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What Does "Critical" Mean in Critical Area/Development Studies?

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In 2021, Martina Padmanaban, Samia Dinkelaker, Maraike Hoffmann, Dimas Laksama, Siti Maimunah, Elena Rudakova, Enid Still, and Friederike Trotier published a "minifesto" on *Principles of Critical Development Studies* in ASIEN 160/161. Unlike a manifesto, which would be based on a grand theory, the minifesto aimed at presenting "a collection of small but significant ideas" (Padmanaban et al. 2021: 210). In their minifesto, the authors invited others to join the discussion that they had started by discussing, writing, and publishing the minifesto. It is a discussion, among other things, of what it means to be critical in area- and development studies.

While I think that the ideas outlined in the minifesto are indeed important and deserve attention, I want to challenge the authors (and others) on some points. My main concern in the following is the very notion of critique and being critical. Calling oneself a critical scholar is commonplace. Therefore, the minifesto performs a meritorious task, as it describes and discusses what this notion means. However, I want to outline here a critique of the critique. Referring to some points in the minifesto, I argue that the critical notion outlined therein is, in a certain sense, not radical (or critical) enough: While it criticizes, for good reasons, Eurocentric approaches, it dispenses with all universalizing approaches and calls for radical pluralization. This pluralization is indeed common in academia and I myself am guilty of it (for instance, Duile et al. 2023). However, I think this critique, which aims at radical pluralization and rejects universalism, ultimately universalizes difference itself, with a potentially problematic political outcome. Therefore, I will argue that critiques we develop in area- or development studies must not only criticize Western or (neo)colonial forms of universalism as problematic universalisms but must at the same time critique the elevation of pluralism and relativism, (that is, difference) to the status of universal. What we need, I claim, is a new form of universalism that takes seriously the emancipatory promises of European universalism — enlightenment, equality, and freedom — as well as its contradictions, but that acknowledges that within our current ideological–economic order (which is also determined by Western universalism in the form of liberalism), these promises cannot be achieved. This is where particular experiences and

particular forms of knowledge from the Global South are crucial. I will argue in favor of particular universalism as the base of critical scholarship and will explain in the following what this means.

Critique as Radical Pluralism

In order to explain my critique here, I will first shortly summarize some points of the minifesto and make some of the inherent philosophical backdrops of this critique explicit. This will be my reading of the minifesto, a reading that addresses only certain points but, hopefully, grasps at least some of its thrust.

The target of the critique voiced in critical development studies, as the authors imagine it, is Western and scientific knowledge that emerges as a form of universalized knowledge, or as the "colonial ways of seeing" which are said to "reduce complex relations to binaries" (Padmanaban et al. 2021: 213). The authors stress the colonial legacy of this knowledge and the embedding of scientific knowledge into ideologies of economic growth (Padmanaban 2021 et al. 2021: 214-215). The question is thus how critical studies should counteract these problems. Here, the minifesto argues in favor of radical pluralism. It does not merely argue that knowledge only empirically exists in the plural but normatively argues in favor of pluralism. The minifesto argues for "commitments to pluralizing knowledge production as an important act within a broader project of decolonizing the university" (Padamanaban et al. 2021: 216).

It is crucial to stress that the minifesto departs from experiences of racism that some students in Passau shared in the department (Padmanaban et al. 2021: 210). The necessity of decolonization and pluralization derives from these experiences of discrimination against particular identities. In other words, what is at stake here is not only the pluralization of knowledge but also the recognition of differences in other fields such as identities (to which other forms of knowledge or, more generally, ways of seeing are linked). This is the aim of critical studies as outlined in the minifesto: to make room for other, neglected, overseen, and oppressed identities with their specific knowledge.

