

## The Decolonial-Historical Approach in Social Research Its Methodological Contours

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In the methodological propositions asserted below, I attempt an explication of an approach in social research which I call the **Decolonial-Historical Approach**. The approach is located within the Post-Xaxa paradigm and was developed while studying Indigenous People's Political Systems. It is constituted by six co-dependent and interconnected concepts - decoloniality, epistemological decolonization, contextualization, engaged observation, equanimity-compassion, and dialogical historiography. A full-length explication of the same is available in the **Post Script** of a short book I wrote on the subject titled "Epistemology of the Peripheralized: A Decolonial-Historical Approach" published by the New Vehicle Publications in 2020.

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Below are the key elements that constitute the decolonial-historical approach:

### **Decoloniality:**

Key to the Decolonial-Historical Approach in social research is the perspective and intent of a researcher. How one sees a 'reality' is critical to any knowledge enterprise. In the decolonial-historical approach, this perspective is framed around a concept called *decoloniality*. *Decoloniality* is a way of thinking and looking at social reality, and in that sense, a point-of-view. 'Intent' is embedded in such a point-of-view.

When one studies colonialism in retrospect, one realises that its key historical project was to forcefully extent a particular way; a colonial way of looking at the

world across all 'other' colonised realities. This way of looking stems from the coloniser's own sociality or social-reality.

Social reality, one may argue, is constituted by diverse reality(s). Each of these diverse reality(s) has embedded within itself a frame-of-reference often spoken about in terms of the universal-particular framework. Every social reality has its own 'particular' interconnected to its own 'universal' within its frame-of-reference. This frame-of-reference is embodied within the social reality of the coloniser; like it is for every other diverse reality.

From a research point of view, when a single colonial entity began to impose itself through colonisation on other diverse realities, it also imposed and extended its embedded 'universal-particular' to other realities. In the process of colonisation, the coloniser began to subjugate other diverse realities and subsumed them under its own frame-of-reference. Through this process, the colonised became the new 'particular' of the coloniser, and had to begin operating within the set rules of the coloniser's 'universal'.

These processes produced a colonial difference in which the coloniser's 'universal' was reproduced and perceived as superior, while the colonised, who are the 'new particulars' in the colonial frame-of-reference, were classified as 'the inferior' within the 'universal' of the coloniser.

Over a period of time, this process was insidiously perpetuated to the point where colonialism began classifying the new subjugated colonised 'particular' as 'inferior being', while the dominant coloniser was reproduced as the 'superior being'. Across various geographies, colonialism manifested this 'colonial difference' in diabolical ways. In some contexts, it marked this difference (in people's 'bodies') as being between 'people with human souls' and 'people with animal souls'. In another context, it was between 'full-humans and half-humans'. In some other contexts it was between, 'pure-bodies and polluted-bodies', and yet in other contexts, the difference was marked as being between 'civilised-beings' and 'primitive-beings'. It is this manipulation of social reality that led to a state where the 'universal' of the coloniser became the 'universal' for all other diverse colonised/subjugated identities, who by this time had to submit, venerate, emulate forcefully, and imitate the ways of the coloniser in order to survive the colonial onslaught.

At the same time a rigid structure of double social inequality was also being perpetuated and embodied in the colonial project to place the worthy superior 'particular' over and above the now condemned and stigmatised inferior

'particular'. In other words, the colonial 'particular' was positioned as superior to the colonised 'particular', thus extending the colonial difference not only between the coloniser's frame-of-reference over the colonised's frame-of-reference, but taking this difference to the point of marking the 'personhood or self' of the coloniser as being superior to the 'personhood or self' of the colonised.

Manifesting from these classificatory processes was a critical phenomenon concerning the condition and status of the subjectivity of the coloniser. The coloniser, throughout the period of colonisation, did not lose their 'subjecthood', and the structures that produce and affirmed their subjectivities experienced minimal epistemological disruption. But as for the colonised, their subjectivity was negated, their social structure epistemologically mutilated, and their 'subjecthood' denied, leading to the fundamental alteration of their 'being' into mere 'objects' of the coloniser. Thus while the coloniser remained a 'subject', the colonised became an 'object'. This objectification of the colonised did not stop here, another important concomitant life process began to layer itself into the lives of the colonised 'object'; they insidiously began to experience alienation from their own organic methodology, having to adopt the now 'superior' methodology of the coloniser. This process occurred across the colonised world and can be referred to as 'methodological alienation'.

