

Anti-Eurocentric Eurocentrism? The pitfalls of a 'shallow' approach to epistemological revision.

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Introduction

When Samir Amin first coined the term 'Eurocentrism' in 1989, he explicated a long-held, yet until then tacit, stream of scholarly interest. Describing the phenomenon which places Europe as the apex of political progress and framer of epistemological exploration, Eurocentrism disguises a particularistic paradigm as universal. For Amin, it constituted a "distortion through which dominant theories and ideologies suffer". In this way, Amin's definition of Eurocentrism was always intended as a form of anti-Eurocentric critique – seeking to expose and, by extension, challenge its dominance.

Yet, in practice, this was far from straightforward. As explored below, Amin's writings may have challenged Eurocentric narratives, yet they simultaneously reified a Euro-colonial axiom of knowledge. This is because Eurocentrism is best considered as a hypernym. Constituting an "attitude", "conceptual apparatus", and "set of empirical beliefs" (Sundberg 2009, 638), it is methodologically approachable at different conceptual levels. As such, anti-Eurocentrism can challenge Eurocentrism and, at the same time, entrench alternative facets: a phenomenon termed 'Anti-Eurocentric Eurocentrism' by Wallerstein (1997, 32).

To demonstrate this point: that the breadth of the Eurocentric continuum subjects anti-Eurocentric efforts to various pitfalls of reproduction, this blog post will outline the connection between one's specific approach and the venues of propagation. To do so, it locates Amin's analysis within, what it coins, a 'shallow' strand of anti-Eurocentrism. Unlike a 'foundational' approach (*see conclusion*), shallow anti-

Eurocentrism seeks to improve, rather than remove, the existing system of epistemic exploration. Working towards epistemological revision, it operates within the parameters of a Eurocentrically defined framework. While undermining the material perception that Europe was predestined for global leadership, it does not challenge the ontological foundations of universalism and linear progress on which Eurocentrism's 'dominance' over epistemology resides. In failing to do so, it implicitly aids in its reproduction: it is, at once, anti-Eurocentric and Eurocentric.

A shallow approach: provincialising Europe and decentring the history of capitalist development

To draw out these potential pitfalls, this post turns to arguably the fulcrum on which Eurocentric thought rests – the interdependent development of capitalism and 'modernity'. Traditionally posited as a linear progression which originated in the ancient 'European' civilisations of Greece and Rome, the two phenomena have acted as the justification for European dominance within both epistemic exploration and political praxis. This teleological tracing of development confers a sense of inevitability to Europe's global leadership by tying the progression of capitalism to 'Western civilisation'. Most prominently, this was emphasised in Max Weber's 'The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism'. Weber argued that the Protestant Reformation released energy for change and provided normative support to entrepreneurs by stressing the virtue of diligence (Alatas 1963, 21). Conversely, alternative religions and, by extension, civilisations, for Weber, lacked "the ethos of an economic system" — defined as "the connection of the spirit of modern economic life with the rational ethics of ascetic Protestantism."

In part, this reflects the context in which Weber operated. Writing at the start of the twentieth century from within Europe, the Protestant-Capitalist linkage mirrored the emergence of contemporary social science, a trend that was methodologically conditioned by Europe's geopolitical dominance (Wallerstein 1997, 21). However, by denying agency to non-Europeans in creating the contemporary world order, (Western) Europe's appropriation of the position of world leader was conferred legitimacy. The 'linearity', from its origins, presented a sense of inevitability. Not only does this create an interregional hierarchy but it relies upon an arbitrary conceptualisation of Europe itself. Indeed, claiming the heritage of Athens but not, for example, Mesopotamia, leans on a discrete demarcation of the Eurasian landmass. This contributed to the Eurocentric sense of hierarchy via a self/other dichotomy between the Occident and the Orient.

Given that this theory constitutes the fulcrum of Eurocentrism, entrenching dominance over epistemology and political praxis, it also forms the basis of the anti-Eurocentric challenge.

