

A Commentary on Boike Rehbein's Approach to Critical Theory after the Rise of the Global South and on his Concept 'Kaleidoscopic Dialectic'

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In his two recent publications titled "*Critical Theory after the Rise of the Global South*" (2010a) and "*Eine kaleidoskopische Dialektik als Antwort auf eine postkoloniale Soziologie*" (2010b), Rehbein presented his critique on Eurocentric foundations of social sciences, particularly of critical theory, and introduced his concept 'kaleidoscopic dialectic'. This concept is claimed to be a new perspective that will eliminate the deficits of universalistic and unilinear assumptions of the social sciences and be a fitting epistemological device in understanding and analysing societies in a multicentric world. These two texts have been very inspiring to those of us conducting post-doctoral, doctoral research projects concerned with the universality and acceptance potential of social scientific knowledge and with the circulation of knowledge between Europe and the global South.¹ Rehbein's effort refers to the need for alternative theoretical approaches and methodologies in order to understand and analyse the social world that has fundamentally changed in the last two decades. Correspondingly, this commentary aims to contribute to these efforts by discussing, rethinking, and elaborating on some of the issues raised by Rehbein. The issues included in this commentary, in the order they are covered, a research programme to understand and analyse the global South; the 'kaleidoscopic dialectic' as the epistemological core of a post-Eurocentric critical theory; power inequalities, and alternative modernities; methodological aspects; relations with other theories; new systems and mechanisms of knowledge production and the role of sociology in a multicentric world; learning process, particularly of the social scientists, on the global scale, and future visions of social science.

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Rehbein's departing point is the end-state of the two centuries of Euro-American domination which have given way to a multicentric structure that has prevailed throughout most of history. It is the "rise of the global South that came to the fore after 1989" which "urges us to review the core assumptions of the social sciences as they are neither apt to explain the present nor suitable to the remote past nor acceptable to the post-colonial world" (2010a:1). The contemporary social sciences do not provide convincing perspectives that go beyond ethnological pluralism and relativism of particular social formations. Although the debates on 'multiple modernities' (Eisenstadt, 2000) and on the even more promising concept of 'entangled modernities' (Randeria, 2002; Therborn, 2003) have brought new insights, there is still a frame missing in the analysis of non-Western societies. Therefore, Rehbein's intervention can be considered as such a research programme to understand and analyse the global South, particularly the emerging non-Western powers/societies such as China, India, Brazil and South Africa. Rehbein searched for a way to analyse emerging powers, and other non-Western societies in general, which avoids the deficits of universalistic Eurocentrism (modernisation theory in many forms) as well as the relativism of plurality (post-modernism, post-colonialism and other 'post'-theories, which focused on the critique of the wrong assumptions of Eurocentrism). By the methodological conception of the 'kaleidoscopic dialectic', Rehbein developed more a research programme than a consistent theory. His effort gains importance as, firstly, there is – at the moment – no consistent theory or methodology, that can explain the social dynamics of non-Western societies in general and of emerging societies in particular, without reducing these social formations to macro institutions; secondly, European social sciences have very little knowledge about non-Western countries like China, India, Brazil, South Africa; and thirdly, it is not clear how the emerging powers and even other non-Western societies will develop in the coming decades and which position in the global order they will occupy. A linear rise of emerging countries is as uncertain as the decline of one or several of them.

Rehbein outlined his 'kaleidoscopic dialectic' "as the epistemological core of a post-Eurocentric critical theory. Central for a 'kaleidoscopic dialectic' as for Adorno's configuration is the relational approach – establishing relations and exploring history" (2010a:9). While trying to find an alternative to the unsatisfying reduction to 'universal' or 'singular' in Eurocentric social sciences, he proposes three characteristics that are central to a 'kaleidoscopic dialectic': "First, the object has to be constructed as a configuration on the level of the particular. Second, it has to be linked to a clearly defined empirical field. Third, it has to be constructed historically but without any teleology out of an origin." (ibid.:9). "To establish relations between rather heterogeneous configurations – to construct kaleidoscopes – seemed to" Rehbein "an epistemological device that fits our multicentric world" (ibid.:12).

