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Postcolonial Theories and the Social and Solidarity Economy

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Abstract

Postcolonial theories have been applied to different fields of knowledge - economics being among the most recent ones. Several works on social and solidarity economy (SSE) has adopted this approach to debate gender asymmetries and other social inequality issues such as the ones focusing on heterogeneity of women in the Global South. There is, however, much to be done in analytical terms, regarding the South that persists in the Global North.

This entry aims to: provide an overview of the main ideas regarding postcolonial approach; reflect upon the narrative of development; and analyse how biases in interpretation might forfeit initiatives, programs and policies bridging SSE and goals such as of inclusion, resilience, participation, gender and racial equity, to name but a few. In this sense, postcolonial lenses can contribute to re-igniting the inherent value of community agency, autonomy, and power of choice for the achievement of social, economic and environmental justice.

Keywords: minorities' agency; postcolonial feminist theories; Otherness; community resilience; postcolonial economics; eurocentrism; Global South in the North

Introduction

Postcolonial theories have been more and more applied to different fields of knowledge. Having started in literary studies, they have contributed to challenging a set of universal assumptions in various areas of research, such as sociology, anthropology, architecture, economics, semiotics, and feminist thought.

By criticising the Eurocentric bias that many theories might contain and reproduce, postcolonial theories have focused on the asymmetries between nations or social groups due to colonial pasts and one-sided colonial wounds. Despite their overarching approach, the focus in postcolonial theories remains on the Otherness' representations and the hegemony developed from this (Said 2003). Building non-Western nations and peoples as underdeveloped and unskilled, Eurocentric strategies and policies have brought about symbolic and material consequences for minorities, whether in the Global South or in the South of the Global North (Santos 2014).

This entry aims to: provide an overview of the main ideas regarding the postcolonial approach; reflect upon the narrative of development; and analyse how biases in interpretation might forfeit initiatives, programs and policies bridging social and solidarity economy (SSE) and goals such as inclusion, resilience, participation, gender and racial equity, to name but a few.

1. Postcolonial theories

Postcolonial theories have focused on the issues of (mis)representation, being critical of modern Western-based universalised concepts and perspectives. Usually associated with the Anglo-Saxon world and located in the cultural studies field, the postcolonial theory might not be so easily distinguishable, at first glance, from other approaches focused on the colonial wounds. Three strands are worth mentioning here: the anti-colonial readings (Aimé Cesaire, Frantz Fanon, Albert Memmi and Edward Said having provided the early founding texts to further support postcolonial thought); the Subaltern Studies (where scholars such as Ranajit Guha, Dipesh Chakrabarty and Gayatri Spivak also laid the foundation, being further considered as postcolonial authors); and the decolonial movement (in which Anibal Quijano, Walter Mignolo, and María Lugones stand out for their ground-breaking work). Despite some important differences among these theoretical frameworks, the fact is that the frontiers are not always obvious.

Likewise, other theoretical approaches with ongoing ties to the postcolonial theories - such as the anti-orientalism (where Said is also placed), the third world approach, and the epistemologies of the South - have consistently contributed either to pave the way to the postcolonial entrenchment or to amplify some issues raised by them. The epistemologies of the South (Santos 2014), for example, have not only highlighted the narrow-mindedness of reducing the epistemological diversity of the world to Western thinking but also called for attention to the plasticity behind the sociological categories of the Global South and the Global North. Santos (2014) originally argues that this

"South" might be found in the Global North, being represented by minorities that are commonly treated as 'unworthy citizens' due to the remaining colonial roots where they live on - for example, Roma and indigenous peoples, Muslim communities, intra-EU migrants and refugees, and minority women (also see the entry "Black Social Economy and SSE"). This "South" plasticity offers a broad understanding of how different Europes might coexist, albeit the prevalent European cohesion discourse.

