of these disciplines.



To further establish the case for parochialism, chapter 2 considers certain philosophical defenses of reason's universality, particularly those of Karl-Otto Apel and Jürgen Habermas. Although they recognize the 'impurity' of reason—that it is, to some degree, conditioned by particular social, cultural, and historical contexts—such defenses hold that there are necessary, context-transcending features of reason. Insofar as the natural and social sciences incorporate these features, modern western knowledge can rightfully be considered universal. Drawing from postcolonial theory, Seth finds such defenses circular: whether for inadvertently universalizing norms and conditions particular to the modern west or for unjustifiably asserting the superiority of modernity. As a result, Seth concludes that modern conceptions of reason and knowledge cannot claim to be universal or superior to other forms of knowledge.

Readers sympathetic to such defenses might find these arguments unpersuasive, or at least in need of further development. For instance, is Seth claiming—as the book's title might suggest—that reason and knowledge are necessarily parochial or only that these defenses are inadequate? Relatedly, Seth claims to be agnostic regarding the truth of disciplinary knowledge (p. 7), though he suggests, at times, that disciplines cannot be evaluated in terms of 'the criteria of faithful representation or Truth', only in terms of their own prevailing presuppositions (p. 112). However, if knowledge is necessarily parochial and guided only by convention, what justifies Seth's negative appraisal, discussed below, of the social sciences' parochialism? Nonetheless, Seth's critique should prove fruitful to anyone interested in these questions, especially since it encourages further dialogue between theoretical perspectives that, as Seth notes, have tended—with few exceptions—to neglect one another.

Although modern western knowledge has no claim to universality or superiority, Seth neither recommends a retrieval of non-western alternatives nor promotes non-western exceptionalism. Pursuing a more cautious, yet comprehensive, path, the aim of Part II—the heart of the book—is to disclose, or 'anatomize', the specific presumptions of the social sciences, history and political science in particular. By Seth's reading, modern history (considered in chapters 3 and 4) constructs its object, the past, through a 'code', which presupposes, for instance, a disenchanted world where humans are the sole creators of meaning and purpose. Since political science is an 'archipelago' of subdisciplines and thus prevents a unified disciplinary anatomy (p. 147), Seth focuses on the subdisciplines of international relations (chapter 5) and political theory (chapter 6). The founding assumption of the former—that the international order, composed of sovereign states, is characterized by anarchy—reveals this discipline's 'amnesia' about the central role colonialism and imperialism played in the creation of the contemporary international order. Unlike the other disciplines he examines, political theory does not have an object that it represents; instead, it produces knowledge for the 'bourgeois public sphere'.



As a result, Seth argues, political theory is necessarily a liberal, western form of knowledge, with limited resonance in the non-western world.

These anatomies are often quite damning: history cannot avoid anachronism, International Relations fails to understand the contemporary international order, and political theory is ‘irremediably’ liberal (p. 215). More generally, the disciplines that constitute modern western knowledge are ‘damagingly provincial’ (p. 216). What, then, should readers do with these parochial, yet global, disciplines? Seth’s aim is not to evaluate these disciplines in terms of their accuracy, objectivity, or proximity to truth. Instead, he is more concerned with their effects, what they make possible and what they foreclose. While this might suggest a political orientation, Seth resists drawing hasty political implications from his negative assessment of modern knowledge.

In the epilogue—a defense of his method of anatomy, Seth distinguishes these anatomies from the ‘explicitly political project’ of rejecting and developing alternatives to modern western knowledge, such as with the ‘epistemological decolonization’ of Anibal Quijano or the ‘epistemologies of the South’ of Boaventura de Sousa Santos (p. 210). Despite some affinities with such projects, Seth argues that modern knowledge’s connection to any ideology or political project is too complex to form ‘sweeping judgments’ that identify this knowledge with capitalism and colonialism, and epistemologies of the South with progress or emancipation (p. 212). Furthermore, Seth distinguishes his use of anatomies from a Foucauldian—via Judith Butler—conception of critique, which insists that seemingly value-neutral or purely factual descriptions are inextricably linked to antecedent normative or evaluative frameworks. While acknowledging that his work inescapably has normative and political implications, Seth claims that we cannot know what these implications are, let alone whether they are emancipatory or progressive, because modern western knowledge ‘makes it difficult or even impossible to contemplate other worlds and other possibilities’ (p. 219).

As this argument closes the book, it becomes even more unclear what readers are meant to do with its anatomies. After all, the stated aim of the book is to disclose what the presuppositions of modern knowledge ‘make possible to think’ and ‘difficult to think’ (p. 7), so that it would not seem unreasonable to expect *Beyond Reason* to prepare its reader to evaluate its political implications. Alternatively, since *Beyond Reason* thoroughly exposes the parochial presuppositions of modern knowledge, we might view this work as a precursor to such an ‘explicitly political project’, in which case a sequel would be highly anticipated.

While Seth does not always provide clear guidance on how to utilize the book’s anatomies, they nonetheless offer, both explicitly and implicitly, insights and suggestions for the improvement of the social sciences. Regarding modern history, for example, Seth argues that because this discipline did not develop from non-western traditions modern histories of non-western pasts should be viewed as translations, written in recognition that they are not superior to other modes of



historicity and that much gets lost in translation. Moreover, since Seth appeals to numerous non-western scholars—such as Achille Mbembe or Partha Chatterjee—to demonstrate the parochialism of the social sciences, the contributions of such scholars would seem to make these disciplines less parochial, or, given Seth’s agnosticism about truth and universality, at least less damagingly parochial. This would underscore the importance of including non-western perspectives in the development of the social sciences.

However, regarding political theory in particular, Seth insists on the shortcomings of attempts to de-parochialize this discipline: for instance, he argues that comparative political theory wrongfully assumes that political theory is a universal practice, while other attempts—drawing from the Frankfurt School, Foucault, postcolonial theory, etc.—risk ‘dissolving the specificity of the subdiscipline’ (p. 199). Yet, *Beyond Reason* itself—with its mastery of various disciplines—speaks to the potential advantages of unsettling rigid disciplinary frameworks. As Seth himself notes (p. 13), disciplinarity is a defining characteristic of the modern knowledge he finds ‘damagingly’ parochial.

Even if they are not fully addressed, such questions and possibilities are the inevitable result of an original work like *Beyond Reason*. Whether for the significance of its challenges to the social sciences and modern knowledge or for its disciplinary anatomies, which—in addition to their place in the broader argument of the book—are illuminating in their own right, readers from the social sciences, postcolonial theory, and elsewhere will find much worth considering in this work.

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