All these processes gave rise to what is called 'coloniality'; a way of thinking, a gaze, a way of perceiving the world in which this colonial difference became an established premise of 'knowledge', accepted and consumed as normative by both the coloniser and the colonised.

The knowledge produced around this framework established coloniality as a 'given'. It is important to assert that, the project of colonialism was not merely a project of wealth accumulation by threat, force, and violence, but also a project of rule by knowledge; an epistocracy. It is within this understanding that the concept of decoloniality is positioned.

In the decolonial-historical approach, the notion of *decoloniality* challenges this coloniality, this colonial mentality, this colonial gaze, but not only this, it also does something fundamental, it attempts to replace the very premise of the 'universal-particular' that is firmly under the grip of the colonialist with another frame-of-reference called 'diversity-coexistence'.

From a 'decolonial gaze' the world is diverse and each of these dynamic diversity(s) are, at a more fundamental level, in a state of negotiated co-existence. Any act of

pulverising, eradicating and homogenising these multiplicities, (that were imperative for colonialism to succeed), amounted to violence; genocide, epistemicide and axiocide. (*Genocide* – the total obliteration of the physical body of the other. *Epistemicide* – the extermination of knowledge systems and culture of the other. *Axiocide* – the annihilation of the structure of ‘good’ and ‘beauty’ of the ‘other’, the destruction/distortion of the value attached to it, and the attempt to completely erase any history of genocide and epistemicide from public memory).

### **Epistemological Decolonisation:**

From this decolonial point of view, one can approach the subject of study through a process I call *epistemological decolonisation*. Before proceeding, it is important however to touch upon the subject of colonial epistemology in order to be able to further the understanding of the concept of *epistemological decolonisation*.

Within colonialism, the idea of coloniality began to get consolidated into a distinct epistemology – the colonial epistemology. This took place incrementally over a period of time. It was this colonial epistemology that constituted the basis of the colonial gaze. With colonialism spreading across the world, this epistemology penetrated and perpetuated itself throughout the geographies of the colonised.

Through this epistemology, the coloniser began to produce a structured social reality in ways that fit their image of the world and in means that serve their purpose and convenience. The act of decolonisation in this context is an attempt to deconstruct the process of colonial reproduction and its concomitant constructs through colonised societies.

But it does not end there, for decolonisation is also an axiological resistance to colonial epistemology. It is from such an act of epistemological disobedience that the notion of *epistemological decolonisation* stems from. It is necessary to assert this point in order to bring to bear the thrust and focus on epistemology in the decolonisation project. One's engagement with the production of knowledge from a decolonial gaze is not merely a theoretical confrontation with colonisation per se, but a rejection of an epistemology that appropriates and subjugates diverse entities into a single unilinear universal-particular frame-of-reference.

In this sense, *epistemological decolonisation* is restrained from reducing colonisation to a single historical event. Instead, it sees colonisation as an epistemology that is violently layered into the lives of people through 'waves of colonialism' and multiple intersecting colonial mentalities. In this case, *Epistemological decolonisation* is posited to unravel and face up to such a conception of colonisation.

### **Contextualization:**

Having clarified the point-of-view and the approach within the overarching frame of epistemology, it now becomes necessary to clarify how one could conceive one's research 'subject'. What constitutes these realities to be studied, and how do these realities lend themselves to the research process.

One can approach this conceptualization from a process called *contextualization*; an attempt to ground the 'self' around the 'context'. Within the decolonial-historical approach the 'context' is to be understood as a 'dynamic confluence of time, space, place, persons', 'fluid and interacting', 'organic and structured', 'experienced in the here and now', and 'containing within itself an embodied epistemology'.

Every context embodies an epistemology- a context epistemology; that propels the production of knowledge, also the ways in which knowledge is structured, the usefulness and necessity of knowledge, the rules of validity or non-validity of knowledge, and how its constitutive elements come to know and experience their realities.

Context epistemology also constitutes multiple intersecting realities within itself and in relation to others. It has a boundary, but the boundary is not rigid and static, it opens and closes based on concrete historical conditions and socio-political events.