Postcolonial theories might be said to gain prominence during the 1990s, even though their roots date back some decades, with the works of Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak (Said 2003, Bhabha 1994, Spivak, 1988). Drawn upon the colonialism associated with the French and British empires, postcolonial theories analyse the colonial roots laid down in these regions during the 19th and 20th centuries (Bhambra 2014). Heading in a different direction, decolonial thought has focused on Spanish and Portuguese colonisation processes, going back to 1492 and the conquest of what was later called the American continent. This defining moment, according to Dussel (1990), not only gave rise to a history of invasions but was also the foundation stone for modernity. The latter has been inspired by the postmarxist world-systems theory, proposed by Immanuel Wallerstein, being also in dialogue with both the dependency and the underdevelopment theories (Bhambra 2014). The decolonial approach has been more focused on the relations between the West and Latin America, whereas the postcolonial perspective draws upon the ties between the West and different contexts, namely Africa, South Asia and the Middle East.

Generally speaking, postcolonial criticism remains focused on representations and discourses. Some ideas might be said to set up the core of this approach: (1) making a criticism of the modern binaries, questioning universalised concepts that have, all in all, reaffirmed the Western hegemony with regard to the knowledge production; (2) unveiling the "Othering" processes that were moulded and fed by shallow representations of the difference; (3) highlighting that the narrative of modernity is, in fact, one of its possible versions - the Western one - that is in contradiction with other readings of what Modernity meant, and (4) calling for the attention to the relevance of a "politics of location" (Brah 1996), according to which the situatedness of embodied subjects cannot be neglected when it comes to analysing identities, contexts and relations.

2. Postcolonial theories applied to economics and the narrative of development

Contrary to other disciplines in social sciences, economics has resisted being heckled by postcolonial theory. However, as a discipline the more economics steps aside from recognizing its underlying ties with cultural issues, the more its discourse is allowed to legitimize biases, having an impact on nations, institutional decisions and ordinary peoples' lives. If it is true that there are perspectives considering the role played by culture in shaping the everyday economy, it is also a fact - a worrying fact indeed - that most of them have focused on the so-called 'cultural determinants of economic development' (Zein-Elabdin 2016), thus restating western-based assumptions on what development should be. Culture might therefore be evoked more as an indicator of

shortcomings regarding the Otherness than as a form of questioning the very premises upon which economic theories have been drawn.

The mainstream approaches continue to rely on neoclassical, mathematical models. On behalf of a supposedly neutral approach, economics has veiled culturally-based assumptions feeding methods and models. This is the reason for Zein-Elabdin (2004, 22) to argue that a postcolonial analysis of economics "must begin with a scrutiny of the cultural construction of the subject matter of economics itself, namely, *its non-economic core*". Culture is to be understood here, first and foremost, as the context which supports the shaping and the prevalence of certain theoretical and epistemological perspectives instead of others. It is thus connected with the mindset and context in which the theories have been forged.

Proposing an original research agenda where different economic strands are analysed, Zein-Elabdin and Charusheela (2004), along with a small group of scholars (Robert Dimand, Jennifer Olmsted, Karen Graubart, Antonio Callari, among others) have elaborated on three main issues: (1) the prevalent discourses on poverty and richness and the way they have been handled in public policies, funding programs, and other institutional uses over time, particularly in formerly colonised countries; (2) the narrative of development and the way it has been used to support "the ontological precedence of modern European societies" (Zein-Elabdin and Charusheela 2004, 2), and (3) the orientalist mindset that can persist and feed some international organisations when thinking of recovery plans.

If postcolonial theories in economics constitute a brand-new approach, a dialogue between SSE and postcolonial economics is even more recent and unusual. This entry is an attempt to signal what this dialogue could be, particularly in European countries. Allowing us to recognise biased policies and routines on civic betterment and community facility support, on the one hand, and cultural assets of a responsiveness-positive community on the other, postcolonial lenses can provide governments and institutions with fine-tuned guidelines for stimulating and assessing social transformation. Postcolonial theories on SSE can also demonstrate to what extent commonly undervalued issues such as self-organization, minorities' power of choice, and non-hierarchical forms of solidarity are primary concerns in decolonising local development goals.

