

Mind the Gap!

Political Ethnography & Translations of Western Concepts in non-Western Contexts¹

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the methodological nationalisms underlying much of contemporary political theory have been increasingly criticised, both for their state-centrism and their primary focus on politics in OECD countries (Kerner 2010: 40). This critique has coincided with two further developments within the discipline: firstly, the increasing efforts to bring political theory beyond the nation-state by focussing on questions of global justice, and, secondly, the aspiration to ground normative political theory in existing social practices rather than in metaphysical presuppositions. However, as these three aspirations coincide, a wide gap emerges between the methodological demand for a practice-dependent global political theory and the discipline's contemporary understanding of social and political practices at a global level generally, and in non-European contexts in particular. This gap, as this paper argues, is far from coincidental but rooted in a systematic tendency of social and political theory to tacitly universalise the political history of Western Europe and North America, thereby elevating it to an incontestable normative plateau from which politics in non-European contexts can only be understood as pathological deviation from the Western model.

In the first part of this paper, I am going to elaborate on this point by drawing on Charles Taylor's notion of multiple modernities and the postcolonial responses it has provoked. Taylor criticises what he calls 'convergence theories of modernity' for their ethnocentric assumptions that tacitly universalise the political history of Western Europe and North America. However, his alternative notion of multiple modernities remains animated by a subtle notion of cultural authenticity,

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which has been criticised by postcolonial scholars. Responding to Taylor, postcolonial scholars have argued for an understanding of global modernity as entangled and emerging in the interaction between colonisers and colonised. In these interactions, the universal concepts of political modernity have encountered pre-existing concepts, categories, institutions, and practices through which they get translated and configured differently. The second part of this chapter is going to take up this notion of translation and illustrate it with examples of translations of both discursive and non-discursive practices in South Asia. Although interrelated, the empirical investigations of discursive and non-discursive translation pose different methodological challenges. Whereas discursive translations can be reconstructed with the methodological tools developed within the history of ideas, the translations of non-discursive practices becomes an anthropological task. The final part of this chapter is going to focus on this anthropological task and highlights two contributions anthropology can make to a global political theory that is grounded in actually existing social and political practices: critical reflections on the politics of representation and methodological innovations that help to address past and current processes of translation of conceptual languages in different social, political, and cultural contexts.

2. Multiple & Entangled Modernities

2.1 Charles Taylor's notion of Multiple Modernities

Sudipta Kaviraj has argued that in spite of the diversity of political practices and institutions that characterises today's world, the conceptual languages, which are deployed to describe, analyse, and evaluate these institutions, are still remarkably uniform (Kaviraj 2009: 172). Thus, there is a curious mismatch between the homogeneity of conceptual languages within the social sciences and the heterogeneity of political practices it tries to capture. Historically, key concepts of the social sciences – e.g. the state, bureaucracy, public sphere – as well as political ideologies – e.g. liberalism, conservatism, and Marxism – developed within the political history of Western Europe and North America and took it as their prime goal to represent this history. Representing the political history of the North Atlantic, the foundational concepts of the social sciences were embedded in wider narratives of modernity, which presuppose a philosophy of history that implicitly suggests the gradual convergence of political practices on the Western model over time. Analytically, the Eurocentrism that underpins these narratives of modernity implies that non-Western politics is primarily understood as pathological devia-

tion from the Western model, which is tacitly upheld as a normative yardstick for the evaluation of non-Western models. This implicit Eurocentrism also finds semantic expression in categories like 'failed states' or 'low intensity democracies'.

Modernisation theory, as the most prominent twentieth-century version of these quasi-teleological narratives of modernity, has been criticised by Charles Taylor, who argues that the manifestations of political modernity are not singular, but plural. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* – as set of historically durable yet transposable, and consequently dynamic, set of dispositions – Taylor has argued that the conceptual building blocks of political modernity (e.g. state, market, bureaucracy, secularism) are transformed in different socio-political and cultural contexts. These transformations are neglected in what Taylor calls 'acultural theories of modernity'. Acultural theories of modernity, which assume the gradual convergence of social and political practices on the Western model over time, are based on the assumption that the transformative processes of culture and society, which occur during the transition from tradition to modernity, are culturally neutral operations. The paradigm case of these acultural theories of modernity stresses the growth of reason, defined as the rise of scientific consciousness, the development of a secular outlook or the growth of instrumental rationality as the driving force of modernisation (Taylor 1999: 154). Within these theories, difference is conceptually located within a notion of tradition whereas modernity constitutes a universal plateau on which different (traditional) manifestations of social life converge over time: as societies modernise, traditional aspects of social life vanish and open a space for modern formations of social order. These formations constitute a clear rupture with the past and have, according to acultural theories, eliminated any traces of their own particularities.

