

## Theory from the South needs Empirics from the South

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Theory from the South; what is it? Nobody knows. We are told we need to decolonize ‘theory’, and also that decolonizing theory is passé. Can’t do that anymore, its complicity all the way down.<sup>1</sup>

Postcolonial, decolonial or critical theories are not useful for the empirical social sciences. With imprecise language, lugubrious absurdity, concepts that have no real empirical referents, such ‘theories’ cannot provide the concepts, methodological tools, or mechanisms that are needed for empirical social science research. **I am unconvinced that students are adequately trained in the irreverence that is needed to read postcolonial theory.** I will go a little further – such theories are a disservice to students everywhere. And what is ‘critical’ theory? To critique something requires a lot of knowledge, it requires judgment, it requires careful study and reading. A lot of ‘critical’ theory appears to lack these elements; it also appears to lack humor, nuance, taste and imagination. It does not however skimp on hectoring, scolding, doom-saying, and lecturing others to spend a lifetime sitting in discomfort and unlearning.

Note to students: you are not complicit if you use ‘colonial categories’. The focus of an author on ‘complicity’ tends to be inversely proportional to the empirical soundness of the work. For instance, a tweet by an academic noted that if a ‘white academic’ mastered the ‘critical grammar of social justice’ such as ‘intersectionality, decolonial, queer, trans, emancipation’, they might ‘surreptitiously enact injustice’ through this vocabulary (21/3/2026, x.com). We often speak of ‘dialog’ with the literature, but here we have an interesting perspective that says that certain people (based on their positionality) cannot engage with certain literature. This is becoming a common epistemological stance in theories from the south, where the adequacy of theory is not determined by how well it can explain or describe a phenomena, but by *who* writes it, reads it, applies it. ‘My theory is pure, but if you use it, it’s injustice’. Theory from the south then becomes a way to gatekeep political positions – all the more ironic as building solidarities and communities is also key to such theory.

A ‘grammar of social justice’ is not a set of concepts for empirical social science. It is a political project – a giveaway is that it is considered

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, Gopal notes that it is not enough to bring in voices from the Global South, ‘other kinds of hierarchies also need to be thought of... attentive to hierarchies *within* the Global South’ (cited in Roy 2023). The goalposts continue to shift.

problematic if the ‘wrong sort of people’ use these concepts. Decolonial theory is declining in importance because diverse political groups decided to embrace it and use it for their own political goals. If use of a concept is preceded by an ideological purity test, that concept is not useful for empirical social science. Are students trained to be able to understand this? I am not aware of other disciplines where the use of concepts is decided not by the empirical materials at hand, but by the identity of the investigator --- ‘don’t use this calibration on your electron microscope / R code / instrumental variable, you careerist bigot’ – such words have never been spoken.

All conceptual categories need to be held up against data – whether the concept is considered to be colonial, decolonial, postcolonial, critical. And if you are doing empirical work and actual data collection, don’t derive ‘theories’ from scholars who don’t do empirical work. Before you can run (theorize), you must walk (do empirical work); before you walk, you must crawl (read). Before theorizing, you need empirical engagement, analysis, analytical generalizations, dialog with the literature. Theory is not meant to be a shortcut, substitute or avoidance of empirical engagement with the real world.

**Theory is built on empirics.** Everyone aims to produce ‘theory’ without knowing what theory based on empirical work looks like, since a lot of ‘theory from the south’ has very flimsy empirical referents. Some authors point out that there is a (neo-colonial) north-south division of labor – where data is produced in the south, and theory is produced in the north. Or more precisely, that the labor of data collection is happening in the south by those of the south, and the glory of theory creation is happening in the north. This is one of the motivations for theory from the south – to balance out this division of labor. It is strange then that in creating theory from the south, many authors lean on abstract theories from the north and little systematic data from the south at all.