Some scholars (Özkazanç-Pan 2017, Essers and Tedmanson 2014, Sambajee 2015, Verduyn, Day and Tedmanson 2017) have already been discussing neighbouring concepts in the light of postcolonial theories. Highlighting the importance of feminist and ethnicity-based lenses, they have interpreted some trendy concepts in a very different way, dissecting market-based discourses and perspectives. This approach, mainly grounded on critical entrepreneurship studies (CES), has otherwise privileged concepts other than social and solidarity economies. They show how close to solidarity economy initiatives some popular formats of social entrepreneurship might be, given the presence of a minority perspective or an enriched blend of economic principles. However, a distinction between social economy, solidarity economy and social entrepreneurship is still needed.

These differences are associated with three main aspects: the promoting agent, the relationship with the state, and the relationship with the market (Hespanha and Lucas

dos Santos, 2016). Aiming at covering the social gaps in the territories and existing in a close relationship with the state and its social welfare agenda, social economy organisations are not allowed to adopt shared management with the aid recipients that they cover. In a different direction and supporting individuals/groups in situations of precariousness or inequality, social entrepreneurship is commonly committed to innovative and efficiency-based models - products and services being adapted to market requirements. Social entrepreneurship distinguishes itself from social economy and solidarity economy by waiving the state's intervention and grasping some market-based concepts such as efficiency, replicability, and upscaling. With major differences from the previous concepts, solidarity economy privileges the communities' autonomy and horizontal participation rather than the adaptation to market requirements or state guidelines. As remarked by Laville (2020, 196), "the solidarity economy approach has brought notions of social utility and collective interest into the public debate", in such a way that the benefits for the community take on the leading role, by overriding the economic goals (also see the entries "Origins and histories of the social and solidarity economy", "Contemporary understandings of SSE" and "Participation, governance, collective action, democracy and SSE").

Embodied in formal or informal economic arrangements and not being focused on individuals, solidarity economy is grounded on self-organising, shared management and non-hierarchical forms of solidarity, thus having a political and a collective dimension. This political dimension is said to follow a three-fold perspective: (1) the fight against different social asymmetries (of gender, class, race etc.) through popular alliances among marginalised people and groups, (2) the validation of non-western knowledge, aesthetic codes, and logics of sense-making that are usually undervalued by the market and the state; and (3) the valuing of economic integration principles other than the market (reciprocity, community redistribution and householding within the communities).

Considering this political dimension, it is surprising that research on the relationship between solidarity economy and postcolonial theories is still underdeveloped, and the same could be said about the social economy. Research on postcolonial approaches in the SSE framework is scarce. They have mainly focused on solidarity economy initiatives in the Global South (Lucas dos Santos and Banerjee 2019, Hillenkamp and Lucas dos Santos 2019, Calvo Martínez et al. 2019), but also started to provide an analytical framework for the social economy and voluntary sector in Western contexts (Lucas dos Santos, in press). It is worth recalling the huge potential for postcolonial theories to analyse how minorities have been supported by social welfare policies and included in projects by social economy organisations in Europe. Similarly, postcolonial lenses could deepen the analysis on the level of minorities' participation (or absence) in European solidarity economy arrangements. Given that there is a South in the North - represented by a number of marginalised citizens, such as Roma and indigenous peoples, refugees and internally displaced people, immigrants, black and ethnic communities, Muslim and other minority women, transgender people, and individuals who are homeless-, there remains a large set of issues to be analysed through postcolonial lenses in a very heterogeneous Europe (also see the entries "LGBTQI+ Inclusion and SSE" and "Migrants, refugees and SSE").

Generally speaking, a postcolonial approach to SSE should be grounded on a set of premises including:

- It is not possible to perceive the inherent power dynamics related to the production of knowledge in the absence of a subaltern understanding of modernity. By assuming Western modernity as an encompassing perspective that fits all, the West is taken as the ruler according to which other economies and societies are compared and expected to follow suit.
- Theories - and scholars who gave rise to them - should not be decoupled from the context in which they were forged.
- Discourses and visual approaches that contribute to the overrepresentation of minorities as unchanged aid recipients by Western-based organisations revive colonial imagery.
- The identification of biases in the discourse of institutions, governments, organisations and even collectivities is a cornerstone of decolonising approaches in SSE.

Aiming at proposing a roadmap toward postcolonial theories in the SSE, the next section presents a set of issues that could characterise a further dialogue between the two perspectives.