Responding to this Weberian narrative, accounts have attempted to revise the existing linearity. Drawing upon preceding arguments, Dipesh Chakrabarty's 'provincialisation of Europe' formally conceptualised a process of 'decentring'. This sought to introduce multiple points of origin and inflexion into the genealogy of capitalist progression, thus constituting a shallow avenue of anti-Eurocentrism in its revisionism. Describing the aforementioned "European intellectual tradition" of unbroken linearity as a "fabrication", Chakrabarty (2000, 5) does not reject

modernism as culturally-specific. Rather, he seeks to create “conjoined and disjunctive genealogies for European categories of political modernity”. Not only does this posit development’s inconsistent fluctuation but it reflects on its regional interconnection. This presents a ‘global’ explanation sensitive to subaltern studies. In turn, provincialisation, as a form of revisionist historiography, provides an increasingly nuanced complexity towards historical analysis, shifting away from a homogenised and reductive universalism.

As alluded to above, Chakrabarty was not the first to employ provincialisation. Indeed, it was in this strand of anti-Eurocentrism that Amin himself defined Eurocentrism. Seeking to revisit historical developments, Amin (1991) traced examples of proto-capitalism across the ‘non-European world’. This theorised a tributary system consolidated around connected, yet disparate, centres of power. Beyond appreciating that “societies prior to the sixteenth century were in no way isolated from one another”, in actuality, Amin (349) places the centre of power in the Arab-Muslim world. Recognising that the most significant proto-capitalist developments stemmed from tributary centralisation in, amongst others, Byzantium and Damascus, he argues that capitalism may “have been born in the Arab world” (359). Moreover, he illustrates that Western scholastic developments occurred first in regions which bordered the Islamic world. Whilst this argument may overstate ideational factors over substantive forces, including resource distribution, it situates Europe within the broader Eurasian landmass, dispersing agency by demonstrating interconnection. By placing Western Europe as a ‘tributary periphery’, this form of decentring extended further than Chakrabarty by attempting to invert agency.

Thus, the shallow decentring strand of anti-Eurocentrism constitutes a challenge to Eurocentrism on two main levels. The rejection of the traditional Weberian account extends further than an increased historiographical nuance. By replacing the linear trajectory with a genealogy that entails multiple points of origin and inflexions, historic agency and relations of power are challenged. This exposes the traditional Eurocentric ontological exclusion of the 'non-West' and undermines the notion of a civilisational hierarchy (Duzgun 2020, 286). This delegitimises the historical placement of Europe as the predetermined apex of the international capitalist system, with implications on a political and epistemic level. In terms of the latter, the revisionist approach facilitates an epistemological expansion, challenging Eurocentrism's monocausal explanation.

Despite these challenges, decentring implicitly reifies the concept of Europe. Reflecting Tolay's (2021, 693) recognition that anti-Eurocentrism can both entrench and challenge its Eurocentric counterpart, the efforts of scholars to expand historiographical accounts 'beyond Europe', essentialised it as a monolithic and distinctive entity. Criticism of 'European' narratives accepts that there is a coherent entity called Europe. By attempting to engage with revision through terms that are distinctly defined by European thinkers, scholars have served to reproduce the corresponding self/other division between 'Europe' and 'non-Europe' (or the West and non-West). These unintended and somewhat counterproductive consequences reaffirm Wallerstein's 'Anti-Eurocentric Eurocentrism'.

Specifically, one form of Anti-Eurocentric Eurocentrism prominent within efforts of provincialisation is the uncritical endorsement of universalism and progress. Despite

challenging the existing universal narrative, shallow anti-Eurocentrism does not attempt to question the notion of the universal itself. Rather, it aims to expand the range of relevant actors spatially and temporally. For example, rather than presenting capitalism as a particular historical phenomenon, the notion of 'proto-capitalist' societies seeks to interlink previously distinct civilisations. Albeit in a revised form, this extends universalism, naturalising capitalism as an all-encompassing (and thus, entrenched) entity. This may challenge mono-causality. Yet, ultimately, the attempt to integrate with a single universal narrative, alludes to a resistance towards removing the notions of the universal in its entirety. By reproducing the underlying purpose of conveying universalism, efforts to provincialise Europe implicitly cement Eurocentric foundations. In turn, this acts to the detriment of alternative systems of social interaction, with capitalism presented as a necessary and natural consequence of development (Duzgun 2020, 293).

