



McLennan, G. (2014). Complicity, complexity, historicism: problems of postcolonial sociology. *Postcolonial Studies*, 17(4), 451-464.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2014.966421>

Link to published version (if available):
[10.1080/13688790.2014.966421](https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2014.966421)

[Link to publication record in Explore Bristol Research](#)
PDF-document

This is the author accepted manuscript (AAM). The final published version (version of record) is available online via Taylor & Francis at <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13688790.2014.966421>. Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

University of Bristol - Explore Bristol Research

General rights

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the reference above. Full terms of use are available:
<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/pure/user-guides/explore-bristol-research/ebr-terms/>

Complicity, complexity, historicism: problems of postcolonial sociology.

Gregor McLennan, University of Bristol, UK

Introduction

The exchange between Herb Lewis and George Steinmetz¹ in relation to the latter's edited collection *Sociology & Empire* poses central issues about the significance of postcoloniality for sociology, and arguably central issues for postcolonial studies more widely. The question of sociology's residual 'complicity' with empire is at the heart of the debate. This is highly charged terrain, because whilst complicity can be made to signal, as Steinmetz maintains, a fairly neutral sense of 'entanglement', for most people it cannot fail to carry an unmistakably negative connotation: that sociology and sociologists have not only been *involved* in empire, they have been *co-responsible* for the historical and political ills visited upon 'the rest' by 'the West'.

In this contribution, I work through interpretations of complicity to see whether the 'neutral' and 'accusative' interpretations can be squared. It turns out that in order to take this forward, serious problems in socio-historical theorizing need to be identified more explicitly than has been the case in the discussion around *Sociology & Empire*, or indeed in most forms of current postcolonial discourse. On our way to that conclusion, and bringing into play other texts on postcolonial sociology, I float three notional options on the discipline's presumed complicity. The first is unequivocally condemnatory: born of the expansionary Enlightenment, installed within the Western academy during the high tide of European imperialism, and reluctant even now to acknowledge the provincial nature of its purported universalism, sociology is compromised to the core as part of the dominant regime of truth. A second position is more hesitant, in fact it seems to represent a kind of *programmatic ambivalence*. Here, sociology's compromised profile is exposed and regretted, but overall it is viewed as a more interestingly contradictory amalgam than straight rejectionism implies. The third possibility holds that the discursive tensions within sociology are better grasped in

terms of multi-stranded *complexity* than as Janus-faced dualism. In that case we might push forward with a sociology confidently engaged, both reflexively and positively, in the analysis of colonial and postcolonial societies. This is the approach that Steinmetz is recommending.

But further articulation is needed for this third option to stand out, and my way of doing this brings to the fore aspects of complexity theory. Complexity theory is frequently regarded as this era's best way of grasping the explanatory commonalities of the natural and human sciences without obliterating their significant differences. This is because complexity discourse seems to offer a satisfactory layering and blending of different levels of generality and specificity in the workings of open, dynamic natural or social configurations; and because it accepts that different types of causal mechanism together constitute patterned interaction. To be clear, I am only touching lightly on this philosophical current for present purposes, though I think it still helps to unearth what is at stake in considerations of postcolonial sociology.² I argue that reference to complexity discourse does buttress Steinmetz's perspective by comparison with the other options considered – until, that is, a crucial question arises. Is the methodological *historicism* advocated by Steinmetz ultimately of the systems-theoretical type that scientific complexity discourse fosters; or is it, by contrast, more in tune with what seems like a new wave of particularism and empiricism? From that second angle, situated complexity should not be ratcheted up into suspect and clunky systems-talk at all. This overarching methodological problem holds considerable significance for the style and substance of postcolonial enquiry across the range of disciplines.

The two complicities

Let us note that in their exchange, Lewis and Steinmetz ostensibly agree that with regard to its assumed complicity with empire, 'blanket condemnations' of sociology are inappropriate. They also concur that many of the individual chapters in *Sociology & Empire* do not exemplify the condemnatory option. That said, Lewis thinks that a simplistic moralism orchestrates the volume, whereas Steinmetz vigorously denies this. Can both be right, and wrong (in various ways)? I think so. For example, Lewis's talk of the editor and his 'group', machinating to expose past intellectual accomplices of Western oppression, is way off the mark, as Steinmetz shows. More generally, Lewis is insufficiently alert to the fact that the comparative gains of this volume over other landmark recent collections on postcolonial

sociology are in good part due to the substantive and theoretical interventions of Steinmetz himself. On the other hand, it seems like wishful thinking when Steinmetz pledges that the only place in this book that the word ‘complicity’ appears is on the back cover. Both Kurasawa (p. 194) and Connell (p. 493) deploy the term in a relatively unmediated sense, and the ‘question of complicity’ is pivotal to theirs and to other chapters too. That concern with complicity, moreover, also drives the major (related) challenge to the assumption that radical critique, in postcolonial context, remains essentially ‘secular’.³ So this matter cannot easily be side-lined in terms of where critical theory should be headed.

