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Decolonizing Management Theory: A Critical Perspective

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Decolonizing Management Theory: A Critical Perspective

In this Point-Counterpoint series Filatotchev et al. (2021) and Bruton et al. (2021) discuss the shortcomings of management theories developed in the West when applied to non-Western contexts. Filatotchev et al. propose an 'open systems perspective' that can help contextualize management theory while Bruton et al. argue that even these emerging contextualized theories are embedded in a Western worldview and call for developing 'indigenous theory' that truly reflects local contexts. In my response to the count and counterpoint articles I argue that attempts to broaden the contexts of management theories and develop indigenous theory are still very much embedded in Western knowledge structures that produce knowledge of the Other. Such knowledge is claimed to be authentic and original without a recognition that this knowledge is produced through the political economy of colonialism. And attempts to 'integrate indigenous theories' into the mainstream inevitably depoliticizes and co-opts non-Western knowledge, leading to new forms of cultural imperialism. Neither an open systems perspective nor 'indigenous theory that is based on the distinctiveness of local contexts' (Bruton et al., 2021) can, in my view, provide the 'epistemological openness' that is needed to decolonize management theory (Filatotchev et al., 2021). Rather, I argue there is an epistemic blindness in most management theories because histories of race, racism and colonialism are excluded or glossed over. I argue that decolonizing the production of knowledge may offer more emancipatory possibilities in the development of management theory than attempts to contextualize or indigenize theory.

The authors of both point and counter point papers agree that management theories suffer from a Western bias and are routinely applied to contexts that do not reflect the underlying assumptions of those theories. This argument while important is already well-established in critical management studies (CMS). Indeed, scholars working in CMS have drawn on insights from postcolonial studies to show how colonial discourses inform our understanding of a range of management theories (Jack et al., 2011; Prasad, 1997; 2003): from images and representations of 'African' leadership in organization studies (Nkomo, 2011); corporate social responsibility and stakeholder theory (Banerjee, 2000); ecological sustainability (Banerjee, 2003); institutional entrepreneurship (Khan et al., 2007); identity regulation practices (Boussebaa et al., 2016); globalization and internationalization (Banerjee and Linstead, 2001; Boussebaa et al., 2012); hybridization processes and contestations in multinational-subsidary relations (Dar, 2014; Mir et al., 2008, Yousfi, 2013); and international business and management (Faria et al., 2010; Fougère

and Moulettes, 2012; Westwood, 2006). These and several other postcolonial studies begin from an epistemic critique that questions received knowledge about management by pointing to the absences of voices from the global South in the production of management knowledge (Alcadipani et al., 2012; Srinivas, 2020). However, these critiques have remained at the margins of management studies for the most part and hence this point counterpoint series that interrogates Western biases in management theory is to be welcomed.

Filatotchev et al. (2021) point to possible biases resulting from the popularity of Western theories and their increasing (mis)application in other contexts. I can personally attest to the prevalence of such biases and the performative effects of Western theories in international management research. In one of my previous faculty positions as Director of the PhD program in management I was approached by a Chinese PhD student who was in some distress because she needed an extension to her candidature arising from delays in data collection. Her thesis involved a cross cultural comparison of Australian and Chinese managers based on Geert Hofstede's (1983) dimensions of culture, which despite several criticisms (see d'Iribarne, 2009; McSweeney, 2002) remains relentlessly influential in cross cultural management. The student had completed her survey of Chinese managers using Hofstede's dimensions but was dismayed at the results because the scores on the dimensions were not consistent with what was expected from a sample of Chinese managers. She was convinced there was something wrong with the Chinese managers because their responses did not fit into the expected dimensions and wanted to redo the survey on another sample. It never occurred to her that the cultural dimension constructs and scales could be invalid and was aghast when I pointed it out and suggested that perhaps measuring Confucian values among white Australian managers could yield more interesting results. There seems to be little, if any, awareness in the field of international business how the epistemic power of a particular system of knowledge enables classification of cultures that despite its ethnocentricity, is portrayed as being universal. Culture as a body of knowledge is also a form of discursive power because it reproduces knowledge through practices that are made possible by the structural assumptions of that knowledge (Clegg, 1989).