The minifesto builds upon discussions about texts from feminist political ecology, post-development studies, decolonial theory, as well as new area studies. While it would be beyond the scope here to discuss all these fields, I think that there are some general currents in these fields that serve as the basis for what "critical" means in the minifesto. In terms of the philosophical currents which have not only made possible the acknowledgment of difference but have elevated difference and pluralism to a normative category, I think we must mention poststructuralism and postmodernist approaches in general. Deriving from a philosophy of language where all signifiers lack meanings themselves and derive their meanings only in relation and opposition to other signifiers, these approaches provide valuable insights into the ideologies of all sorts of centrisms where certain signifiers are ontologically privileged over others. However, while poststructuralism makes the critique

possible, it often offers little for emancipatory projects. Claiming that essentialism can only be applied strategically does not do justice to emancipatory political struggles where people really need to believe in something as the focus point of their struggle, that is, as a universal. When people in Iran, for instance, struggle for freedom under the banner of "Women, Life, Freedom," it is not possible to claim that the woman does not exist except as a social construct. Rather, they have to challenge the Islamic reactionary conservativism of the regime which defines femaleness in a certain sense with their version of what it means to be a woman, and they cannot but try to universalize their particular notion of the woman and femaleness.

In a very basic sense, critique is always a critique of a tautological overlap, that is, the assumption that something is natural, given a priori, or simply that *it is because it is*. Critique is the critique of commonsense elements, and colonial power relations which continue to be relevant are indeed part of it. The critical element is that it claims that there is no universal. There are only particularities (identities, forms of knowledge, and so on). Whatever emerges as universal is in fact a particular elevated to the status of the universal within a political field of antagonisms. The particular notion of it is to be brought into light by deconstruction. However, the crucial point here is that this critique does not really dispense with the notion of the universal: it rather simply universalizes antagonisms. Postmodernist approaches criticize the idea of the universal and hegemony as a natural state, but elevate the idea of particularization and difference itself to the universal. By doing so, these approaches uphold a Kantian formalism, namely the binary between the absolute (universal) and the particular. The alternative critical notion I suggest here is a Hegelian take on that: the absolute (universal) only exists *within* the particular. It is not a dualism but a dialectical relation between the universal and the particular. They are both part of a totality that is characterized by a crack or rupture, and the particular (particular identities, forms of knowledge, etc.), as well as the universal, are part of that totality which is, philosophically speaking, not identical with itself.

Critical Studies and the Concrete Universal

Even though we might depart from experiences of our own society (like the students' experiences of racism in Passau), I think we have to assess what the call for radical pluralism of knowledge and identities would mean politically, especially for Southeast Asia. Many Southeast Asian societies can be characterized as "plural societies" anyway and expressing forms of knowledge equally would probably lead to a fragmentation of society. In societies that historically have been plural (and in which this plurality was also fabricated and utilized by colonial powers), the task in nation-building processes was to find forms of what John Furnivall termed "common will" (1967: 447), which was ultimately lacking in the plural societies. In other words, there was always a kind of universalism necessary in decolonial practices, a universalism that was able to unify particular struggles and identities. This is at least

true for what Olúfémi Táíwò has called the original meaning of decolonization (to which he refers to as "decolonisation1"), namely, a process of transforming a colony into a self-governing, politically independent entity. The urge to pluralize and render whatever comes from the West as neocolonial is what Táíwò called "decolonization", namely, "forcing an ex-colony to forswear, on pain of being forever under the yoke of colonization, any and every cultural, political, intellectual, social and linguistic artifact, idea, process, institution and practice that retains the slightest whiff of the colonial past" (Táíwò 2022: 3). This would mean, in Southeast Asia at least, finding forms of radical nationalism and particularism against the West, and reactionary forces — from Islamists to traditional authorities —welcome this cultural relativist anti-universalism.

Critique, as I suggest it, must not dispense with universalism. However, it needs to aim at concrete universals which have clear political implications. A well-known example in this regard is the BLM movement. Whereas the notion of "black lives matter" takes the concrete experiences of black people as the basis for the universal notion of the recognition of life, the reactionary notion of "all lives matter" is nothing but an empty phrase. The latter notion is an abstract universal notion which renders invisible the concrete lives at stake. Hegel has argued that in abstract universals the content has the form of indifference against its universal (Hegel 1969: 284). Critique must address this indifference, but without jettisoning the very idea of the universal within the concrete.