It is by embodying such a conception of context, that one may approach the process of *contextualization*. The act of *contextualization* within the decolonial-historical approach is a conscious effort that demands the engagement, deconstruction, delineation, unravelling, and reassembling of these intersecting realities through the identification of 'lines of enquiry' rather than the 'object of inquiry'. There is no 'object' to inquire, only multiple lines of intersecting inquiries to be unravelled and comprehended in context.

This gives rise to its own theory, but not a single universal theory, instead it produces an assemblage, a multiplicity of interdependent intersecting theories. The process of *contextualization* engages with this multiplicity, with all its complexities, and unravels a particular line or more lines of inquiry in the context.

The knowledge produced through *contextualization* is multiple and in process, and it cannot be reduced to a single universal truth. This is how *contextualization* conceives knowledge. As far as the knowledge producer engaging in knowledge production is concerned, *contextualization* is somewhat restrained to any 'truth-claim' by any

person about having understood the totality of a particular social reality. The knowledge producer has at most unravelled one aspect of the social reality, not the total reality.

This limitation set on the knowledge producer about 'truth-claiming' and the characterization of knowledge as a continuity of intersecting narratives, demands the recognition of two fundamental processes in knowledge production (i) that the knowledge producer should openly choose and state one's line of inquiry in the knowledge enterprise and (ii) that any social knowledge produced is only one among the many.

In *contextualization* there is no single Truth to be found, only multiple narratives to be unravelled. The role of the knowledge producer is to articulate these narratives and to restrain from making universal 'truth-claims' that fixes reality(s) in time and space as if socio-structural realities and people's socio-historical experiences are static objects or unmoving entities.

### **Engaged Observation:**

Having clarified the subject of study within the decolonial-historical approach, and how one perceives the same, it is necessary that a deeper discussion be made about the process of engagement with this 'context' within the process of contextualization. One of the methods of contextualization, I propose to call *engaged observation*.

This way of engagement is partly a rejection of what is often spoken about in the (colonial) social sciences as 'participant observation'. The attempt in *engaged observation* is not merely to be a visible or invisible participant in the observation of the context, but to become so engaged in the context that one becomes the context itself.

How does one do that, one might ask? To answer this question one has to unravel the idea called ethnography and its method called 'participant observation'. The idea of 'participant observation' has its roots in colonialism. The way in which a 'participant' observer produces knowledge in ethnography is to make clear distinctions between the subject (researcher) and the object (data). The subject begins by objectifying the data, then classifies the same, followed by categorisation and finally produces knowledge by comparison.

Such a process, that is objectification-classification-categorisation-comparison, formed part of a method in which colonialism framed the production of colonial



knowledge. The idea of objectification and classification was actually fundamental to the colonial project. Colonialism needed to engage in such ways as it allowed them to produce the colonial difference that marked them (the coloniser) as superior and the other (colonised) as inferior. This was important for the coloniser because it is through this strategic methodological intervention that the coloniser was able to then encapsulate, dominate and control the colonised 'object'.

Once the coloniser took upon himself or herself the universal position of the knowledge producer, the colonised 'object' is subjugated to an inferior being, who can then be reconstructed and reproduced in the coloniser's new project of rule. It is through this process of inferiorising and infantilizing the colonised 'other' that the coloniser began manufacturing and perpetuating the notion of being historically and morally superior, and thus responsible to 'civilise' and 'rule' the inferior 'subject'. It is this same intentionality that went on to inform the framework of colonial research.

In colonial research the researcher occupies the location and gaze of the coloniser, and the research subject (peoples and cultures) is reduced to an 'object' of inquiry that needs to be defined, classified, compared, and theoretically taken control of; as in claim ontological epistemological authority over the 'object'.

Throughout the process, the researcher uses his/her observation, mostly 'cognitive bounded' reflexivity to collect 'data' and piece together a theory around and about the data/object. This is then compared to other data/theory in the process of analysing and writing, to produce what colonialism considers social scientific knowledge.

In direct contrast to participant observation, the practice of *engaged observation* goes much beyond, by first attempting to merge the subject and the object in ways that the researcher is no more engaging only from cognitive-centred reflexivity but can begin to 'feel' the subjective reality of the 'object'. Here the context of the study subsumes both the subject and object to become 'subject-object' and thus turning the colonised 'object' into a decolonised 'subject'. The conceptual distinction between the two remains, but now as mere entities that in practice have become one in context, with both subjectivities recognised and affirmed, and altering the research relationship between the researcher and researched in fundamental ways from 'subject' and the 'object' to 'subject-object' to 'subject-subject'.