Two points require clarification before I engage with the point and counterpoint arguments. First, the epistemological and ontological assumptions of theory for both Filatotchev et al. (2021) and Bruton et al. (2021) appear to be based on an objectivist approach to social science that reflects a realist ontology and positivist epistemology (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Thus, for

Filatotchev et al. theories explain ‘relations between one or more variables at different levels of analysis development’ and for Bruton et al. the ability to operationalize and test predictions is a key characteristic of theory. There is nothing wrong with this particular characterization of theory per se – similar assumptions underlie much of management theory. However, it is important to realize that non-Western approaches to knowledge are not cognitively bound to these particular norms of Western science. Thus, management research cannot be contextualized through ‘multidisciplinarity, epistemological openness, and methodological pluralism’ (Filatotchev et al., 2021) in a paradigm that is exclusively positivist and functional. While Bruton et al. acknowledge that indigenous theories are location specific and not readily generalizable they argue theories can ‘become generalizable over time’, citing the example of how Japanese scholars exported total quality management to Western settings. However, theories are performative and can also shape contexts – thus theories of total quality management do not exist in isolation but are performed in other settings by an ensemble of actors and material practices (D’Adderio et al., 2019; Marti and Gond, 2018). The performative effects of theories can also be seen in the example of Chinese managers described earlier where a particular group is seen as ‘lacking’ the required personality traits that are specified by a universal theory of culture.

Second, the notion of ‘indigenous’ needs some unpacking. The term indigenous has different meanings in disciplines like sociology and anthropology where there is a recognition of colonial histories in distinguishing between native inhabitants and settlers. In international business research on the other hand the term indigenous is used to differentiate local firms and practices from those that entered from ‘outside the country’. Hence, there is a need to distinguish between common parlance use of the term indigenous as referring to local practices and Indigenous peoples as ‘those ethnic groups that were indigenous to a territory prior to being incorporated into a national state, and who are politically and culturally separate from the majority ethnic identity of the state that they are a part’ (Sanders, 1999, p. 11). According to the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Indigenous peoples practice ‘unique traditions’ while retaining ‘social, cultural, economic and political characteristics that are distinct from those of the dominant societies in which they live’. Indigenous is understood based on a number of aspects including ‘self-identification as Indigenous peoples at the individual level and accepted by the community as their member; historical continuity with pre-colonial and/or pre-settler societies; strong link to territories and surrounding natural resources; distinct social, economic or political

systems; distinct language, culture and beliefs; form non-dominant groups of society; and resolve to maintain and reproduce their ancestral environments and systems as distinctive peoples and communities' (United Nations, 2021).

The distinction between the meaning of 'indigenous' as a differentiator between foreign and local practices and its meaning as a term that describes Indigenous peoples is important because of colonial legacies that continue to structure relationships between business and Indigenous communities (Banerjee, 2011). Despite an acknowledgement of the 'theoretical imperialism' of Western frameworks (Filatotchev et al., 2020) and 'the taint of colonialism' that marks the term indigenous (Van de Ven et al., 2018), it is unclear how an open systems perspective that attempts to embed local contexts or 'indigenous theory that is based on the distinctiveness of local contexts' (Bruton et al., 2021, p. xx) can overcome the deep differences between Western and Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies. Perhaps the conflation between the two meanings of indigenous can be avoided, as I attempt below, by using a decolonial perspective to analyze how the term is used in management research.

