

Beyond Reason: Postcolonial Theory and the Social Sciences

Sanjay Seth

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Modern knowledge, it would seem, is in crisis. It is no longer “modern,” and it is not “knowledge,” at least not in the sense that it contributes to the progress toward a “universal Truth.” At best, any claim to the contrary smacks of naivety. With the rise of global social justice movements like BlackLivesMatter, the 1619 Project, calls to decolonize education, and the turn to Indigenous ways of knowing and being, challenges to the ideas produced and circulated in formal educational settings have over the last few years gained renewed purchase. While popular critiques of “modern knowledge” were once relegated to works of high theory, recently published work¹ demonstrates that scholars are seeking new ways of understanding how the disciplines produce, disseminate, and police specific ways of knowing.

Sanjay Seth’s recent monograph, *Beyond Reason*, surveys the intellectual and disciplinary currents central to recent critiques of “modern Western knowledge.” Through a close examination of disciplines central to how we understand knowledge produced in social, political, and cultural spheres, Seth considers the philosophical implications of disciplinary knowledge, and what that knowledge does. His purpose is ultimately to “anthropologize” (15) the West, showing the historically specific roots of knowledge systems thought to be both objective and universal. He does this, to be clear, not to show the falsity of Western knowledge, but rather to show what these systems of inquiry “bring into view and what they obscure, what they make possible to think, and what they make difficult to think” (7). Ultimately, Seth demonstrates the specific, contingent structures of our epistemic “commonsense.”

In seeking to provincialize “modern Western knowledge,” *Beyond Reason: Postcolonial Theory and the Social Sciences* departs from much recent decolonial and postcolonial scholarship that reframes modern knowledge as always already global. For Seth, outlining the specificity and provinciality of modern Western knowledge affirms that its foundational presuppositions—subject/object, human/animal, observer/observed—are, indeed, both “modern” and “Western.” While claims to the contrary have been important in showing the colonial roots of ideas, technologies, and ways of knowing the world previously celebrated as being the singular achievements of “the West,” Seth asks why these ideas—if simply adapted and repackaged—were not recognized when “returned” to the colonies. Why did “Western knowledge” require gunboats and repression, and why did non-Western intellectuals spend decades

debating how to include recognizably Western aspects of this knowledge, while maintaining distance and cultural difference? Seth reminds us that while technologies, medicinal and agricultural practices, and scientific modes of inquiry were central to modernity, we must not forget that knowledge was taken from conscripted subjects. “Even where it bore the marks of extensive borrowing ... facilitated by prior contacts and exchanges,” Seth writes, “modern knowledge did not arrive to these locals as a reworked version of what was already familiar, but as something new—and alien” (11). Navigating these multiple currents, Seth seeks a third way in addressing these knowledge systems, one that acknowledges their global presence without ignoring how that presence was established. Seth reminds us that the disciplines, despite relying on widely dispersed knowledges, traditions, and cultures, were transformed in the West and used as sources of power and dominance in the Global South. His cautious approach reminds us that we must neither elide the specificity of modern knowledge *nor* obscure the processes by which it became globally dispersed.

The first part of the book provides an astute overview of some of the foundational epistemic critiques of knowledge. The book’s methodological strength lies in its inquiry into the specific bodies of formal knowledge “produced, disseminated, and utilized in schools, universities, and state bureaucracies” (14). Laying the groundwork for these inquiries, Seth surveys early challenges—from Foucault and Kuhn, to Rorty and Latour—to what might be called a “Whiggish” view of knowledge: namely, the unmasking of universal truths, and the uncovering of the logics of the natural world. Seth then outlines how key theorists—specifically, Karl-Otto Apel, John Rawls, and Jürgen Habermas—have tried to recover “progress” and “reason” as liberational aspirations. The greatest force and originality of *Beyond Reason* lies in the second section, which offers a close reading of debates within a handful of disciplines. Seth devotes chapters to history, international relations, and political theory to show how these specific disciplines themselves have internalized—or sidelined—the implications and complicities of their own histories.

Seth probes internal discussions and debates within the social sciences that demonstrate an increasing anxiety toward the construction and maintenance of disciplinary knowledge. While disciplines are always self-reflexive and paradigmatic, requiring fluency in a specialized language and methodology, Seth outlines a more general set of propositions across the disciplines that privilege positivism, a secularism that overlaps with the so-called “disenchantment” of the natural world, and a separation between an observer and laws set in motion guiding otherwise inert matter. These preconditions for knowing not only played a large role in the dehumanizing academic discourses that buttress colonialism, but also in how we conceptualize animals and the natural world as that which contains value to be extracted. In the social sciences specifically, Seth outlines the contingencies embedded within methodological approaches. International relations, perhaps the youngest discipline he

examines, has a historical amnesia to anything other than the nation-state as a supposedly universal actor. A naturalized and universalized telos has been drawn anachronistically, for example, from the Treaty of Westphalia (1648) to a modern world composed of nations and nationalities. Other times, places, and social orders are envisioned as steps toward our enlightened moment and “recoded” according to a once provincial way of knowing the world. As a result, Seth points out, “with rare exceptions, the centuries of colonialism and empire barely register in the disciplines of international relations” (165). What is important about Seth’s work is that rather than critiquing from outside of the disciplines, Seth builds on important internal debates, drawing attention to the tensions that generate questions and debates about the construction of disciplinary knowledge itself.

In postcolonial studies, we have long asked difficult questions about our disciplinary knowledge: in what ways are we complicit with, and how do we reorient, exclusionary systems? What forms of knowing, worldmaking, and understanding are forgotten when we imagine literature in terms of categories such as “high” and “low” culture, “society,” “humanity,” “nature,” “universal truth,” and “canon”? Seth’s book demonstrates how the methodologies, approaches, and objects of our disciplines are culturally and historically contingent systems, with specific (not universal) rules, genres, and modes of inquiry: useful in certain contexts, limited and exclusionary in many other instances. As such, *Beyond Reason* presents a pedagogical model of how to think about disciplinary knowledge and the codes and structures at work as we frame and communicate that knowledge. Seth reminds us that, in addition to revising the curriculum, making the canons more inclusive, and incorporating a diverse range of voices (all important endeavors), we must do the necessary, much more foundational work of transforming the very structures of oppression and meaning-making—built into the fabric of disciplinary knowledge—that exclude and degrade other ways of being and knowing. As the Western model of higher education continues to expand globally, contributions like *Beyond Reason* are invaluable as we remind ourselves of the dynamics at play in the creation and transmission of parochial forms of knowledge, however global they have become.

Notes

¹ For example, important recent contributions include Wael Hallaq’s *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge* (2018), Julian Go’s *Postcolonial Thought and Social Theory* (2016), Santiago Castro-Gomez’s *Zero-Point Hubris: Science, Race, and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Latin America* (2021), Jason Storm’s *Metamodernisms: The Future of Theory* (2021), and Gurinder Bhambra’s and John Holmwood’s *Colonialism and Modern Social Theory* (2021), among many others.