The logic of the complicity-complexity connection is worth dwelling upon. Steinmetz notes some of the legal connotations of complicity, but more can be said. In law, complicity is paradigmatically about aiding or abetting the commission of a crime, and generally a matter of accountability for harm done. This can quickly be broken down further, because there can be inadvertent complicity, complicity by omission or neglect, complicity under duress, and complicity through perceived necessity. Already, here, complicity covers many degrees of causal contribution, happenstance involvement, and responsibility. Moreover, whether maliciously intended or not, and although the causal contribution may be weak, the assist just as much as the primary commission can be considered to constitute the event in question. The very specification of a legal offence – a riot, say, or a ‘terrorist’ attack, or any kind of past collective wrong – may be impossible without complicity taking central stage. Ethical considerations of a necessarily speculative sort then come into play: who could have reasonably acted or thought differently, in the circumstances? Could one have been expected then, from where we sit now, to have had some kind of ‘knowledge’ of the future, in terms of anticipating the nature and extent of damage done? Such complications lead the scholar from whom I have derived these points to conclude that for all its technicalities in law, the question of complicity ‘goes to the heart of our attempts to live an honest moral life in an imperfect world’.⁴

When the imperfect world in question stretches over different epochs and geo-political contexts, where the harm involved is amorphously socio-cultural as well as episodically criminal, and if the whole process is co-constituted by direct and indirect action, culpable and inadvertent intentionality, the question of complicity becomes simultaneously more pressing and distinctly agonistic. This is because the issue is not only about finding *degrees* of causal contribution, rationalization, and resistance. It is also about opening up for debate the nature and depth of the ‘harm’ itself; about the difficulty of allocating different

aspects of the harms to the past, present or future; and about assessing the ways in which the harms, over time, become bound up with knowledges, technologies, and cultural reference points that cease to be the instrumentalities of the perpetrators alone. All this, I guess, approximates to the question of complicity in the domain of empire, from the point of view of a politics of the present.

And in that regard, complicity turns out not to be the notional opposite of complexity, but part of it. Lewis wants to say, in that case, that we should altogether ditch the question of complicity *qua* guilt or responsibility for imperialism; Steinmetz advises that we need to proceed to examine the work and lives of sociological individuals and groups on a case by case, criterion by criterion, context by context basis. He also understands that while there may be no transparent relationship between *personal* and *systemic* effects and perspectives, the links between these two dimensions (agentive and systemic) can never be severed entirely, because they are co-constitutive of the phenomenon.

This is a longstanding sociological proposition, of course, but it has received fresh legitimation from complexity theory. This is because systemic coherence displays, indeed is defined by, *emergence*: the ‘higher level’ shape and trajectory of the whole depends upon innumerable ‘lower level’ inputs and interactions, but develops structural properties that go beyond the inputs of any group of causal determinants. On top of that, in complex life, whether natural or social, we are never talking about just one system only, but a range of co-present and mutually influencing large-scale phenomena. Interestingly, some complexity scientists use the very term ‘complicity’ to capture precisely this context of compound structural interaction. Thus, according to one influential statement:

Complicity is the tendency of interacting systems to coevolve in a manner that changes both, leading to a growth of complexity from simple beginnings – complexity that is unpredictable in detail, but whose general course is comprehensible and foreseeable.⁵

Applying this to our immediate concerns, the development of Western global hegemony can be depicted as a matter of complicity in these systemic, relatively impersonal terms: over centuries of compound interaction, involving different social forms and forces, both within and also *between* ‘the West’ and ‘the rest’, cultural benchmarks and power sources develop, consolidate and change in various ways. But this does not mean that complicities in the more customary human meaning have been bleached out of the picture, because we are still talking about ‘structures in dominance’. Accordingly, at every stage the emergent characteristics of

the system are fuelled by myriad, differentially weighted individual and collective contributions (thoughts, deeds, and social relationships). Now this way of presenting the two senses of complicity, and how they operate together, is highly general and as such will not resolve the normative questions of who and what to blame for colonialism-imperialism, if that is what we seek to do. But it does, I think, spell out the underlying logic of the ‘third’ analytical option for postcolonial sociology that George Steinmetz is proposing.

Discourse and power revisited

How might these considerations of complexity guide further our sense of the options facing postcolonial sociology? Thinking for a moment of examples from outside the recent batch of texts on the subject, the late Stuart Hall’s 1992 essay on the ‘West and the Rest’ offers one kind of complexity-attuned critical perspective. Hall took his readers through the ways in which this powerful imaginary was sponsored in the European Enlightenment, and he emphasised how it continued to be ‘still at work’ within contemporary sociological understandings.⁶ In particular, and along with many others, Hall associated two of sociology’s much-qualified yet still-extant assumptions – that ‘modernity’ represents, at least comparatively speaking, an ‘advanced’ form of social organization, and that modernity took off definitively in the societies of Europe/the West/the North – with the logic of the ‘four stages’ theory of human history first fully adumbrated by people like Adam Smith and John Millar.⁷ For Hall, the analytical schemas of the stadial philosophers came directly out of the colonial regime of their times, when due to the consolidated process of ‘discovery’, conquest, trade and exploitation, the whole phased development of humanity from hunter-gatherers to ‘polished’ commercial businessmen, appeared contemporaneously spread before their very eyes. And the notion of progress that formed an integral part of this emerging universalist social scientific discourse was normatively grounded in the inevitably prejudiced, frequently vicious, contrast between ‘rude’ and ‘refined’ societies, between ‘ignoble savages’ and the ‘cultivated’ metropolitan class.