(Post)colonial and Decolonial Deliberations¹

The 'global South' has always been a recipient of theories that are produced in the 'global North,' where the producers of theories have generally ignored postcolonial critiques and insights (Alcadipani et al., 2012). Arising from radical critiques of colonialism and imperialism, postcolonial perspectives contested the unquestioned sovereignty of Western epistemological, economic, political and cultural categories. In particular postcolonialism sought to understand how colonial legacies continued to cast their shadow on contemporary problems in developing countries through neocolonial structures and processes of political, economic and cultural control (Said, 1978). The canons of postcolonialism emerged from disciplines like history and literary criticism in the mid 1980s and was dominated by South Asian scholars working primarily in US

¹ It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a review of the extensive literatures in postcolonial and decolonial thought that spans nearly seventy years and draws on scholarship from Africa, the Americas, Asia and Australia. An indicative reading list can be accessed [here](#). Research drawing on postcolonialism began to appear in the management literature in the mid 1990s and there has been a steady growth in interest in subsequent years, although the topic is still a marginal one in the field.

and Australian universities - see for example the work of Bhabha (1990; 1994), Spivak (1988; 1999) and of the Subaltern Studies Collective (Guha, 1983). This work was influenced by earlier critiques of colonialism that focused on the racial construction of the colonizer-colonized relationship (Césaire, 1955) and on the psychological and dehumanizing effects of colonialism Fanon (1955; 1961). In analyzing colonial discourse, postcolonial scholarship examined linguistic codes and practices in colonial politics, the cultural basis of political domination and the silencing of voices and subjugation of knowledges that did not conform to colonial cultural norms. A central concern was about the Eurocentric approach of representing histories and cultures of non-European peoples where Western historical development became the norm against which other historical experiences needed to be assessed. Postcolonial thought was a political project that attempted to overturn and provincialize this Eurocentric historical narrative (Chakrabarty, 2000) by a 'decolonization of representation; the decolonization of the West's theory of the non-West' (Scott, 1999, p. 12).

Emerging scholarship on decoloniality offers a critical engagement with Indigenous knowledges and practices that were subjugated by colonialism. Drawing on Latin American histories of colonialism beginning with the European invasion of the Americas in the 15th century decolonial scholars like Aníbal Quijano, María Lugones, Gloria Anzaldúa, Maldonado-Torres and Walter Mignolo among others attempted to produce alternate epistemologies from the perspective of marginalized populations (Mignolo, 2000). Decoloniality recognizes the failure of the postcolonial state to live up to the promise of decolonization and interrogates the postcolonial nation state as a colonizing entity in the context of struggles over Indigenous sovereignty. Decolonial thought begins with a critique of the coloniality of power that imposed a racialized classification of societies in Latin America and reinforced historical structural inequalities of colonialism (Quijano, 2007). Decoloniality is also rooted in praxis and attempts to overturn the various hierarchies and oppressions produced by the coloniality of power – such as the international division of labor and modern slavery, as well as racial, gendered, sexual, ecological, spiritual, epistemic and linguistic hierarchies (Grosfoguel, 2013). These forms of internal colonialism can be described as epistemic coloniality that involved institutionalization of knowledge as 'scientific knowledge permitt(ing) the integration of native elites into the dominant Anglo-Euro-Centric ideology of modernity' (Florescano, 1994: 65).

Latin American management scholars have used insights from decolonial thought arguing that organizational knowledge produced in the West is an example of epistemic

coloniality that maintains and reproduces colonial difference in a global neoliberal economy (Ibarra-Colado, 2006). This epistemic coloniality defines the problems of the developing world and articulates possible solutions solely from the perspective of a market economy. Studies have used insights from decolonial thinking to challenge the epistemic coloniality of North American strategy scholarship (Wanderley and Faria, 2012), analyze Indigenous struggles against extractive development projects (Misoczky, 2011; Ehrnström-Fuentes, 2016) and provide Latin American perspectives on critical management studies (Mandiola, 2010).