Taylor criticises acultural theories of modernity for their ethnocentrism and the superficial account of social change. They 'lock us into an ethnocentric prison, condemn [us] to project our own forms onto everyone else and [to remain] blissfully unaware of what we are doing' (Taylor 1999: 165). Acultural theories of modernity are ethnocentric as they equate social change with changing doctrines about society, the divine, and the cosmos. This, however, constitutes only the most superficial level of social understanding, as knowledge is not only explicitly available in language but also embodied. Taylor argues that the processes of social and cultural transformation of modernisation change not only our reflectively held doctrines but alter our entire way of being in the world as embodied creatures. Between this level of embodied knowledge and our explicitly held doctrines about the social world is the mediating sphere of symbolic meaning, rituals, and works of art (Taylor 1999: 167). Together, these different levels

of understanding constitute *l'imaginaire social*, which is 'that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy' (Taylor 2002: 106). It is this common understanding in the social imaginary which carries Taylor's notion of multiple modernities. Thus, a cultural theory of modernities recognises that 'the starting point will leave its impress on the end product' (Taylor 1999: 161). Therefore, the processes of social and cultural transformation called 'modernisation' do not lead to convergence over time but to multiple modernities.

2.2 *Postcolonial critiques of Multiple Modernities*

Although this notion of multiple modernities as developed by Taylor highlights the limitations of convergence theories of modernity, it seems to win this insight at the cost of essentialising cultural differences in notions of an 'Indian modernity', a 'Japanese modernity' and 'various modulations of Islamic modernities'. Distinguishing between institutions and practices, on the one hand, and culture, on the other, Taylor suggests that whereas the former might converge, the latter find new forms of differentiation and perpetuate cultural pluralism at a global level (Taylor 1999: 163-5). Thus, like his politics of recognition, Taylor's theory of multiple modernities is animated by a subtle notion of authenticity, which can be both emancipatory and oppressive. Referring to the social dynamics involved in the construction of identity, Anthony Appiah has argued that 'between the politics of recognition and the politics of compulsion, there is no bright line' (Appiah 1994: 163). As there is no bright line between the recognition and the reification of culture as marker of difference at both national and international levels, Taylor's notion of multiple modernities might avoid the ethnocentric assumptions of social and cultural convergence over time; but it creates another ethnocentric prison by locating difference too firmly in a notion of cultural authenticity that is detached from social and political interactions. Although Taylor highlights the multiplicity of modern formations at a global level, his account of pluralism remains caught within a framework of authentic and isolated cultures. It fails to fully account for the plurality of social and political practices, which are described through the universal conceptual language of political modernity.

The notion of cultural authenticity has been the target of post-colonial critiques. Gurinder Bhambra argues that the notion of multiple modernities – and the underlying concept of cultural authenticity that animates it – remains blind to the effects of colonialism and the ways in which economic, political and cultural interactions with the rest of the world have shaped European modernity itself. Instead of accounting for global interconnections since the fifteenth century, the

notion of multiple modernities analytically separates social from cultural developments and universalises the former while reifying the latter (Bhabra 2007: 71-9). Whereas Taylor supposes the convergence of societal modernity, diversity is only introduced at the level of 'cultures' that provide internally self-sufficient frameworks for the particular appropriations of the institutional structures of Western modernity that lead to 'Indian', 'Japanese', and several variations of 'Islamic modernity'. Instead of separating social from cultural modernity and the latter from any kind of interaction, Tani Barlow has argued that modernity – itself inseparable from colonial expansion – should be conceptualised as a relationship between colonisers and colonised (Barlow 1997: 1). This relational understanding of a global modernity (in the singular) circumvents the cultural essentialism of Taylor's notion of authenticity while preserving his insights into the creative transformations of modernity across the globe.