3. A postcolonial agenda of SSE

More recently, a mobilisation towards civic engagement, community resilience, and co-governance through participative methods has become trends in the European context. Although these trends or efforts to realise them are undoubtedly a breath of fresh air, the underlying conditions to make them achievable goals are as important as the drive towards them. Some challenges are presented under a postcolonial framing to highlight some of the challenging aspects that might be overlooked. They are: poverty reduction, sustainable development, inclusion policies, and assessment guidelines.

3.1 Poverty cannot be decoupled from other forms of Othering

Poverty reduction has been assumed as one of the main targets in SSE policies and projects. Being measurable through a set of indicators that allow the calculation of resource deficit, poverty might also be a trapped concept if misinterpreted as a problem to be technically solved. To put it simply, poverty cannot be decoupled from other forms of Othering.

Poverty has been the material consequence, rather than the cause, of intersected asymmetries. Without combatting what has made groups of people vulnerable on a daily basis, the efforts towards the reduction of resource deficit will just attenuate the circumstances. Likewise, without the participation of subaltern groups in the forging of tailor-made solutions, their resistance to vested interests and power imbalances will be permanently undermined.

Besides, material constraints experienced by some minority groups in terms of labour opportunities and/or job mobility, social welfare services, credit access, fair housing policies, and unhindered access to public equipment should be seen as the outward face of tacit forms of discrimination due to gender, race, ethnic background, religion, or sexual identity, to name but a few. For instance, the situation of black people in Europe shows how material constraints might be associated with or aggravated by discrimination. According to the 2018 FRA report *Being Black in the EU* (2018, 12), "skin colour affects access to adequate housing". The disproportionate ratio between the access to decent housing by black and other citizens demonstrates how material constraints might be related to non-economic issues. In a group of 6000 black people interviewed in the 12 European countries with a high proportion of black residents, "nearly half of the respondents live in overcrowded housing (45 %), compared to 17 % of the general population in the EU" (2018, 12). Peripheral black women, likewise, are overrepresented in low-paid jobs and are likely to be misinterpreted as being poor because of their unskilled jobs. Notwithstanding their low wages, it is worth stressing that these women are stuck in a permanent situation of in-work poverty exactly because they are repeatedly selected for these unskilled job vacancies. Another finding brought by the FRA report (2018, 45) demonstrates that education is not the reason behind the overrepresentation of black people in low-paid jobs: "almost twice as many respondents with tertiary education (9 %) are employed in elementary occupations – usually manual work involving physical effort – than the general population (5 %)".

Grounded on findings such as these, postcolonial thinking calls for the attention to the following issues: (1) inequality cannot be properly understood without a deeper comprehension of power relations and prevalent social imageries that might reinforce stereotypes; (2) the tacit mechanisms of Othering need to be detected and dismantled - be they in social dynamics, public policies or local projects; (3) discourses and pictures disseminating the Otherness as a permanent aid recipient, stuck in a position of someone who is always in need of learning and direction, need to be removed from institutional communication - be they in the SSE or Third Sector frameworks, in public policies or even in international organisations; (4) recognising minorities' agency and power of choice is the stepping stone to reinforce their resilience and to contribute to social cohesion.

3.2 Achieving sustainable development needs the capacity of overcoming the 'one size fits all' approach

As discussed by Zein-Elabdin and Charusheela (2004), there has been a strong drive in disseminating western-based patterns as the parameters to follow suit. It encompasses values, aesthetic codes, priority definitions, ways of living and sense-making. The narrative of development has not only naturalised a kind of ontological precedence of western societies (Zein-Elabdin and Charusheela, 2004) but also has made other co-existing rationalities fade in time, seen as inconsistent or illogical. Indigenous rationality and knowledge could be said to be among them.