With this very succinct and incomplete introduction to postcolonial and decolonial perspectives let us examine possibilities of decolonizing Filatotchev et al.'s open system perspectives and Bruton et al.'s indigenous theory. My unit of analysis in engaging with the point counterpoint arguments is the epistemological and ontological foundations of the theoretical approaches proposed by the authors to overcome Western biases of management theories, in particular the need to question and dismantle Western knowledge structures that produce knowledge of the Other.

Decolonizing Open Systems and Indigenous Theories

Decolonizing management theory begins with an explicit acknowledgement of the colonial basis of knowledge whereby only a Western knowing subject can produce histories and knowledge about the Other. Scientific knowledge created a self-generative epistemic position of ethical and political neutrality that became a legitimizing device and the intellectual justification for the colonial enterprise. Much of what we know about international and cross-cultural management is based on a particular Western knowledge system that sustains asymmetrical power/knowledge relations by providing the West with a flexible positional superiority (Said, 1993). Colonial modes of domination from this privileged position of knowledge production enabled the classification of societies into developed/underdeveloped, modern/primitive, and advanced/backward where authority and knowledge always resided with the 'developed', the 'modern' and the 'advanced' resulting in both the naturalization of knowledge about the Other and at the same time marginalization of the Other's knowledge. 'Scientific' knowledge that produced these categories and defined particular paths to development was not politically neutral but instead represented a 'pernicious form of imperialism' constitutive of colonial histories (Ake, 1982, p. 17). Thus, an entire continent like Australia, with one of the longest histories of continuous human

occupation dating back more than 70,000 years, could be described as *terra nullius* (nobody's land or land belonging to no one) by a particular knowledge system with the power to erase entire societies through the basis of 'international law' in order to justify colonial occupation.

Colonial systems of knowledge production operate from a position of *epistemic blindness* that make invisible alternate ways of knowing and being. Epistemological assumptions of a particular knowledge system provide a framework that describes what types of knowledge can be obtained along with criteria that distinguishes 'true' from 'false' understanding (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). There is a form of epistemic blindness in most accounts of management because histories of racism and colonialism are excluded or glossed over. For instance, principles of 'scientific management' that regulate productivity of today's workers are directly derived from the labor extractive techniques of slavery (Cooke, 2003). To increase productivity of their slaves, plantation owners held contests where slaves who picked the most cotton received small cash prizes. This amount then became the minimum output expected from each slave and was also used to calculate how many lashes of the whip slaves would receive if they did not meet their targets (Rosenthal, 2018). Slavery and racism were enabling conditions of industrial capitalism whose legacies persist in contemporary practices of modern slavery. Why are such histories missing from our textbooks on principles of management? How do we 'properly contextualize' practices of modern slavery with our theories of strategic management and corporate social responsibility? What indigenous theories of international business can emerge from the former colonies that explain modern slavery and the extraction of raw materials? Can the 'frontier domain' in Bruton et al.'s framework of indigenous research provide a space for radical decolonial critiques of management research? While importantly both the point and counterpoint articles refer to 'power dynamics' among actors in indigenous contexts and the 'role of power and power relations' in comparing different institutional contexts, what is missing is an explicit analysis of the colonality of knowledge that incorporate 'indigenous theory' into hegemonic power structures that are represented as 'frontier theoretical domains' (Bruton et al., 2021).

When ways of knowing become hegemonic, epistemic blindness inevitably leads to forms of *epistemic erasure* that negate or subjugate alternate knowledges through discursive processes that construct them as 'traditional', 'superstition', or 'ethnoscience' (Sharma, 2021). After centuries of colonial domination that subjugated Indigenous knowledge, Western science in the last few decades appears to have recognized the potential for Indigenous knowledge to address

global problems of climate change, land management, conservation, and habitat loss (Mistry and Berardi, 2016). However, Western science and Indigenous knowledge represent profoundly different paradigms that do not permit easy contextualization or integration. The point counterpoint articles seem to elide these problems in advocating for better contextualization or indigenous theory.