*Engaged observation* also asserts that all social knowledge is situated and the ability to occupy a location or a point-of-view is key to any knowledge enterprise. This position on knowledge challenges the way colonisers conceive knowledge.

For colonialism, social knowledge is not situated, and the notion of objectivity, by the usage of a 'scientific' method, is its means to claim subject expertise over a knowledge domain. This is how a coloniser makes claims about his/her superior ability to produce true, unbiased certain/scientific knowledge about the 'other'. And how so? because this knowledge produced by the coloniser was made from an unsituated, objective, and unbiased 'Gods eye view', which in other words, is the point-of-view that includes and overarches all other points-of-views without being part of the view itself.

In this (colonial) way of producing knowledge, the 'object' of inquiry is a silent subject, devoid of any subjecthood, without a voice, without being able to speak for itself, and nothing more than data for the theorization, theoretical production and meaning-making project that affirms and neatly fits into the world of the coloniser-researcher.

### **Equanimity-Compassion:**

The next question that arises in the social research process is what state of mind should the 'self' be in while practicing 'engaged observation' in the context. Also, when does one know that one's subjecthood is now entangled with the subjectivities of the context? To discuss these processes it is important to understand the concept of *equanimity*.

The idea of *equanimity* goes much beyond (cognitive) reflexivity. It enters the domain of what can be called 'ecologies of sensation'. The 'self' in a social research context is a 'sensation'; a feeling plus thinking being. It cannot be reduced only to a thinking being. It is when one can feel the sensation of the context; the people and all other beings that constitute it (thus the word ecology), that a researcher engaged in a knowledge enterprise can begin to get a deeper insight and understanding of the subjectivities of the identified context.

The context in and by itself is a 'subject' and not a mere 'object' that is to be objectified and interrogated. While this sounds easy enough, it however demands something much more than just equanimity and 'ecology of sensation', it demands 'compassion', as in *equanimity-compassion* on the part of the researcher.



The concept equanimity is often spoken about as closely link to compassion, not in the metaphysical but in the methodological sense. Human beings are capable of one more act over and above 'sympathy' and 'empathy', which is the ability to feel and experience compassion. It is not that compassion does not require empathy, it does, but it demands much more than just the cognitive aspects of empathy, it requires the emotive possibilities of empathy to be embraced wholeheartedly.

The idea of compassion constitutes both 'cognitive empathy' and 'emotive empathy'. Cognitive empathy, which is often championed in the social sciences, is often spoken of in the research process as a critical capacity of the researcher. However, while cognitive empathy requires a great degree of sensitivity arrived at through critical reflexivity between self and the other/external reality, the state of emotive empathy has to be cultivated as part of a conscious research practice of 'turning the gaze within' or 'into the self', while operating in the external reality. Looking within to look without is part of this cultivation process.

The *equanimity-compassion* continuum within the decolonial-historical approach replaces what is often asserted in the interpretative schools of social science as the reflexivity-empathy spectrum which stresses more on the cognitive aspects of the research engagement.

Equanimity, however, is different, because while reflexivity; often referred to as the human capacity over and above reactivity and responsivity that a researcher possesses while engaging in inquiry, the idea of equanimity on the other hand refers to the capability of the researcher to observe oneself while observing and engaging with the subject of study.

Further, while empathy loosely refers to a capacity that human beings have to cognitively understand the concrete condition of the 'other', the idea of compassion refers to a non-judgmental affect that is possible for a researcher to experience the 'other' much beyond empathy.

These two simultaneous processes of *equanimity-compassion* go beyond the ability of a researcher to produce knowledge not merely as a 'subject' observing and trying to understand a concrete condition, but as one with an organic and partly authentic experience of the context itself.

Two points however are important to note here about the *equanimity-compassion continuum*. First, when one hears such a conception for the first time, one might immediately feel a cognitive repulsion to the proposition. There could be many reasons for this, one of which could be that 'research' as a means of knowledge

production has been so dominated and subsumed by Western/Colonial/Occidental rules that any conception out of this framework is immediately negated and ridiculed. This however is what the decolonial project attempts to historically rupture and theoretically unveil; the limitations of the western colonial knowledge enterprise and the problematics of a conception in which the mind is the base of existence – ‘I think therefore I exist’.