To establish relations between heterogenous configurations – kaleidoscopes – may be quite acceptable as a fitting epistemological device. However, time and space dimensions need to be considered as well. It particularly becomes problematic when we realize that the kaleidoscopes demonstrate a continuously changing pattern. Giddens (1994:96) argued, in his discussion on tradition and globalization, that “whereas tradition controls space through its control of time, with globalization it is the other way around. Globalization is essentially ‘action at distance; absence predominates over presence, not in the sedimentation of time, but because of the restructuring of space”. Hence, how would the kaleidoscopic perspective deal with the challenge of time and space running counter to each other? Although Rehbein’s multicentric world may mean more than a globalized world, restructuring of space can still be dealt with in his kaleidoscopic perspective. But the time dimension remains questionable, since, in the first place, continuity of the process is lost. It needs to be clarified how the social sciences or knowledge systems would produce knowledge in each and every moment that fits the continuously changing phenomenon.

Rehbein stated that history is no longer based on a homogenous (Eurocentric) history with common foundations and its aim is not to reach to universal laws or a totality, and does not presuppose a unilinear evolution towards a certain goal (ibid.:8). Alternatively, as Rehbein claimed, there is the possibility to search for a multitude of relations and explore history. He also explained, as mentioned above, how such dialectic is going to work. The ‘particular’ and its search and definition in an empirical field, is a strong feature of Rehbein’s theoretical perspective, which also augments the types of relations, and does not let the classical dialectic set ‘contradiction’ as the only relation. Rehbein suggested this to be a characteristic of a post-Eurocentric critical theory. In addition to ‘contradiction’, we should remember that ‘domination’ has also been a prominent form of relation in times of Eurocentrism. Shifting from an immediate ‘domination’ to ‘particularity’ can be considered as an important step to overcoming Eurocentric perspectives. One can interpret that at this stage, the ‘particulars’ set themselves as equal and neutral entities. Concerning this diagnosis we have two questions: Can we really outpace dominance so easily? (Or is it still there and how can we grasp it theoretically in a kaleidoscopic dialectic?) And how can we imagine communication between different ‘particulars’? We want to concentrate on the first question now and will consider the second question at the end of our commentary.

Considering various ‘particulars’ as equal seems promising and necessary on a visionary or normative level. But given that they are situated in different areas and positions in a global world, we are reminded of Habermas’ ‘power-free discourse’ which includes an assumption of everyone united in a state of consensus. Therefore, we should not forget the critiques (e.g., Weinberger, 1999) saying that there are no power-free social relations.

This main problem of power inequalities remains unsolved in Rehbein's argument. He suitably links the ability of countries like China and India to spread their own ideas of modern society to their new economic and geopolitical power. But the rest of the global South that still lacks similar power does not appear in his approach. In the world's given power structure 'kaleidoscopic dialectic' might eventually lead to a situation where European universalism is abandoned and various centres learn from each other, but the ideas and thoughts of a huge part of the global South still remain marginal.

Regarding this problem, another statement of Rehbein needs attention:

"Eurocentric theory could remain indifferent to the rise of the global South if the South still followed the model of European society and development. This assumption has become incoherent since China leads the way in several categories. This is simple logic: If the global South leads the global North in at least one category, it cannot be lagging behind and cannot follow the Western model of society (any more)" (2010a:7).

Two points must be underlined at this juncture: Firstly, does Eurocentrism need geographic Europe? Does a multicentric world automatically imply the end of Eurocentric principles? There is no doubt about the rise of some countries of the so-called 'global South' in mainly the economic, technological and military areas, and much less in the political, cultural and social. But the question is whether the increased, yet, limited influence of those geopolitical areas automatically leads to a real increase of implementing power, and whether the consolidation of the periphery actually leads to a multipolar or multicentric world. It may only be a displacement of some areas of influence from some Euro-American countries to some of the 'Euro-rest-of-the-world', in other words, Europeanized countries.

Secondly, this 'simple logic', however, is not entirely convincing, for being 'better' in a competition with rules that were invented somewhere else, does not mean that the winner no longer follows the given model. It only shows that he/she learned to play better than the other (maybe the 'original') players. The decisive question here is whether the above-mentioned countries only exceed Western countries in the given Eurocentric world order by applying Western methods or whether they are really establishing something new and different. Therefore, showing that these countries no longer follow the Western model requires more convincing arguments than the one made by Rehbein.