Beyond cementing the idea of the universal, the extension of spatial and temporal parameters turns "every past event into a necessary 'precondition'" (Duzgun 2020, 292). This historiographical approach, embodied in Amin's work, anachronistically posits capitalism as teleologically inevitable, reproducing its assumed organicism. Underlyingly, this presentist pitfall extends further than capitalist development, entrenching the notion of linear progression. Originating in the work of Immanuel Kant, progress, as a basic theme of the European Enlightenment, is presented as the purpose of history. Defining the Enlightenment as the "emergence from immaturity", Kant (1784) states that "mankind is a story of progression". This teleological focus on 'maturation', via reason and progress, was furthered by Hegel (1833) who, in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, considered history to be

“governed by an ultimate design”. The Kantian and Hegelian legacy, which defines modernity through capitalist exchange and Enlightened rationality and progress, formed the bedrock for the Eurocentric archetype.

Although Chakrabarty seeks to decentre responsibility, revising the universal narrative in challenge of Europe’s perceived pre-eminence, he does not question the Enlightened premise of progress and universalism, on which these accounts are grounded. Stating that “the project of provincialising Europe ... cannot be a project of cultural relativism” (43), this argument, which attempts to expand explanations of capitalist progression, proves consistent with the core exploratory aim of the Weberian approach. Shallow revisionists endorse progress as the universal metric for empirical analysis. Understood as the ‘correct’ methodological avenue for knowledge production, this reproduces Eurocentrism by echoing the basic tenets of how one pursues, in this case, economic history. Even if decentring challenges the unipolarity of development, it does not question the underlying understanding that history is an account of progress. It reproduces Eurocentrism’s particularistic paradigm as universal.

Attempts of revision lend themselves to further entrenchment. This is because revised theories increasingly crowd the literature, obscuring the underlying continuity of Eurocentrism’s foundations. The extension of the universal teleology of capitalist development frames notable differences over spatial and temporal agency, rather than the foundational scope of the literature’s investigation. Therefore, by anachronistically accepting the Eurocentrically-defined notion that progress is not only teleological and universal, but that it is the ‘correct’ metric of analysis, shallow

elements reproduce Eurocentrism's epistemological dominance. These underlying theoretical and methodological values, presented during an epoch of European domination and, in part, aided by shallow anti-Eurocentrism, continue to frame ontological assumptions, limiting alternative avenues of logic. It is on this last point, that this blog will now turn to.

By reproducing the ontological framework through which European thought has implemented a sense of epistemic totality, alternative epistemological traditions are restricted. Moving beyond capitalism, the underlying conceptualisation that history retains a teleological purpose runs against non-linear paradigms. For instance, scholars have noted that Kantian deontology is incompatible with Buddhist ethics (see, for example, Goodman 2009). Cosmologically, Buddhist thought subscribes to a notion of Dharmatā and Saṃsāra. The former describes an infinite and beginningless universe; the latter constitutes the corresponding principle of oscillating and cyclic organisation. This cyclicity is believed to be true for individuals and society at large. Additionally, Buddhist theorists currently argue that the world is in a devolutionary cycle and will continue to decline before emerging again (Nattier 2008, p. 155). Even if this may still be understood as progress (temporally), it, nonetheless, proves antithetical to Kantian thought's linear and teleological evolution defined in its 'end', or purpose. Consequently, the framing cyclicity impedes its employment within the contemporary analysis of, for example, development. Whilst this blog is not advocating for Buddhist cyclicity over linear teleology, by falling outside the ontological parameters, it highlights how Eurocentrism limits the spectrum of epistemic exploration.

Dotson (2014, 115) argues that this can be considered 'epistemic oppression', defined as a "persistent epistemic exclusion that hinders one's contribution to knowledge production". In turn, this exclusion illustrates how shallow anti-Eurocentric revisioning reproduces Eurocentrism to the detriment of diversified analysis. This proves mutually reinforcing, with the limited viability of non-linear exploration reducing the efficacy of alternative challenges. Thus, despite potentially constituting a consequence of purpose — seeking to revise the existing historiographical account of capitalist development — decentring does not question the ontological foundations through which Eurocentrism is reproduced. By tying itself to the aforementioned Eurocentric parameters, no room is left for alternative non-linear conceptualisations of progress and history. This stymies the extent of reform and, in a mutually-reinforcing cycle, reproduces Eurocentrism.