Epistemic blindness also makes invisible the privileged position from which meanings of ‘indigenous’ are produced. Thus, Filatotchev et al. describe *guanxi* in China, *chaebols* in South Korea and Japanese *keiretsu* as examples of indigenous practice. But institutional theory, resource-based theory, and agency theory somehow escape the indigenous label because Western scholarship is the norm for assessing other knowledges. With ‘proper contextualization’ these ‘context-sensitive Western theories’ can indeed provide ‘important and even provocative insights when applied to non-Western /global contexts’ (Filatotchev et al., 2021). Proper contextualization can enable research that is conducted in Western contexts (which is also ‘indigenous’) to be represented as ‘universal’ (Nkomo, 2011; Van de Ven et al., 2018). Filatotchev et al. do not elaborate on the parameters that define ‘proper contextualization’ except to identify ‘domains that seem to be most relevant’. How is assessment of relevance made? The same epistemological and ontological assumptions that underlie Western theories also assess the relevance of domains. Thus, anything outside the West can be studied using a particular kind of universalized rationality which, while acknowledging its Western bias, still retains its positional superiority where the content of local meanings and realities can only be understood as non-Western ‘context’. Bruton et al.’s counterpoint that better contextualization simply provides ‘band aids’ to existing theory in the hope they will provide the necessary contextualization is a valid criticism of Filatotchev et al.’s claim. For example, both ‘traditional’ and ‘open systems’ frameworks as summarized in Table 1 (Filatotchev et al., 2021) operate from the same epistemological assumptions that do not acknowledge possible incommensurabilities in applying theories of corporate governance, strategy or corporate social responsibility to vastly different contexts. If as Bruton et al. argue, scholars seeking better contextualization of theories ignore important problems like chronic poverty and underdevelopment that reflect the realities of billions of people then perhaps proponents of indigenous theories overlook histories of colonialism and racism that played a key role in creating these problems.

While importantly Filatotchev et al. and Bruton et al. acknowledge Western biases in existing theory when applied to non-Western contexts, their theorizing of foreign institutional contexts does not go far enough. For instance, Bruton et al. point to the existence of institutional voids in countries facing extreme poverty that make monitoring of firms difficult. Similarly, Filatotchev et al. state that companies operating in an 'environment characterized by institutional voids' engage in more CSR activities. In both cases the limitations of universal theories of entrepreneurship or CSR can ostensibly be overcome by an 'open perspective' or 'indigenous theory based on the distinctiveness of local contexts' that investigate how local and international firms fill these voids. What is missing here is a consideration of how these voids were created in the first place during colonialism through destruction and undermining of existing systems and institutions that did not conform to Western norms (Hamann et al., 2020). As Bothello et al. (2019, p. 1507) point out the assumptions underlying the concept of institutional voids is a form of 'conceptual imperialism' in management scholarship that promotes Western market systems and corporate governance. There is a danger that that filling 'institutional voids' can erase local social and economic arrangements that do not conform to Western liberal institutional logics and replace them with market-oriented institutions that exclude the very people from participating in decisions on which their survival is based (Bothello et al., 2019). The rule of law which Western markets hold so sacrosanct and which is found to be weak in non-Western markets ignores the colonial legacies of institutional voids where 'systems and institutions were proactively denigrated, exterminated, or exploited by mainstream Northern coalitions of academics, businesses, and governments during and after colonialism' (Hamann et al., 2020, p. 4). If the framework of 'institutional distance' offers 'powerful practical perspectives' in understanding international business (Filatotchev et al., 2021) a decolonial critique would reveal the colonial and racialized origins from which this distance is measured and the inevitable institutional voids that would be created as a result. Deploying an open perspective or developing indigenous theory can still serve to consolidate Western theories if the aim is to draw from local insights to enhance theorizing in Western sites. A decolonial perspective (not necessarily from 'indigenous' locations) would instead reveal the racial and colonial origins of inequality that create institutional voids and show how institutions and organizations are incorporated into structures of racial inequality (Ray, 2019).