Post-colonial criticisms of Taylor's notion of multiple modernities broaden his conception of pluralism at a global level by showing how political modernity, i.e. bureaucratic state structures, a market-based economy, and a socially differentiated civil society, is itself inevitably plural. In interactions between colonisers and colonised, the universal concepts of political modernity have encountered pre-existing concepts, categories, institutions, and practices through which they get translated and configured differently (Chakrabarty 2008: xii). Thus, multiplicity within global modernity is not reducible to different 'authentic' cultures but comprises the array of practices accommodated in concepts like citizenship, the state, civil society, secularism and human rights. This wide array of social and political practises emerging underneath apparently similar concepts, however, causes a peculiar dilemma for contemporary students of politics beyond the North Atlantic: European social and political theories are at the same time both indispensable and inadequate in helping us to think through the experiences of political modernity in non-Western societies, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued (Chakrabarty 2008: 4-18). However, understanding the experiences of political modernity in non-Western contexts is crucial for political theory if it wants to push its disciplinary boundaries beyond the nation state and produce a (normative) global political theory, which is, at the same time, rooted in existing social and political practices. In the next section, I am going to argue that the notion of translation offers a useful conceptual lens to understand social and political practices beyond the North Atlantic not as pathological deviations from the Western model but as instances of global modernity itself.

3. Translations in South Asia

3.1 *The notion of Translation*

The dilemma of the simultaneous inadequacy and indispensability of Western social and political thought for a global political theory that aspires to be grounded in social and political practices can be conceptually addressed through the notion of translation. This notion needs to highlight the creative transformations of norms and ideas when they travel between different socio-economic and cultural contexts (Lewis and Mosse 2006). The diversity in the interpretation of norms and ideas reflects not so much fundamental differences in ‘culture’ but highlights different national and regional histories, social and economic conditions, and political contexts with distinct trajectories (Hurrell 2004: 150). Although the notion of translation is gaining increasing prominence within the social sciences, its analytical dimensions have not yet been fully developed. Thus, Doris Bachmann-Medick has criticised the overtly metaphorical use of ‘translation’ within contemporary social science while, at the same time, highlighting its potential to capture interactive social practices (Bachmann-Medick 2006: 269). In order to analytically capture these interactive social practices, it is important to distinguish between two different dimensions of translation: linguistic translations and translations into practices.²

3.2 *Methodological Challenges I – Linguistic Translations*

Linguistic translations occur when the content of new concepts is, often over prolonged periods of time, integrated into the conceptual universe of vernacular languages. One example of linguistic translation is offered by Sudipta Kaviraj in his analysis of the ideas of freedom in modern India: In pre-colonial Bengal, Hindu philosophy produced sophisticated reflections on the nature and forms of *mukti*. In these reflections *mukti* designates an otherworldly freedom, a freedom from the concomitant suffering inherent in ordinary life. It could be attained by renouncing all forms of ordinary life, or by breaking out of the circle of reoccurring reincarnations. However, as nineteenth-century British conceptions of individual liberty entered Bengal through the legal institutions of private proper-

2 These distinctions are, however, more ideal than typical. My distinction between linguistic translations and translations into practices resembles the distinction between discursive and non-discursive practices. Whether or not non-discursive practices can be conceptually separated from discursive practice, and in which ways, has been the subject of prolonged academic debate. In this paper, I do not aim to come down on either side of the debate – but I would like to argue that although discursive and non-discursive practices might be difficult to disentangle conceptually, their respective analyses do pose different methodological challenges.

ty, which presupposed some notion of individual freedom to possess and dispose of property, a reformed education system that bore the strong imprints of British influence, and the reception of Western social theory by parts of Bengal's intellectual elite, the concept of *mukti* changed. Eventually, it would resemble a notion of social freedom similar to liberal conceptions of individual liberty. However, it would also refer to the freedom of a nation from external domination, with Indian nationalists using *mukti* and *savadinata* interchangeably and people in Bangladesh referring to *mukti-vahini* (army of freedom) and *mukti-yuddha* (war for freedom, i.e. the independence movement) during the secession from Pakistan (Kaviraj 2011: 35-7).

In the contexts of both Indian and Bangladeshi nationalist movements, the notion of *mukti* as designating both individual and collective freedom has not left the nineteenth-century British connotations of liberty, which first transformed it, untouched. In the case of Bangladesh, *mukti-yuddha* became the war for freedom from the domination of the Pakistani state and the ideology that underpinned it (Riaz 2003: 306). Thus, it emphasised Bengali language and culture in opposition to religion as common marker of identity for East and West Pakistan. While this emphasis on Bengali language coincided with an explicitly secular notion of nationalism in the pre-independence period, the post-independence period after 1971 has seen ongoing contestations over the role and status of religion within Bengali/Bangladeshi national identity. Part of this contestation involves constitutional debates over the status of religion within Bangladesh's legal system, the latest incident being a number of cases concerning the legal status of *fatwa* that were negotiated before the Supreme Court from 2000 to 2011. In these debates, the notion of *mukti* is also constantly re-negotiated and endowed with a multiplicity of meanings that reflect the political history of Bangladesh.