Nevertheless, Rehbein's point can be supported through taking a closer look at the emerging powers. For instance, China is trying to form its own modernity by adopting only certain parts of the Western model and rejecting others, replacing them with thoughts derived from its own culture. In the final years of the 20th century, when the West still claimed the neoliberal development model of the 'Washington

Consensus' to be without alternative, Chinese intellectuals debated 'alternative modernities' and discussed visions of economic development, political participation, and national sovereignty that considerably differed from the ideas that dominated the discourse in the West (Leonard, 2008). Although the success of the Chinese model was in fact more the outcome of an experimental step-by-step approach than of applying a single consistent and specific Chinese theory, it reflects many of these alternative ideas. On these grounds Gungwu and Yongnian (2008:7) argued that "China has already offered alternative routes to development that have worked better than those offered by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) models, and could at least offer useful ways to stimulate and sustain development in the Third World."

Another issue to be raised here is the methodological aspects of Rehbein's approach that also need to be clarified further. If we understand the kaleidoscopic dialectic as a research programme rather than a holistic social theory, it directly leads us to the question of research methods and techniques. In his depictions, Rehbein constructed his argument on a theoretic level to explain how his approach fits well into Western social thought. He implicitly argued how to overcome research methodologies that do not match his perceptions. He conveyed the impression that such practices are to be explored in a next step. Yet, there exists social research that makes use of methods which might match the criteria of a 'kaleidoscopic dialectic'. It could be fruitful to take a closer look at these methods and their theoretical embedding. For example, Grounded Theory as one of the most widely used methods in qualitative social research is not based on universalistic theoretical assumptions, but instead creates specific evidence-based, case-related (particularistic) theories within its research process². Other methods that focus more on social action can be found in ethnography. They, as well, remain on the level of theoretical particularism, as this is anchored in the theoretical basis of contemporary ethnological thought. Contemporary ethnology focuses on exploring the 'other' – no longer limited to the other (foreign) people and peoples, but possibly on any kind of social configuration that differs from the known, the anticipated, and the familiar. Ethnologists here speak of the 'ethnological viewpoint'.

When it comes to the other theories, it is interesting to see that post-colonial theory is the only theory that Rehbein set in relation with his own approach (aside from critical theory, where he located his kaleidoscopic dialectic). He understood the 'kaleidoscopic dialectic' as a 'post-colonial-refined dialectic'³ (Rehbein, 2010b:215). He also argued that a 'kaleidoscopic dialectic' has more to do with the overcoming of the Eurocentric theory rather than protesting against all disciplinary and cultural borders. Eurocentric theory should be replaced by a theory,

² For the discovery of Grounded Theory see (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

³ Authors' translation from the original text in German language.

which resolves post-colonialism – nevertheless, considers its critique of Eurocentrism, yet does not let the diversity of perspectives standstill, but rather incorporates them in theory (ibid.: 233). It seems as if these two approaches, both of which are research programmes rather than theories, can be integrated into one another. Rehbein stated that anti-colonialism has still its validity. Certain social realities in formerly colonised regions are still shaped by ‘old dependencies and plights’⁴ between the colonising and the colonised (ibid.: 222). Thus, if the social scientists come across with these dominant configurations in their research, this will be a valid and useful finding that well fits into the research programme of the kaleidoscopic dialectic. It seems that Rehbein would like to assure that the social configurations which are to be examined are not limited to post-colonial interpretation. This could imply that he understands post-colonial theory – or its application in research – as a universalistic approach that does not accept other perspectives on the same set of configurations. We think that Rehbein’s attempt is a bit too early to outweigh post-colonial theory. We understand that Rehbein would like to go beyond the post-colonial theory with his ‘post’-post attempt, but this should not necessarily mean a total replacement of post-colonial theory.

Although Rehbein mentioned that his concept has little to do with driving against all disciplinary borders, his attempt leads us to think about the new systems and mechanisms of knowledge production in social sciences. He indicated at this juncture that different systems of science and ethics are also coming closer to each other and establish relations, which fit into the knowledge mechanisms of a multicentric world (2010a:12). This statement of Rehbein can also be understood as a critique of the anachronic disciplinary divisions of modern social sciences, which have their own framed realms and explanations⁵. It is interesting to imagine that the new systems of science themselves will not only be different but also multicentric. This leads us to think about a mixture of knowledge mechanisms whose configurations are not defined yet. Is this mixture going to be created through a new form of inter- or trans-disciplinary theoretical activity or can some disciplines undertake new roles using the advantages of their present knowledge production mechanisms? To be more specific, in this multicentric world, would sociology undertake a particular role? It is not a question Rehbein himself raised or was concerned with in his texts, but we believe it is worth discussing in the framework of the knowledge production in this new understanding of the world. While being one of these modern disciplines, sociology can still play an important role in understanding and explaining ‘configurations’. Since a configuration is an arrangement

⁴ Authors’ translation from the original text in German language.