Put this way, Hall’s essay – building on Said’s *Orientalism* of course⁸ – appears to set a firmly corrective-dismissive tone for postcolonial retrospects on sociology. Julian Go’s account of the ‘imperial unconscious’ underlying the founding of American sociology in the Steinmetz volume and Steven Seidman’s review of the ‘colonial unconscious of classical

sociology' in Go's 2013 collection *Postcolonial Sociology* appear to fall squarely into that mould.⁹ However, a closer reading of Hall reveals a more nuanced reading.

First, Hall constructs his account in a broadly Foucauldian way in order to illuminate the connections between *discourse* and *power*. The West-Rest imaginary, in that sense, is not to be addressed directly in classical ideology-critique terms, but rather as a matter of excavating an underlying 'regime of truth'. Now Hall knows very well – as Said did – that the Foucauldian matrix triggers almost unresolvable conundrums about the relationship between the material context/consequences of theoretical perspectives and their ideational content, and about whether the *rightness* or *wrongness* of the ideas themselves enters the Foucauldian picture at all. For those reasons, Hall states, the discourse/power framework is being used *heuristically*. A second point is that, for Hall and many other postcolonialists, putting 'modernity' into question as structured by, and in various ways serving, empire, does not mean *disowning* cultural modernity/modernities, or saying that history can and should be somehow *reversed*, or insisting that modernity did *not* emerge as some kind of qualitatively new 'stage' out of pre-existing and very different social formations, modes of production, and cultural imaginaries. Neither is he implying that 'rise of the west' stories that highlight 'endogenous' or internal developmental processes are always invalid as such, only that teleological, necessitarian, and uni-dimensional accounts are. The point then becomes that whatever acceptable factors 'internal' to the European context are duly given an explanatory role, corresponding and at times overwhelming 'external' determinations – those to do primarily with physical encounter, conquest and cultural imposition – also have to feature prominently.¹⁰

Third, Hall highlights the dangers of reproducing the West-Rest binary by thinking of western modernity and its scholars as culturally homogeneous and as uniformly regressive in political-historical terms. He counters the oft-heard but entirely superficial slogan that binary thinking itself is some kind of special cultural effect of modernity, because he knows that *all* cultural systems are coordinated by binaries of one sort or another. What Hall is doing, rather, is seeking to combine a sense of the systemic, integrating nature of colonial-imperial hegemony with an appreciation that the way that has been established, motivated, operationalized, and contested are, to an extent, 'open' questions.

We can underline this by noting that Hall drew considerably on R. L. Meek's *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage*. That 1975 work argued that although the stadial theory was

shared by a whole generation of scholars, and incorporated ‘supremacist’ attitudes, Millar’s version especially was subtle and powerful, providing substantive and methodological insights of enduring value for any historical sociology. Meek rebuffs the accusations of ‘Eurocentrism!’ made by a number of anthropologists and historians in the 1950s and 1960s – so let us note in passing that these debates have been around for some time – by showing that his favoured theorists were acutely aware of the downsides of commercial modernity; were careful to avoid mechanical and ‘inevitalist’ applications of the stadial typology; and had considerable respect for the non-modern modes of life they were analysing. Above all, they were announcing the kind of *contextualist* and *social* frame of understanding that remains decisive in the battle against claims that differences between peoples can be explained in terms of *natural* inequalities. To claim, therefore, as some postcolonial critics do, that proto-sociological theorizing of the stadial type rationalized the West’s sense of *racial* superiority, is mistaken. Rather, it made the sociological critique of racism possible.¹¹

Sociology and postcolonialism: programmatic ambivalence?

In the light of the above, it might seem that a certain kind of principled ambivalence is the appropriate attitude to strike when thinking about the history and merits of sociology in the context of empire. However, though good for political dialogue and personal reflexivity, ambivalence does not easily make for coherent social theorizing, partly because, typically, one side of the ostensible dichotomy takes priority over the other. We can see this in the manifesto-like statements fronting two books that *Sociology & Empire* builds upon.

In setting out an agenda for *Decolonizing European Sociology* (2010), Manuela Boatca and Sergio Costa provide a neat pairing of headings. They first ask ‘why *postcolonial* sociology?’ followed by ‘why postcolonial *sociology*?’ Indicatively, however, whilst the first question is given extensive treatment both in their essay and across their collection, little is said about why the third word matters in their goal of ‘postcolonially sensitive sociology’. Thus, ‘postcolonial theories are aimed straight at the heart of sociology’s central terminology’ because the latter’s ‘prescriptive and ahistorical universals’ correspond to ‘no independent, objective social reality’. Sociology, on this basis, merely ‘suppresses’ colonial difference and dynamics, and intrinsically harbours ‘strategies of exclusion’.