### **An example of a ‘theory from the south’**

Here is an example of what counts as theory from the south based on my research on urban policy in Mumbai and the paper that was published as Issar 2022.<sup>2</sup> Here’s the story of how that paper on Floor Space Index (FSI; which is building height policy, to put it simply) and Transferable Development Rights (TDR) came about.

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<sup>2</sup> Sukriti Issar. 2022. Financialization of floor space, Mumbai 1880-2015. *Urban Studies*, 59 (15): 3150-3166.

Everyone I met in 2006 onwards doing fieldwork in Mumbai, spoke to me about TDR and FSI. So that told me it was important. I was intrigued (context of discovery). Then serendipitously, I found a document that was written in 1963 that showed me that FSI had a long history. Eventually some of my interviewees also told me about its history (e.g. a senior municipal engineer who had worked with the municipality since the 1960s). I was eventually able to recover a much longer history of FSI, I can now trace out building heights back to the late eighteenth century through primary source materials. Through meticulous, painstaking empirical work, turning thousands of pages, standing in the sweltering heat in the archives or doing fieldwork, I could reconstruct a history and a narrative.

I found an empirical regularity that I believe is theory from the south – pithy, explanatory, generalizable, testable. What I found was this: FSI is now a hybrid instrument, it exists as standard, tax, fee, premium, incentive. This finding is itself generalizable – most cities around the world have height restrictions (FSI, Floor Area Ratio or FAR is another term for it), and in many cities there are also premiums, incentives, concessions, air rights, height bonuses and so on. This talk of ‘hybridity’ is not to say that FSI is ‘messy’ or ‘contingent’ or ‘variegated’ – its meant in a more precise sense. FSI is both a command-and-control standard and an incentive.

**Hybrid instruments create hybrid constituencies** (here I am *ahem* complicit in drawing from institutional theory which argues very simply that policies create constituencies. Whether it’s a policy in the global south or the global north). Using the example of this hybrid instrument, I show that changes to one part of the instrument (say the standard) will impact other parts of the instrument (say the market for air rights) – thus, the hybrid instrument might make policy change more difficult due to these interlocking constituencies and interlocking effects.

This *is* theory from the south. It can be applied to cases of similar instruments anywhere in the world. It is empirically grounded, it is restricted in scope (only refers to policies and instruments), it is testable. It might not be found to fit the empirical reality everywhere, but it can be tested against data as its empirical referents are clear. It is *generalizable*. It contributes to the urban policy literature by showing that a ubiquitous policy instrument of building heights is really a hybrid instrument, and to institutional theory by showing how hybrid instruments create hybrid constituencies which can then mediate institutional change.

Why should this not be seen as ‘theory from the south’? Why does theory from the south need lugubrious absurdities to be theoretical? Why have we decided that theory from the south is too pure to engage with the real

world? Why does social science research in / on the global majority need to draw on unimaginative literary criticism for its theories? If one starts with the sort of grand theory that is either untethered from empirics or built on flimsy anecdotal data analyzed in the most absurd way, then reality is paralyzing, and fieldwork and data is disdained.<sup>3</sup> There are more paradigm-shifting re-thinkings and re-imaginings than there is good solid, boring, painstaking, meticulous empirical work.

Postcolonial theory, or anything that says it is theory from the south without having adequate empirical referents, is not theory. It explains nothing. It does not hone the young scholar's intuition of what makes for good intellectual work. None of the talk on complicity or citation politics addresses whether the empirical work is any good. The endless parsing of positionality does not give students the taste for good work. Once we put positionality aside, are students able to identify what is good social science? Would they be able to be effective peer-reviewers in the future? Would they be able to guide future scholars at doing normal social science in the Kuhnian sense?

#### References:

Roy, Srila. 2023. Dissonant intimacies: Coloniality and the failures of South–South collaboration. *Sociological Review*, Vol. 71(6) 1237–1257.

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<sup>3</sup> On this point, see also Sherry Ortner's 1995 classic paper 'Ethnographic Refusal'. Ortner has in recent interviews distanced herself from this piece. I think the paper remains important than ever.