Although an intellectual history of ideas of freedom in either Indian or Bangladeshi nationalisms is beyond the scope of this paper, such histories could technically be written with the methodological tools developed within the history of ideas, either through the Cambridge School or the German version of *Begriffsgeschichte* (cf. Skinner 2002 and Koselleck 2002). However, the second dimension of translation – as translation into practices – poses different methodological challenges.

3.3 Methodological Challenges II – Translation into practices

The second aspect of translation refers to the translation of concepts into different social and political practices. Here, familiar concepts of Western social and political theory are decoupled from their referents in the political history of

the North Atlantic and translated into alternative practices. One example of this translation of familiar concepts into unfamiliar social and political practices is the translation of democracy in post-colonial India. As Partha Chatterjee has argued, in post-colonial India the vast majority of the population is not organised within the formal confines of civil society but inhabits what he calls ‘political society’. Whereas in civil society citizens are related to the state through the mutual recognition of enforceable rights, political society is not inhabited by rights-bearing citizens. Instead, the inhabitants of political society are categorised by state-agencies as empirically established and quantifiable parts of population groups like ‘the poor’, ‘marginalised’ or ‘vulnerable people’ that engage in political negotiations with state agencies to receive benefits and services (Chatterjee 2011: 13-4). In political society, notions of law and legality are translated into political practices, which are unfamiliar to Western political theory.

Squatters, slum dwellers, and street vendors, all inhabitants of political society, often depend for their livelihoods and the systematic violation of laws and government regulations: they illegally inhabit government-owned land or use water, electricity, and other services without paying for them. Although not recognised as rights-bearing citizens by the state, members of political society are organised and make their claims upon the state through elected representatives and local politicians. State-agencies, in turn, often recognise that the inhabitants of political society have some sort of legitimate claim upon the state. However, these claims are hardly ever formalised and secured through legal guarantees. Instead, exceptions to the existing legal framework are granted in a contextualised manner that leaves the formal legal framework intact. Thus, in the negotiations between state-agencies and members of political society, a new conceptualisation of the relationship between law and participation emerges in postcolonial Indian democracy. In political society, people do participate politically – often with a high degree of sophistication and a fine-tuned sensibility for political processes – not to change existing laws but to guarantee their non-enforcement (Chatterjee 2008: 58-9). Thus, the implicit goal of political participation in political society is not to alter generally binding rules and regulations, but to win temporary and contextual exceptions.

A similar logic of politics as the deliberate effort to circumvent the enforcement of existing laws unfolds in Pakistan. For the case of postcolonial politics in Punjab, Matthew Nelson has shown how the electorate has consistently voted for political parties, which demanded that the laws of the state should be in accordance with the principles of Sharia law. However, at the same time, the electorate has also frequently called upon local politicians for their help to prevent the

actual implementation of Sharia law. Thus, Nelson concludes that postcolonial politics in Punjab is characterised by the ‘emergence of an entirely new logic of post-colonial political accountability specifically designed to circumvent the substance of existing laws’ (Nelson 2011: 170). Thus, in the case of Punjab, both dimensions of translation overlap and coincide empirically: the notion of the rule of law in Pakistan has been translated into political practices of the deliberate non-enforcement of existing laws. At the same time, the notion of Sharia law is also altered as it becomes state-backed law. Generally, Sharia refers to the normative system of Islam as historically understood and developed by Muslim jurists. In this sense, it is much broader than the legal subject matter of Islamic law (An-Na’im 2002: 1-3). Islamic law itself also changes under conditions of modern statehood as it becomes codified in statutory law and embedded in a bureaucratic-administrative network of law-enforcement. Thus, although posing distinguishable methodological challenges, linguistic translations and translations into practices often occur simultaneously and coincide empirically.

The social and political practices of law and participation as described by Matthew Nelson and Partha Chatterjee are unfamiliar to – and hard to decipher with – the conceptual tools of Western social and political theory. Within a quasi-teleological narrative of modernity whose endpoint is the social and political practices known in the North Atlantic, the above mentioned examples of postcolonial politics in South Asia could only be understood as peculiar deviations that are supposed to vanish over time. As they are supposed to simply vanish over time, convergence theories of modernity encourage little – if any – systematic theoretical reflection on the practices described by Nelson and Chatterjee. However, this reflection is needed if modernity is understood as a global phenomenon that initially emerged in the interactions between colonisers and colonised. Instead of universalising the political history of the North Atlantic into abstract theory that bans everything unfamiliar to an empty notion of ‘tradition’, the postcolonial histories of South Asia, and the examples cited above, call for a global social and political theory that investigates the translations of its conceptual languages in non-Western contexts. Especially the translation of apparently familiar concepts into unfamiliar social and political practices poses distinct methodological challenges. These challenges – and possible solutions – will be discussed in the following section.