Despite adhering to these unequivocal propositions, the authors in question then declare that they do not hold that sociology’s faults are ‘irreparable’. Thus, its ‘constructivist

conception of culture' can be praised, and it is affirmed that postcolonial studies 'contain a clear sociological scope', because they 'treat differences in the context of societal structures'. Nevertheless, because the failures of sociology have been presented as so grave, this endorsement comes across very much as an afterthought.¹²

Julian Go's prefatory analysis in *Postcolonial Sociology* (2013) outlines three main waves of postcolonial thought, in the course of which humanities subjects like history and literary studies are said to have been far more receptive to postcolonial themes than ever-resistant sociology. Go never precisely states why sociology should be so stubborn, but we deduce that it is due to the reproduction of the 'imperial gaze' by the founders of the discipline that Go invokes early on. He proceeds to advise that sociologists have much to learn from postcolonial theory that is not available within, indeed runs against, the standard sociological repertoire, pointing out that if Marxist-influenced theories of development and the world system have been 'sociology's best answer' to the postcolonial boom in the humanities, those paradigms have waned along with the consistent charges of economic reductionism (correctly) made against them. Postcolonial theory, on the other hand, has produced rich, pluralistic, multidimensional analyses in which the 'cultural, psychological, discursive, epistemic, representational or textual dimensions' of empire-related issues are given due consideration. Sociology's deficiencies are compounded by its difficulty in even addressing questions of empire (as opposed to nation), and its lack of postcolonial attention to subaltern voices and agency. All in all, then, sociology would appear to be completely disabled by its entrapment within the 'metropolitan standpoint'.

At this point, however, Go distances himself somewhat from the 'strand' of postcolonial critique that directly equates sociology with positivism, and positivism with the epistemic and political 'violence' of the imperial standpoint. He asks: what if sociology is not completely or inherently positivistic? What if the postcolonial critique itself relies on 'a minimal epistemological positivism' such that we can claim to demonstrably *know* sociology's metrocentricity and its reflection of Northern interests? And what if sociological knowledge – like other parts of science – has validity notwithstanding its Eurocentric origins? In that light, Go recommends that we don't have to 'uncritically accept sociology or reject it entirely'; rather we should acknowledge its limitations and reflexively 'push ahead' with new methods and concepts 'so as to meet the postcolonial critique'. This is well said, but once again there is a hefty imbalance in the expression of ambivalence. The probing questions

come too late in the day, and had they really carried conviction, the framing of the relationship between sociology and postcolonial thought would have had to be significantly different right from the start.¹³

Sociology & Empire takes up the task of sociological ‘pushing ahead’, but not exclusively in order ‘to meet the postcolonial critique’, and in a way that is ‘positive’ as well as ‘reflexive’. It is not so readily assumed that postcolonial thought is profoundly out of kilter with critical historical sociology. Its governing sense of ambivalence, and the positioning of individual sociologists and different national sociologies in the context of empire are therefore more endorsing. So Lewis cannot be right in regarding *Sociology & Empire* as driven by a stilted concern with complicity. Yet, complicity does take its place within the book, prominently so in being allocated the authoritative concluding statement, by Raewyn Connell. Thus, Connell quickly notes aspects of the new forays into sociology of empire, before returning emphatically to the irretrievable fact of empire *in* sociology. Plying that now-familiar track, Connell asserts amongst other things that ‘[t]he comparative method that Durkheim saw as the heart of sociology is exactly the colonizer’s gaze on the colonized within the epistemology of empire’ (p. 490).

But such formulations are very strained. The ‘exactly’ in Connell’s assertion, for one thing, cannot be exactly right. Nor can Durkheim’s or any other sociologist’s version of ‘the comparative method’, as such, merely be the vehicle for epistemological and worse types of violence against the colonized, as such. Connell’s central trope, moreover, ‘the point of view of the Metropole’ just crudely reverses the West/Rest binary. Even the notion of the power-laden colonizing ‘gaze’, lazily culled from Foucault and solemnly repeated, meme-like, by so many authors in these volumes, is more an all-purpose metaphor than a precise explanatory concept. Postcolonial copyright on the gaze notion is assumed to hold because – harking back to Hall and Meek – the theorists of European modernity felt they had some kind of master map under view, according to which the necessary history and improvement of the world could be plotted spatially in terms of advanced and primitive peoples currently existing. But the degree to which this is accurate, and what *exactly* one can conclude from it, is far from clear, not something to be pre-empted through mechanical association. Alan Macfarlane (2000) for example – no linear evolutionist – absolves Montesquieu, Smith and Tocqueville from the charge, while Fuyuki Kurasawa’s 2004 book on *The Ethnological Imagination*, referred to by Lewis, finds the gaze of Rousseau, Marx, Durkheim, and Weber postcolonially enabling as well as, inevitably, constrained and constraining in various ways.¹⁴ And as we