Secondly; the reason that *equanimity-compassion* is posited as a stance in research is that it is possible for every serious researcher, no matter what social background, to study any context without having to be trapped in the colonial construct popularly posited as the 'insider/outsider' debate. This binary construct is nothing but a manifestation of the colonisers' angst. All that the *equanimity-compassion* stance seeks in the research process from the researcher is that the researcher humbly accepts one's location and consciously attempts to occupy the point-of-view of the living, pulsating 'researched subject' in the process of knowledge acquisition and production.

The above argument, however, is not to take away from the fact that even western social science research is now beginning to seriously engage with these complex processes. Some of the new methods like auto-ethnography, critical ethnography, critical discourse analysis, affective and critical histories, and the likes have been proposed to study varied domains such as society, culture, technology, and biodiversity.

### **Dialogical Historiography:**

Another method that is interconnected with all the above five processes concerns the direct engagement with the 'history of the context', inclusive of the method of writing history, and the ways in which theoretical production becomes part of the knowledge enterprise. This method of engagement with history, I call *dialogical historiography*.

To understand *dialogical historiography* we first need to contrast it with colonial historiography. Fundamental to colonial historiography is to posit the writing of history within a universal-particular framework.

Two claims are made by colonial historiography (i) that the history written is universal; as in applicable across time and space, and (ii) the approach to writing is objective; as in being unbiased and neutral.

*Dialogical historiography* rejects these claims and makes no such assertion, either about being objective or about producing universal knowledge. The only claim that *dialogical historiography* makes is that historical knowledge is situated and is neither objective nor neutral. The question it posits is less about what history is written, and much more about who writes the history.

There are many differences between 'colonial historiography' and *dialogical historiography*, but one and the most fundamental concerns the frame-of-reference of both. The frame-of-reference of *dialogical historiography* is 'diversity-coexistence' as compared to the 'universal-particular' framework of colonial historiography.

This fundamental shift from 'universal-particular' to 'diversity-coexistence' frame-of-reference is the defining characteristic of *dialogical historiography*. A whole new paradigm of historiography now arises, giving rise to a new frame-of-reference grounded on a new premise. The premise of this new paradigm is called 'diversity-dialogue'.

The notion of dialogue within this framework stems from the idea of coexistence. Dialogue is akin to coexistence and knowledge from this perspective is conceived more as a means of dialogue rather than an attempt at truth-assertion.

*Dialogical historiography* simply affirms the notion of 'points-of-view' and 'non-judgementality' rather than the delusionary colonial claims of 'objectivity' and 'neutrality'. An important point to note here is that this idea of 'points-of-view' and 'non-judgementality' does not negate criticality, instead, it embraces criticality openly.

Criticality here is conceived as 'a conscious decision taken to locate oneself within a critical gaze, which is the dialectical opposite of the doxological, the commonsensical, the traditional, the unperceptive, and the undiscerning gaze'.

This is what marks *dialogical historiography* as different. It stresses upon the dialogical nature of knowledge. Dialogue as knowledge, or dialogical knowledge is an act of engaging, conversing, and reciprocity, rather than defining, constructing, and controlling.

This knowledge intends not to impose or forcefully construct the other, rather it attempts to converse with the other. This inter-epistemic dialogue speaks simultaneously to its own context (the researcher) and also to other dynamic contexts (the researched) in a rational, dignified and self-respecting manner. It conceives the relationship between the researcher and the researched as co-

producers of knowledge, both engaging in the co-production of knowledge, as against the colonial-centric relationship of constructing and manipulating the 'other', in order to fit the 'researched' into the theory and world of the 'researcher'.

Such knowledge and ways of engagement, the decolonial-historical approach asserts, are to resist the colonial historiographical attempt to appropriate, inform, construct, manipulate, claim expertise, dominate and control, and to propel, in its stead, the liberatory *dialogical historiographical* mindset of engaging, conversing, co-producing, healing, empowering and emancipating.

In the *decolonial-historical approach*, it is important to assert that knowledge is healing, empowering, emancipatory, and that social research is not merely a project of power, but a project of truth(s), but while the researcher is, in many ways, a soldier of knowledge, ultimately the researcher is the battlefield too!

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