⁵ For a detailed discussion, see *Open the Social Sciences: The Report of the Gulbenkian Commission on the Restructuring of the Social Sciences*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996. Also, Michael Burawoy’s “Open the social sciences: To whom and for what?”, in *Portuguese Journal of Social Science*, 6 (3): 137-146.

of parts and components, its understanding requires a holistic perspective, which, we believe, sociology provides. An explanation would not be sociological without relations, as society itself is a set of relations. Sociology, above all, tries to understand the relations, including the ones between human beings and nature, between the members of society, their relations within groups, the relations between these groups in different forms, and further their aggregate as societies and various dimensions of the relations between these societies and so on. Sociology enables us, more than many other disciplines, to connect knowledge from different fields while explaining a phenomenon. Therefore, it has the potential to understand these heterogeneous configurations in an appropriate way and to bear this role in a multicentric world.

Our final comment will be on Rehbein's following statement about the learning process, of particularly social scientists, in our (new) social world:

"When Hegel said, philosophy was nothing but the time put into thought, he meant that the known had to be thought through – that one only learns what one already knows. Now, all of us can learn something that we do not know." (2010a: 15).

As promising (and beautiful) as this last statement is, we doubt that it is equally true for all of us when we talk about a global scale. Researchers and intellectuals in the global South (as well as in post-socialist countries within Europe) have to learn and know about the 'West', about its culture, traditions, history and theories, and have to integrate this knowledge into their scientific publications if they want to be heard, respectively have their texts published internationally. Whereas researchers located in Europe and North America could and still can publish their ideas without locating them, they either perceive their issues as 'general' (therefore, do not see a need to localize them) or they take their readers' knowledge about their contexts for granted⁶. So, while authors located in most areas worldwide have to know and learn about at least two regions – their own and (certain) Western ideas and traditions – Western intellectuals tend to be those with the least knowledge about other regions, ideas and traditions (with the exceptions of many anthropologists or those social scientists doing comparative research). Therefore we think it is us, researchers located in the West, who have to learn the most, while others will hopefully be able to begin to talk with us on equal terms of mutual knowledge about each other's contexts.

Taken as a whole, we think that Rehbein's concept of 'kaleidoscopic dialectic' not only has an inspiring critical quality, but also a unique meta-stance on crucial issues of social theory on the global scale. We find the idea of replacing universality and singularity with particularity in social research convincing, and the focus on empirically grounded theories sound. However, it remains open as to how we could imagine such a future of social sciences that neither leads to a relativistic nor a

universalistic perspective: How are different approaches with different regional embeddings supposed to find or work on their 'family resemblances'? How can they be imagined to communicate or to co-operate globally? Could it be a network of different approaches with different links representing, e.g., similarities, differences, dominations or alliances, resembling, for example, the visions of another theorist trying to find ways avoiding universalist and relativist traps in (social) sciences? What about Haraway's visions of "partial, locatable, critical knowledge sustaining the possibility of webs of connections called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology" (Haraway, 1988:584)? In her approach researchers have to find translations of their languages and ideas at interfaces that can form temporal coalitions and should take responsibility for their knowledge claims. Or shall we imagine transnational co-operations rather in line with Connell's idea to perceive social science as "not as a settled system of concepts, methods and findings, but as an interconnected set of intellectual projects that proceed from varied social starting points" with overlapping intellectual interests as well as mutual goodwill and respect as bases of "co-operation in the social sciences that run around and across peripheries" (Connell, 2007: 228)? In the final analysis, we believe that it is the 'circulation' of knowledge that is the central movement within this step of global communication, which is not given enough space in Rehbein's article. 'Circulation' is the process where possibly the space for alternative or multiple relations is released from 'contradiction' and 'domination'. One aspect of this process that we can talk about more confidently is that, through 'circulation' it is highly possible to transcend Eurocentrism and provincialism, and even the relativistic implications of post-colonial thinking. Moreover, circulation is open to all forms of relations, including the intermediate/hybrid forms, between 'particulars' and their configurations. But how and with which forces the knowledge is going to circulate appears again as the crucial question. It is also possible that the dominating forces might keep their place longer and give shape and direction to the wind of circulation.

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