have seen, Meek made the case for withdrawing the guillotine from Scottish proto-sociologists like Millar, whose sense of ‘universalist’ theory explicitly incorporated rather than over-ran the specificities of times, places, environments, modes of socio-economic life and cultural ‘inclinations’. Millar’s thought was formed when Glasgow was booming on the profits of the Atlantic tobacco trade; wealthy merchants attended his lectures thus contributing to his academic salary; and the social circles in which his ideas circulated were thoroughly bourgeois, male, and white. So Millar’s thinking must be profoundly colonialist – right? Wrong, or let’s just say debatable.¹⁵

Let me try to crystallise what I find problematical – I do not say groundless – in the postcolonial critique (of sociology) in both the condemnatory and reluctantly ambivalent modes.

1. There is a constant temptation to commit the ‘genetic fallacy’: *because* sociology was born in Europe and exposited by metropolitans, *therefore* its principles and theorizations serve only the ‘imperial standpoint’. This form of reasoning is fallacious because it entails the bizarre conclusion that strictly nothing in the realm of ideas can transcend their formative context and ideological use. (Ironically, the authority of the claim itself is also thereby undermined.)
2. It follows that the reluctance in these volumes openly to credit sociological thinking with context-breaking qualities and insights is unwarranted. Partly this is due to the regrettable tendency amongst some postcolonial commentators to cast suspicion on generalisation *as such*, figuring abstraction to be some kind of colonial gambit or form of epistemic violence, despite the fact that without the power of generalization and an aspiration to universalistic sense-making, postcolonial analysis would be impossible. Partly, it is due to a rather strange envy of other disciplines. It does not occur to Julian Go, for example, that if, compared with sociology, humanities subjects are more enthusiastic about postcolonial themes, this is part of a profound longer-term ‘*sociologization*’ of those disciplines, given their traditionally much stronger commitment to abstract universal values and their higher symbolic status amongst metropolitan cultural elites.
3. The tendency to present postcolonial thought itself as uniform and coherent, such that the learning process between it and sociology is thought to run entirely in one direction, is distorted. It overlooks postcolonialism’s *necessary* sociological dimension, being massively dependent upon large scale social-structural

generalization and ideology-critique; and it diminishes the huge amount of internal *dispute* that has characterised the field of postcolonial studies since its inception. Go attributes pluralistic multi-dimensionality to postcolonial thought at the expense of poor old economistic Marxism. Yet this plays down Marxism's always-considerable influence on people like Said, Spivak and Hall, and it forgets the fact that precisely the same complaint against Marxism has been levelled by generations of eminently pluralistic western sociologists. In any case, the idea that multiple analytical dimensions require to be somehow pulled together is by no means the same as *synthetically theorizing* them. That is an enormously difficult task, not least because strong and interesting theories generally nominate a preferred explanatory key, to more or less 'reductionist' effect.

Towards complexity

Sociology & Empire is far less prone to those problematic tendencies.¹⁶ It enhances postcolonial sociological complexity firstly by moving away from the tendency to anthropomorphize Sociology, as though it were some kind of singular purposive agent that could be blamed, praised, cajoled, or just laid to rest. It's interesting to note here that this exaggerated sense of disciplinary imperative has no equivalent in the humanities or natural sciences. Sociology does foster a progressivist sensibility widely shared amongst its practitioners, and this is one of its strengths, but it shouldn't be overdone. Steinmetz provides a necessary corrective by encouraging talk of *sociologists* rather than Sociology in the context of empire, and by making encroachments on their scientific 'autonomy' his benchmark criterion. This is quite a controversial move, when so much faux-philosophical theorizing leads many critical scholars today to refuse any distinction whatsoever between science/scholarship and normativity. The increasingly tedious charge of 'positivism!' is therefore already on its way. But whilst, *of course*, sociologists are ever-embroiled in the politics of the present and the ideological conditions and consequences of their analyses, intellectual distance still has to be levered, and an aspiration to objectivity motivated, otherwise it all reduces to 'whose side are you on?' (which is a vital question for sociologists as *people*).

Secondly, the book is marked by a greater sense of pluralism than its predecessors, achieved just by inclusively setting the more accusative contributions alongside exploratory

and positive ones, especially in the ‘National Sociological Fields’ section. The sense of fair and robust *debate* is thereby enhanced, which speaks to that sociological sensibility of progressive dialogue across difference.¹⁷ So I don’t favour Lewis’s recommendation of high-handed disciplinary *disentanglement*. For example, while I have some difficulties with Connell’s contentions in general, and with her modular engagements with particular ‘Southern’ thinkers,¹⁸ her injunctions that sociologists really must so engage, and that they must take the size and cultural significance of *the land* of the world more fully into their global schemas, are salutary indeed, and could only have come out of a legitimate, fully ‘entangled’, concern about disciplinary complicity.