Both Filatotchev et al. and Bruton et al. certainly display an awareness of the colonial legacies of management theory. However, they do not go far enough in terms of decolonizing their

own approaches on how to better contextualize management research. Here, a decolonial critique would reveal the challenges that arise from conflating 'indigenous' with 'Indigenous' based on the distinctions within the term discussed earlier. Contrary to Van de Van and Jing's (2012) claim that the 'abuses' of research on Indigenous peoples arise from a methodological bias and not due to the 'substantive topics' that were researched, I argue that the 'substantive topics' themselves reflect an epistemic blindness that leads to epistemic erasures of Indigenous realities.

These epistemological biases in assessing indigenous theory could be explored by discussing specific examples of indigenous theory instead of describing two streams of 'indigenous management research' based on country specific regional contexts and non-Western philosophies. As an example of the latter Bruton et al. mention 'ongoing efforts to develop theories of motivation and leadership based on Islam in some Middle Eastern (and other Muslim countries)' as well as responses to poverty in Latin America 'from the perspective of the indigenous populations' philosophical perceptions of time'. Whilst these are very relevant examples, they do not really explain what these indigenous theories are and how they differ from Western theories of leadership, motivation or poverty. Developing an 'indigenous theory of Chinese management' based on Confucian values is cited as another example, again without any elaboration on the basic elements of Chinese management theory. While their critique of Anglo-American bias in universalizing these contexts is certainly valid, the authors do not provide any examples of indigenous theories of family or growth that can provide alternate explanations. Instead, they point to 'Confucius philosophy' or 'Islamic culture' as a 'potential foundation for theory', in which case one could conclude that at the present moment there is no such thing as indigenous theory (except for 'potential foundations'). The challenge for researchers is to 'reduce Confucian philosophy or the Islamic culture to a manageable level on which they can agree' (Bruton et al., 2021). And therein lies the fundamental problem of using a Western lens to represent the Other – its epistemological reductionism that exposes a Western bias in erasing the holistic foundation of Indigenous knowledges. What is the theoretical basis of this 'reduction' process, what parameters determine a 'manageable' level of Chinese management theory and what are the positionalities of the researchers who are tasked with 'reducing' Confucian philosophy? Indigenous theories that emerge from this mode of knowledge production are still embedded in knowledge hierarchies resulting from imposing a Western view of the world regardless of context.

I argue that both open systems perspective and indigenous theory development results in the depoliticization of contexts arising from a conflation between indigenous and Indigenous. For example, Tsui (2018, p. 465) argues that despite the ‘imperialistic connotation’ of the term ‘indigenous’, engaged indigenous scholarship is ‘good social science’ because it takes the ‘context seriously in efforts to accurately describe, explain and discover both unique and Chinese approaches and universal practices in the growth, development and management of Chinese organizations locally and globally’. Thus, engaged indigenous scholarship can help discover the ‘mystery of how China has been able to transform, in forty years, from an impoverished nation to an economic powerhouse globally (p. 465). A decolonial perspective can allow us to see how the exemplar of Chinese management as ‘engaged indigenous scholarship’ (Van de Ven et al., 2018, p. 452) obscures the coloniality of power in knowledge production. The epistemic blindness in these portrayals of engaged indigenous scholarship serves as an epistemic closure in understanding colonial relations of power between the Chinese state and the many ethnic minorities that constitute the Indigenous peoples of China². In particular, ethnic minorities in Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia and Tibet are subject to oppression and discriminatory policies where the government implements strict controls that prevent these communities from practising their religious and cultural traditions leading to ethnic tensions and conflicts over land expropriation, forced relocation and natural resource extraction (Zhang, 2012). These accounts of ‘Chinese management’ do not appear in any of our international business and management journals, which is a reflection of the coloniality of power that dominates knowledge production in our field. Thus, neither an open systems perspective nor indigenous theory can escape the ‘strait jacket of existing theory’ without an explicit engagement with ongoing colonial relations that created the strait jacket. Histories of colonialism and racism are often overlooked in Western theories that explain poverty, underdevelopment and cross-cultural relations and a decolonial perspective would enable

²Although the People’s Republic of China voted to support the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, it disavowed any obligation under the declaration, claiming there were no Indigenous peoples in China.

us to identify structures of internal colonialism that reflect social, economic and political conditions in non-Western countries.