Even when development is addressed according to the United Nations' sustainable development goals, one might question to what extent western societies have accepted that other contexts have knowledge worth learning in a more balanced North-South dialogue. Popular and non-western knowledge has been constantly neglected, despite

their own solutions to old and brand-new challenges. While western-based solutions are assumed as a deliverable for everyone everywhere, innovative knowledge from other contexts might be refused under the excuse that they were tailored to specific settings. As examples of that, it is worth recalling the indigenous knowledge of large and antiseismic structures (Moassab, 2020) and their capacity of developing crop production methods to deal with extremely high altitudes (also see the entries “Indigenous Economies and SSE” and “Food & agricultural sector and SSE”).

The very concept of sustainable societies should also give more attention to its capacity of overcoming the ‘one size fits all' approach to environment-related issues. Solidarity economy, through popular alliances toward food and water sovereignty, plays an important role by directing attention to environmental justice and the way that different groups are disproportionately impacted by growth strategies. For example, those gated in devalued areas with higher levels of toxic waste and industrial pollution, such as the case of Roma people - a situation that was recently reported by the European Environmental Bureau (Heidegger and Wiese 2020).

Postcolonial lenses can thus contribute to a more critical and sensitive look towards the way minorities have been placed in an overarching sustainable society project. They can also increase attention to a remaining unequal production of space (for minority women, persons in situations of homelessness, Roma people etc) even in the light of sustainable cities.

3.3 Inclusion should not be misinterpreted with the Otherness’ depletion

Inclusion might also be a trapped concept if the differences associated with minorities are expected to fade out over time. A postcolonial approach, on the contrary, requires organisations, public bodies, technical staff - and even solidarity economy collectivities, usually animated by a political dimension - to stimulate active participation of subaltern groups in designing the solutions to combat their inequality situation.

It means that neither the idea of inclusion should imply total compliance with prevailing western-based perspectives, nor should it be reduced to a labour inclusion issue. The Otherness must be respected as such - a condition which is only possible if Europe recognises its own heterogeneity. Likewise, minorities should not be seen as homogeneous or frozen in time, which is, unfortunately, a very common perspective in public policies and inclusion strategies. It is worth bearing in mind that minorities’ cultural values and/or traditions have also undergone changes, although this happens on their own terms.

Through a postcolonial perspective, the following issues are to be taken into account: (1) inclusion should not be reduced to the acquisition of competencies to fit into the host societies’ labour market; (2) inclusion policies should not undermine the power of choice and the agency of minorities; (3) participation must not be misunderstood as a mere opinion poll and the possibility of dissent by disadvantaged people in consultation processes should be safeguarded; (4) participatory methods imply tailor-made consultation processes aiming at enlarging minorities’ conditions for expressing dissent and negotiating.

3.4 A different approach starts by changing metrics and assessment guidelines

One of the major problems regarding the SSE framework is the growing concern with isomorphism, a result of the pressure for efficiency from funding sources. Although upscaling, at first sight, may seem the most effective way of driving forward a previously tested solution to a wider context, the excessive concern with scale has led initiatives and support organisations to deviate from long-lasting solutions on behalf of more quantifiable and time-bound objectives (see the entry "SSE and co-optation, isomorphism and instrumentalization").

Scale-based solutions focused on efficiency-based answers, usually overlook how cultural changes require prior recognition of usual biases and factors of lock-in within the communities. It means that the connivance with stereotypes or flimsy approaches to combat exclusion and discrimination - in the community or in the public bodies - contributes to both deviating from what is at the core of the problem and masking the one-sided focus on market. The fact is that community resilience - outside a neoliberal understanding of that - demands new sociabilities and collective practices capable of reinforcing the social ties in the community. Being concerned with reciprocity and community redistribution, the solidarity economy might contribute to long-lasting community-based solutions.

With regard to this topic, contributions brought by a postcolonial theory on SSE can thus be summarised as follows: (1) community-based popular technologies should be taken as assets in the assessment guidelines' scope since they foster both community resilience and social cohesion; (2) other economic integration principles should be evaluated as being so relevant as the capacity of having products and services circulating in the market; (3) the capacity of solidarity economy arrangements to simultaneously reframe the redistribution of community surplus and reduce the burden of individual scarcity - through short supply chains, exchange circuits, community vegetable gardens, community repair shops and popular rotating savings - evinces the empirical but also the theoretical contribution to rethinking small-scale solutions to foster social and environmental justice.

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