Third, pluralistic debate does not equate to complexity theory per se, but there are anticipations of the latter too. *Epistemologically*, Steinmetz proposes in his reply to Lewis that we view (social) science as a developing hybrid amalgam of three relatively autonomous processes: the internal dynamics of the field (which include symbolic power dynamics), the external social contexts of science, and ‘irreducible creative acts’. *Methodologically*, in the opening pages of his introduction to the book, Steinmetz states that ‘sociological resources’ for research on empire must include the latter’s forms, developmental trajectories, determinants and effects. In relation to the determinants and effects, the point is to establish ‘conjunctural, contingent, multicausal patterns of causality’, comprising not only social and economic strands, but ideological, linguistic, cultural and psychic dimensions too. *Substantively*, the goal is to identify the specific ‘emergent properties’ that empire exhibits over and above the level of states and nations. This actually amounts to a very considerable agenda, but in principle it is one that seems strongly guided by the tenets of complexity thinking.

Something of this complexity agenda is instantiated in the ‘Current Sociological Theories’ part. For example, Krishan Kumar’s chapter shows that the traditional opposition between nation state and empire may be deceptive. Empires can generate state-like cultural mechanisms to secure integration, whilst in a sense – it comes as a mild shock – the major ‘Westphalian’ nations have *always* been actual or quasi-empires in formation or disintegration, rather than stable ‘stand-alone’ social totalities. A similar suggestion had been made previously by Michael Mann, whose chapter Lewis deems journalistic and self-regarding. This is a serious misjudgement. Mann’s work has been at the very centre of theoretical historical sociology in multidimensional style. His grasp of the different but combined sources of social power enabled him to support a broadly ‘internalist’ account of

the endogenous (but also happenstance, concatenated) conditions leading to the ‘rise of the West’, whilst also recognizing the undeniably ‘predatory’ character of its ‘externalist’, expansionary moment.¹⁹ Mann takes things further here (pp. 213-216) by providing a fertile encapsulation of the meaning of empire – ‘a centralized, hierarchical system of rule acquired and maintained by coercion through which a core dominates peripheries, serves as the intermediary for their main interactions, and channels resources from and between the peripheries’. He then offers a five-fold typology to chart historically the different phases and regimes of empire: direct, indirect, informal, economic, and hegemonic. It is the latter that currently straddles the world, Mann asserts, characterised by a ‘diffuse collective domination’ by Northern institutions and actors. The absence of direct coercion and coordination here intimates that Mann is offering a version of the Smithian ‘hidden hand’ or Hayekian ‘spontaneous order’ – sometimes referred to as ‘conservative’ versions of social complexity theory. But Mann has newly injected Gramsci into his scenario, so it is still very much a structure *in dominance*. And if the totality lacks a grand design or singular meaning, its overall viability and direction remain the product of multiple group interests, conscious actions, open and latent contestation.

Finally in this context, Lewis cannot see why Bergeson’s discussion of China’s ‘surgical imperialism’ in Africa should be in this book at all, given critical sociology’s obsession with Occidentalism. But as Steinmetz insists, the book is not so obsessed. Moreover, while Bereson’s surgical metaphor and other aspects of his argument are far from definitive, his attempt to exemplify ways in which empire might develop *after* the West, and through the *combined* resources of alternative modernities, is surely both interesting and necessary. It suggests, again, that a sociological account of history featuring various phases and logics of social organization is not (necessarily) a Eurocentric pursuit.

Questions of historicism

Lewis doubts the theoretical coherence and depth of Part II of *Sociology & Empire*, and cannot see how the seven informative Part III studies of the situated politics of colonial settings add up to a ‘new approach’ to imperialism. This is true, they don’t. Yet the avoidance of unifying conceptual punchlines, and an associated shift towards greater historical specificity represents a definite theoretical strategy in its own right – a pluralistic, deflationary one. Thus, the forms of complicity of intellectual and administrative colonial

strata, when looked at on the ground, turn out to be various and partial. They also include subaltern resistance, as illustrated by Daniel Goh's theoretically strenuous account of the 'Contradictory Rationalities of State Formation in British Malaya and the American Philippines'. The 'historical' chapters, then, support the editor's conviction, after Weber, that 'social events and objects are almost always conjuncturally overdetermined' (p. 12). In that sense they bring to a fitting close this substantial contribution to sociology in the broadest sense.

Let me close by pondering the implications of this new historicism. One question is whether it is as fully in line with complexity theory as I have, for argument's sake, been suggesting. One of the strongest appeals of complexity discourse, in its systems-theoretical variants, is that as well as postulating an inadequate simplicity *this side* of complexity, so to speak, it also promises the satisfaction of higher-level clarity *the other side* of complexity. That is why most complexity scientists are driven not by postmodern visions of chaos, but the prospect of unifying 'laws of complexity'. But Steinmetz's idea of historicism – a term, of course, open to almost diametrically opposed meanings – seems more 'Rankean' than 'Popperian'. In other words it veers more towards recognising the utter particularity of events in time/context than to finding their deeper significance by reference to a normatively-inspired perspective on human history as a whole. In that light, sociological involvements in empire, and even the nature and direction of empire itself, become definitively circumstantial, affording little scope for integrative theorization, not least because so many causal and motivational factors seem to demand full accreditation (social, economic, psychic, linguistic, cultural, personal, creative, and so on).