Toward a Decolonial Research Agenda

What would a decolonial research agenda for management and organization studies entail? It would begin with a critical analysis of the colonial dimensions inherent in our theories, for example in understanding how CSR theories are contextualized in emerging markets. Filatotchev et al. point to a ‘counterintuitive observation’ that companies operating in countries with institutional voids engage in more discretionary CSR, not less. However, from a decolonial perspective such a strategy is logical because it consolidates the power of multinational corporations by creating dependency relationships with their key stakeholders in developing countries (Banerjee, 2011; Ehrnström-Fuentes, 2016). Indeed, this is illustrated by their own example of Doh et al.’s (2015) case study of CSR and sustainability initiatives of the Brazilian conglomerate Odrebecht. These are described as a ‘signal to investors, customers, and other stakeholders that they are legitimate partners in the absence of strong governmental controls, e.g., by promoting human rights, protecting the natural environment, and reducing poverty.’ However, in 2016 Odrebecht was fined \$2.6 billion because of its involvement in corruption and bribery in 10 Latin American countries (all of this presumably within the ‘institutional voids’ that the company was able to exploit) leading to significant economic and political repercussions throughout Latin America (Gallas, 2019).

Similar elisions can be seen in Filatotchev et al.’s discussion of the Business Roundtable’s Statement on corporate purpose, which although ‘potentially revolutionary’ still represents a ‘very Western-centric view’. Citing Waldman et al. (2020), the authors argue that in many parts of the world the sole focus of a corporation maximizing shareholder return is seen as an ‘extreme position and unacceptable’. However, such a position would be considered equally unacceptable in some Western countries as Waldman et al. (2020) themselves point out. Critics have described the statement as an example of ‘purposewashing’ designed to counter criticisms of corporate lobbying against environmental and social issues. An extensive conceptual and empirical analysis of this so-called revolutionary form of stakeholder governance conducted by Bebchuk and Tallarita (2020) found that the stated corporate purpose of serving stakeholders did not produce any material benefit and instead impeded meaningful regulatory and policy reforms that offered

real protection to stakeholders. It makes little sense to study how emergent theories travel from the West to other locations when these theories seem to be flawed in the contexts from which they emerge. More contextualized research cannot resolve the contradictions that are inherent in theories of corporate social responsibility and stakeholder engagement.

Both contextualizing and indigenizing theories would benefit from engaging with the burgeoning criticisms of CSR and stakeholder theory that can be found in the literature – for example how CSR can become a ‘predatory corporate project’ (Rhodes and Fleming, 2020, p. 945) by (1) providing defacto corporate political authority without accountability (Hussain and Moriarty, 2018; Willke and Willke, 2008); (2) undermining democratic legitimacy (Dawkins, 2021; Sabadoz and Singer, 2017); (3) undermining the role of the state (Frynas and Stephens, 2015); (4) hegemonic accommodation to dominant interests (Levy et al., 2016; Moog et al., 2015); and (5) obscuring legacies of colonialism and imperialism (Khan and Lund-Thomsen, 2011; Özkazanç-Pan, 2019; Varman and Al-Amoudi, 2016). A decolonial research perspective on corporate social responsibility would explore the colonial legacies that continue to inform processes of contextualization. If a ‘broader stakeholder orientation’ represents better contextualization of CSR then a decolonial critique will reveal how a stakeholder theory of the firm represents a form of stakeholder colonialism that serves to further marginalize communities (Banerjee, 2000). A decolonial research agenda is also an explicitly political project in that it acknowledges that research aimed at generating knowledge about CSR and stakeholders are also products of power applied by corporations, states, civil society actors and business schools, and not just a practice that happens to ‘vary significantly across national contexts’ (Filatotchev et al., 2021).