How can area studies be decolonized and, even more importantly, offer decolonial perspectives that transcend a mere call for pluralization and the universalization of difference? We will have to think about that in more detail, but for the time being my first idea would be to engage with anticolonial intellectuals, especially with those who do not simply oppose the West and its knowledge but engage with Western thought in order to fight colonialism or to make visible different modes of domination within colonial society. We can find numerous of these thinkers in Indonesian history. One would be Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana, for instance, who was ready to fully embrace Western modernization in order to find what it truly means to be Indonesian, that is, to be part of a new society that dispenses with both its own traditions and Western domination (Lubis 1979: xv). Or we could read Soetan Sjahrir (1968) in order to understand colonial violence and how his stance on independence was an attempt to overcome it. Or let us engage with Raden Ajeg Karini (2014), whose insight into the patriarchal structures of colonial order was enabled, among others, by Western education and the egalitarian promises of emancipatory universalism. This is not to engage in a reactionary project and claim that 'there was something good in colonialism' and therefore that we should not condemn colonialism. Rather, it means that a critical perspective acknowledges that the sublation of colonialism has come from within it. The ways to overcome capitalism, too, lie in its inherent contradictions, and capitalism and colonial conditions form contradictive social totalities. Knowledge and practices of resistance from, for instance, indigenous communities, are in this sense never knowledge and resistance

from outside but operate from within the social totality of capitalism (or colonialism). And this is precisely the reason that while they can contribute to a critical approach, they can make visible the inherent contradictions of a social totality. A call for pluralization, however, may tend to conceptualize them as independent alternatives from the outside whose only connections to the hegemonic capitalist or colonial forces are their differences.

Conclusion: A Dialectical Critique

What I suggest here is a dialectical critique that recognizes universals, but keeps in mind that all universals are always-already pre-meditated and sublated forms of former universals. The universal can only appear in the particular. Critical, in this sense, neither means cultural relativism and the elevation of difference to the universal, nor simply upholding the universal notions of Western liberalism or even colonialism.

This is not to say that we should not use postmodern approaches. On the contrary, they are necessary as critiques of hegemonic forces. Postmodern approaches and theories are not simply "cynical theories," as Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay (2020) have called them. Many postmodern scholars are genuinely concerned about crucial issues which are often even matters of life and death for people of excluded identities. Moreover, I think that we cannot simply go back to a liberal universal notion, as Pluckrose and Lindsay suggest when they argue against postmodern theories. There is no radical universalism beyond identity, as Boehm (2023) recently suggested. Every universalism has always been within concrete identities (the clergy, aristocracy, bourgeoisie, colonial European, etc.) and is always an already sublated form of a previous universalism. The contradictions within recent liberal universalism are too obvious and we have to acknowledge that liberal universalism is in deep crisis. The emergence of identity politics, both on the left and the right, is indeed a symptom of the crisis of liberal universalism.

In a certain way, it is a false dichotomy when people put liberal universalism in opposition to postmodern particularism. Instead of simply opting for radical relativism, postmodern forms of critique can help us to determine what is worth saving from liberalism, enlightenment, political achievement, science, and Western knowledge. It can help us to see what kind of new universalism we need. Some post- and decolonial thinkers recognize the need for universals. Recently, my college Michaela Doutch mentioned a quote by Chandra Mohanty, from a revised version of her famous essay "Under Western Eyes," which, I believe, puts it well:

> […] differences are never just 'differences.' In knowing differences and particularities, we can better see the connections and commonalities because no border or boundary is ever complete or rigidly determining. The challenge is to see how differences allow us to explain the connections and border crossings better and more accurately, how specifying differences allows us to theorize *universal concerns* more fully. It is this intellectual move that allows for my

> concern for women of different communities and identities to build coalitions and solidarities across borders. (Mohanty 2003: 151, italicized by T.D.)

And here we arrive at what truly could make critical studies *critical*: the focus on universal concerns, which need universal forms of knowledge deriving from the universal concerns that can bring together particular struggles. Such a form of critical studies is inherently political, simply because it has to critique conditions that are always-already political. But it must bring together different groups instead of perceiving differences as a matter of borders or boundaries.

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