We need to note here that major challenges have lately been levelled against whatever remains of sociology's initial quest for overarching patterns and drivers. One form of critique due to Bruno Latour and others is that only vacuous or erroneous propositions result whenever particular phenomena are 'explained' in terms of sociology's ostensible main object, 'the social'. This is because the latter is not the *source* or *cause* or *essence* of anything; at best it is the *outcome* of what should really be grabbing our attention: those limited sequences of networks and assemblages in which people interact with multifarious things and other non-humans. Accordingly, Latourians urge the abandonment of explanation altogether in favour of a new *descriptivism*.²⁰

Relatedly, social theory's residual 'epochalism' and 'culturology' have come under fire – its constant apparent requirement that all manner of social dimensions, events, ideas, tastes and behaviour be packaged up into homologous affinities and historical blocs. And energising that kind of project is said to involve a hubristic political *romanticism*: the compulsion critical scholars somehow feel to always be *speaking for society*, berating others about its special crises and evils, and pre-emptively installing their preferred notion of radical progress.²¹ Latour is increasingly invoked by cultural radicals, but his cutting comment that postcolonial theory now stands as the latest epochal romanticism in that unacceptable vein should give great pause for thought in that regard.²² This is because despite their differences, totalizing perspectives like Marxism, radical cultural studies, and postcolonial ideology-critique are indeed similarly epochalist and culturological. Perhaps sociology is too, in a mild-mannered way. In response, today's new sceptics – typically leaning on Foucault, Deleuze or Latour – favour an ethically- rather than politically-orientated observational *empiricism*.

It would be interesting to learn how Steinmetz thinks his historicism connects with this intriguing set of issues, urgent for sociological theory and postcolonial studies alike.²³ For the moment, his solution is broadly 'Weberian', though those who see Weber's sociology as forever invalidated by his racism may not approve. The thought is that if sociology needs to be careful about untrammelled generalisation, it can at least generate perspicacious models to cut into the dense situational material in order to gain analytical and causal traction. Thus, Steinmetz's chapter provides a helpful set of 'working definitions' of the notions of empire, imperialism, colonialism, and the state, and fills them out by reference to pertinent socio-historical scenarios. And Mann, we have seen, delineates a sequence of forms of empire, explicitly tagging them as ideal types. But does this all amount, finally, to a qualified epochalism, or is it more a case of sophisticated pragmatic empiricism?²⁴

The long-standing philosophical (and also political) issue here is this. Weber held, in the neo-Kantian way, that while ideal types were both necessary as a matter of epistemological management, the manifold of social experience that they cut into – that teeming, endless mass of irreducible particulars – has no knowable core structure. Our ideal types are dependent upon the way in which we animate and accentuate social reality, and we make what we can of that scientifically, which is to say pragmatically. Now some sociologists and postcolonialists alike will find that rationale attractive – that ultimately, all scholarship is the product of the ineliminable clash of values and interests. But other

sociologists and postcolonialists are more ontologically *realist*. They think that the truth or otherwise of our historical perspective matters, not least because politics without truth becomes essentially whimsical or manipulative. In that case, ideal types are necessary, but only as first approximations towards a deeper grasp and a bigger picture, one in which the rise and fall of real social orders over time is something about which we can have secure knowledge, all the better to inform a better future. Such concerns go back a long way, yet remain highly active, not least in the ongoing ‘rise of the west’ debates.²⁵ *Are these meta-theoretical questions any longer pertinent in identifying and justifying a postcolonially-attuned sociology? And if so, does Steinmetz’s historicism offer a satisfactory resolution?*

Notes

¹ Herb S. Lewis, ‘Disentangling Disciplines’; George Steinmetz, ‘Defensive Anthropology’, *Postcolonial Studies*, this issue.

² Whilst complexity theory holds considerable promise for the social sciences, its adoption is by no means unproblematical. See Gregor McLennan, *Sociological Cultural Studies: Reflexivity and Positivity in the Human Sciences*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, Chapter 8, ‘The Turn to Complexity’.

³ It pervades, for example, the notable collection by Wendy Brown, Talal Asad, Judith Butler, and Saba Mahmood, *Is Critique Secular?* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009.

⁴ James G. Stewart, ‘Complicity’, in M.D. Dubber and T. Hornle (eds.) *Oxford Handbook of Criminal Law*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming, 2014.

⁵ Jack Cohen and Ian Stewart, *The Collapse of Chaos*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995, p.3.

⁶ Stuart Hall, ‘The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power’, in S. Hall and B. Gieben (eds.), *Formations of Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992, p. 315.