4. Political Ethnography & the Study of Translations

4.1 *Political Ethnography & Everyday Practices of Political Thinking*

Studying translations of familiar concepts into unfamiliar practices constitutes a particular methodological challenge as it pushes social and political theorists out of their academic comfort zones and beyond the erudite study of philosophical texts and (academically) sophisticated arguments. Instead of focussing exclusively on scholarly texts, the study of processes of translation requires the investigation of everyday patterns of political thinking. Arguing for the broadening of the subject domain of political theory to include these everyday practices of political thinking, Michael Freeden argues that:

...the student of existing political thought needs to investigate the malicious, the wrong, and the inadvertent, not only the inspiring and the virtuous, as part and parcel of run-of-the-mill thinking about politics (Freeden 2008: 203).

Studying the wrong and inadvertent, as well as the ordinary, the seemingly trivial, and philosophically less coherent but widely accessible languages of political thinking in different parts of the world becomes an anthropological task. Anthropological insights have increasingly received attention in political science and international relations over the last couple of years, resulting in the emergence of a sub-field of 'political ethnography'. In his discussion of political ethnography, Edward Schatz distinguishes between ethnography as method and as sensibility (Schatz 2009: 5). As a method, political ethnography employs participant observation and in-depth interviews as research technique. However, this narrow understanding of ethnography as a set of research techniques reduces it to an empiricist data-collecting machine (Vrasti 2008: 281). Against this reduction of political ethnography to a data-collecting machine, Schatz highlights his second notion of ethnography as sensibility, which tries to '...glean the meanings that the people under study give to their social and political reality' (Schatz 2009: 5). This definition of political ethnography as sensibility closely relates it to interpretivist traditions of social science research; it also bridges the gap between empirical social analysis and philosophical hermeneutics.

These affinities between ethnographic social research and philosophical hermeneutics open the intellectual space for a constructive dialogue. This constructive dialogue is necessary if political theory as an academic discipline wants to understand how its basic concepts have been transformed in non-Western contexts, where they have been translated not only linguistically but also into alternative social and political practices. These alternative social and political practices might also contribute to an enhanced understanding of politics in the North

Atlantic, if the tacitly assumed congruence between the conceptual languages of the social sciences and the political history of Western Europe and North America is carefully disentangled. This disentanglement of key concepts like democracy, secularism, or the rule of law can benefit in particular from two anthropological aspects of anthropological research: its analysis of embodied knowledge and the critical self-reflection on its own intellectual endeavour, which it has sustained over the past three decades.

4.2 Contributions of Political Ethnography I – Embodied Knowledge & the Politics of Representation

Mediated by the work of Pierre Bourdieu, the notion of embodied knowledge underpins Taylor's critique of convergence theories of modernity. As knowledge is not exclusively constituted in the domain of intellectual reflection but also ingrained and inscribed into bodies, even deliberate appropriations of new concepts continue to carry the contextual vernaculars of their recipients. These vernaculars amount to often subtle but nonetheless significant contextualised changes and translations of concepts into alternative practices. These practices are beyond the reach of philosophical hermeneutics, whose preferred domain of enquiry focuses on juridical and philosophical text, artefacts, or sophisticated literature. They are also beyond the reach of traditional political theory, which has neglected the thoughts that animate politicians, bureaucrats, activists, and dissenters (Kaviraj 2010: 41). Often more practical and sketchy than philosophical discourses, these thoughts not only animate political action, they are also informed by both intellectual and physical experiences of politics, which are not limited to devising political strategies, setting agendas, or arguing. These experiences of politics include the participation in demonstrations, screaming in the face of perceived injustice, being arrested, sometimes tortured, being deprived and suffering for what one believes in; they also include the joy of politics: tearing down walls of separation with one's own hands, dancing in the streets as a foreign army leaves, or just winning small victories with the weapons of the weak (cf. Scott 1987). These experiences might be mundane, but they are not trivial. They affect and alter the ways in which we understand politics; and they give meaning to the conceptual languages through which we navigate our political lives. However, within political theory as an academic discipline, these experiences of politics have been largely ignored.

This groundlessness of political theory has been criticised within the discipline itself, especially for its neglect of embodied power relations (McNay 2007). An increased attention to power relations embodied in social relations and their inseparable connection to mechanisms of knowledge production has also influ-

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