The real challenge in developing a decolonial research agenda lies in creating an intellectual space that can enable a fruitful exchange of ideas and perhaps collaboration between mainstream and heterodox approaches to research. Rebranding conventional management theories to address so-called ‘grand challenges’ like climate change, poverty, sustainability and inequality is not the answer. And neither is creating a new interest group or division in the Academy of Management on decolonial management studies because these become self-serving spaces where scholars preach to the converted. The formation of Critical Management Studies in 2018 as a division in the Academy of Management may have increased the number of submissions of critical papers but has had little or no impact on most other divisions and much of critical management research still

remains irrelevant to mainstream management scholars. What is needed is a foregrounding of the political in management research and an end to the futile search for ‘objective’, value-free theories that reproduce the hegemonic structures of knowledge production (Ergene et al., 2020). This is where senior academics, journal editors, presidents and board members of academies can play a key role. As gatekeepers of knowledge, it is incumbent among all of us to push the boundaries that define what kind of research ‘makes a significant theoretical contribution’ by engaging with voices that are absent from our canons. For instance, it is time we addressed the exclusion and marginalization of black, Indigenous and people of color from the production of knowledge as an act of epistemic justice (Dar et al., 2020; Muzanhenamo and Chowdhury, 2021).

A decolonial research agenda would begin by addressing the historical exclusions in knowledge production. While an appreciation of context is crucial there is a danger of essentializing context by an uncritical privileging of the local. A more fruitful avenue would be to explore a ‘dialogical approach to contextual reflexivity’ that allows for collaborative investigation of phenomena in a global North-South context (Hamann et al., 2020). Such reflexivity will question both the imposition of Eurocentric assumptions to other contexts as well as the ‘authenticity’ of concepts claimed by the local. Contextual reflexivity would problematize notions of ‘indigenous research’ by analyzing the colonality of power that produces and assesses this research, as I have discussed earlier in the context of ‘Chinese management’. Van de Ven et al. (2018) call for an ‘international scientific community’ to assess the quality of indigenous research. However, if the aim of indigenous research is to ‘build or test theories that can explain and predict phenomena in their local and cultural contexts’ (Bruton et al., 2021) there is an epistemic closure to alternate ways of knowing because the ‘international scientific community’ that assesses the quality of research can only impose particular epistemological and ontological perspectives that disallows other knowledges. In particular, Indigenous ways of knowing involve relational ontologies where entanglements of humans and non-humans co-create the realities of the world, are incommensurable with realist ontologies of Western science that see the world as being constitutive of cause-effect relationships and ‘objective’ facts where entities and not relations have primacy.

While I agree with Filatotchev et al. and Burton et al. that there is a need for alternative epistemologies and ontologies to broaden the study of management, I do not think that the solutions they propose go far enough. In particular, I do not think they can effectively provide the

theoretical, political and intellectual space for non-hierarchical dialogue between different epistemological traditions. For instance, there is the risk that the ‘polycontextual approach’ advocated by Filatotchev et al., whilst well-meaning in its intention to ‘incorporate multiple contexts’, could lead to other forms of colonial control unless it pays more attention to the power dynamics that determine who is being incorporated and who is doing the incorporating.

Importantly, a decolonial perspective should not incorporate multiple contexts into some fictitious ‘holistic and valid’ black box. Rather than attempt to subject all other worlds to the rules of a universalized Western world a decolonial perspective asks us to imagine a ‘pluriverse’ – a world in which many worlds coexist and where everything is connected to everything else.

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