In summary, efforts to provincialize and decentre have simultaneously challenged and reproduced various facets of Eurocentrism. Reflective on the terminological breadth, Chakrabarty and Amin have challenged the Eurocentric, Weberian account of capitalist development. The introduction of multiple genealogies has facilitated epistemological nuance and expansion, in turn, eroding the legitimacy of previously presumed interregional hierarchies. Yet, despite challenging traditional agency and relations of power, shallow anti-Eurocentrism continues to reproduce Eurocentrism. Beyond merely reifying the notion of Europe (by exploring the role of the 'non-European' other), the shallow approach challenges Europe's apparent pre-eminence but does not question the foundational and framing assumptions. Partially a consequence of its revisionist nature and purpose, as Tolay (700) suggests, this "displaces but does not resolve". Its spatial and temporal expansion neither

questions that progress is a universal foundation, nor shifts away from the notion of the universal itself. This fails to break beyond the core theoretical and methodological axioms which posit a European paradigm of epistemic monopolisation.

A foundational alternative?

What, then, is the solution? While shallow anti-Eurocentrism aims at revision, alternative 'foundational' approaches challenge the underlying universal framework itself. For instance, Decoloniality –conceptualised by Mignolo and Walsh (2018) in response to Anibal Quijano's seminal work on 'coloniality' – elevates plurality in an attempt to "delink from the colonial matrix of power". Decoloniality, they argue, is "first and foremost [about the] liberation of knowledge", differing from shallow approaches in its determination "not to resist, but to re-exist" (146).

Foundational approaches are not without their own pitfalls. By dispersing knowledge it fragments the 'non-European' axes, impeding the confrontation with Eurocentrism (Nanda 2003, 158; Matolino 2020, 213). Yet, Decoloniality is not devised to replace Kantian teleology with an alternative 'non-European' position. It does not favour Buddhist cyclicity. Rather, it counters the notion that any school of thought can be 'correct' and thus, universal. Mignolo and Walsh partially ground their analysis in the 're-existence' of indigenous Andean communities. Employing the indigenous 'awareness' of Vincularidad, understood as one's relation to territory or land, they emphasise the need to operate introspectively through one's "own ancestral knowledge and intelligence". Each epistemological paradigm is presented as distinct

from one another, grounded in a relativistic relationship to the land, the past, and knowledge itself.

Reflecting the intimate relationship between knowledge and power (see Foucault 1975), Decoloniality seeks to liberate knowledge as a necessary prerequisite for substantive social, political and cultural autonomy. This aims to transition towards a system of relational pluralism, emboldening epistemic independence and shifting agency via the unrestricted development of subaltern voices.

Take, for example, Adejumo-Ayibiowu's (2022) recent work on Afrocentricity. Long smothered by the Euro-colonial axiom of knowledge, which "makes an absolute distinction between the body and soul, matter and spirit" (Senghor; Ba 2015), an Afrocentric approach "embraces the African ideas of collective identity, communalism, humanness" (Adejumo-Ayibiowu 2022). Running counter to Eurocentrism's materiality, the Zulu philosophy of Ubuntu argues that a "person is only a person because of other people" (Adejumo-Ayibiowu 2022). The premise on which postcolonial African states are judged, namely a pursuit of growth and development, is thus discriminatory in its very foundation. Without a foundational approach to anti-Eurocentrism, challenging the narrow Eurocentric prescription of epistemological parameters, Ubuntu's collective spiritualism cannot assert itself.

In this way, Decoloniality, as a foundational approach, takes anti-Eurocentrism a step further. While not without its own pitfalls, it is only through this approach that anti-Eurocentrism can avoid reproducing its Eurocentric counterpart. It is destructive rather than revisionary. By removing, rather than revising, a singular universalism

(as is the case in shallow efforts), Decoloniality can help unleash multiple coexisting epistemological paradigms.

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