⁷ Essentially, the four historical-societal stages proposed (both empirically and theoretically) were hunter-gathering, pastoralism, settled agriculture, and commercial-mercantilism. The social types and stages of ‘progress’ were therefore defined in terms of different *modes of subsistence*, corresponding to which were certain socio-cultural practices, forms of belief, and civilizational qualities.

⁸ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978.

⁹ Steven Seidman, ‘The Colonial Unconscious of Classical Sociology’, in J. Go (ed.) *Postcolonial Sociology (Political Power and Social Theory Vol. 24)*, Bingley: Emerald, 2013; Julian Go, ‘Sociology’s Imperial Unconscious: the Emergence of American Sociology in the Context of Empire’, in G. Steinmetz (ed.), *Sociology & Empire: The Imperial Entanglements of a Discipline*, Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2014.

¹⁰ Hall, ‘The West and the Rest’, p. 317.

¹¹ Ronald L. Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975, pp. 235-43. Disappointingly, Steinmetz neglects to mention the Scots in his genealogy of 'proto-sociologists'.

¹² Manuela Boatca and Sergio Costa, 'Postcolonial Sociology: A Research Agenda', in E. G. Rodriguez, M. Boatca, and S. Costa (eds.), *Decolonizing European Sociology: Transdisciplinary Approaches*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2010, pp. 14-17, 23, 26-7.

¹³ Julian Go, 'Introduction: Entangling Postcoloniality and Sociological Thought', in J. Go (ed.) *Postcolonial Sociology*, pp. 4, 6-9, 18-21.

¹⁴ Alan Macfarlane, *The Riddle of the Modern World*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000; Fuyuki Kurasawa, *The Ethnological Imagination: A Cross-cultural Critique of Modernity*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. As Lewis points out, Kurasawa's chapter in Steinmetz backs off from the more sociologically affirmative conclusions of his earlier book, for reasons that escape me.

¹⁵ Millar was an early abolitionist, and he felt that the degradation of women was one of the retrograde features of Western commercial society. In both respects he still remained, of course, a man of his times. See W.C. Lehmann, *John Millar of Glasgow*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960, which includes parts of Millar's principal treatise *The Origin of Ranks*, first published in 1771.

¹⁶ Let me clarify that this is a relative, comparative judgement, because the earlier volumes were *not* inhospitable to debate. They included against-the-grain chapters by myself, for example, and an absorbing paper by Boaventura de Sousa Santos in *Decolonizing European Sociology – 'From the Postmodern to the Postcolonial – and Beyond Both'* – that might lead us to reconsider whether complexity really is as different from ambivalence as I have been intimating.

¹⁷ The strongest 'positive' account of sociology's engagement with coloniality is now to be found in George Steinmetz's 'British Sociology in the Metropole and the Colonies, 1940s-1960s', in J. Holmwood and J. Scott (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Sociology in Britain*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014. There, at one go, Steinmetz quells two of Lewis's complaints: complicity obsession and the neglect of British sociology.

¹⁸ See my 'Postcolonial Critique: the Necessity of Sociology' in *Postcolonial Sociology* for comments on Connell's handling of non-Western thinkers in her book *Southern Theory*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007. In *Sociology & Empire*, Connell extends her approach to Sun Yat-sen and Jomo Kenyatta, but the presentation of these canny, North-knowing, deliberately strategizing political intellectuals as straightforwardly particularist cultural voices of the South strikes me as sociologically and historically naïve.

¹⁹ For the shorthand version see Mann, 'Predation and production in European imperialism', in S. Malesevic and M. Haugaard (eds.) *Ernest Gellner & Contemporary Social Thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

²⁰ See Patrick Joyce (ed.) *The Social in Question: New Bearings in History and the Social Sciences*, London: Routledge, 2002, which includes a chapter by Latour.

²¹ For one statement of anti-epochalism see Thomas Osborne, Nicolas Rose, and Mike Savage, 'Reinscribing British Sociology', *Sociological Review* 56 (4): 519-34.

²² Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to ANT*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 187.

²³ In ‘Transdisciplinarity as a Nonimperial Encounter: For an Open Sociology’, *thesis eleven* 91, 2007: 48-65, Steinmetz seeks to erase any recalcitrant differences between sociology, history, and other social and humanities disciplines. But in doing so he re-endorses – whether on behalf of sociology itself or the new larger collective – sociology’s traditional object, the social.

²⁴ It can be noted here that Mann’s anti-evolutionist, multifactorial perspective in *The Sources of Social Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986 & 1993) did posit one quasi-evolutionary selector mechanism, namely the capacity for ‘organizational outflanking’. By contrast, his *Incoherent Empire*, London: Verso, 2003, though excellent and hard-hitting, seems content to be largely descriptive.

²⁵ See for example the discussion of methodological ‘accidentalism’ in the exchanges around Joseph M. Bryant, ‘The west and the rest revisited: debating capitalist origins, European colonialism, and the advent of modernity’, *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 31(4), 2006: 403-44.