Social Theory and Asian Dialogues: Cultivating Planetary Conversations

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Introduction and Invitation

Asia is not a predefined fixity; it is a journey of co-realizations and pluralizations. Similarly, social theory is not unitary; it is a plural process of reflection on the dynamics of self, culture and society. But much of social theory as it rules in the academic corridors of Europe, Asia and the world is Eurocentric. But now there is an epochal need for realizing social theory as part of a planetary conversation. While some may look at it in terms of the rise of Asia and the decline of Euro-America, the challenge is not to replace one ethnocentrism and exclusivism with another but to make social theory a field of mutual learning and a dialogue of presuppositions. Dominant social theories from the West have their own presuppositions, for example, the presupposition about the centrality of power in Max Weber and Michel Foucault, and justification and application in varieties of critical theory, such as that of Jürgen Habermas. But these presuppositions are not universally shared as reigning presuppositions of self, culture and society. For example, in *Srimad Bhagavad Gita*, a text that expresses the spiritual traditions of India, it is written, "*Sradhha Maya Ayam Purusha*

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Jo Jat Sraddha Sa Ebasa: This *Purusha* [the human person] is character-ized by *sraddha*—capacity for love and reverence—; one is who one loves or reveres." These lines also offer some presuppositions about self, culture and society and urge us to realize that it is not only power but also *sraddha* (reverence or love) that characterize being human in the fields of self, cul-ture and society. For a fuller realization of social theory there needs to be a dialogue between presuppositions of power and *sraddha* as important elements in the dynamic of self, culture and society, rather than a one-sided assertion and exclusion.

Rethinking Theory

Theory is not only a noun but also a multiplex verb and it is not only activistic but also meditative. The practical turns in social theory—through terms such as linguistic, feminist and ecological—do help us realize that theory is both noun and verb. But they do not sufficiently cultivate the meditative side of such turns as their notion of practice is mostly activistic and is not related to processes of meditative co-realiza-tions (see Giri 2012). In Asian countries the majority still travel on foot and we can cultivate the notion of theory as walking meditation. Many in Asian societies, such as our indigenous peoples, have a propensity to dance, so we can also cultivate theory as dancing meditation. Theory is not just an unconditional system; it is a conditional journey. We are invited to reflect upon and realize theories as walking and dancing medi-tations starting from our own location and dialogue with insights from our home and world.

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We need to open classical and contemporary social theories which are pre-dominantly Euro-American to multiple dialogues such as Asian dialogues, which then become part of planetary conversations (see Connell 2007; Comaroff and Comaroff 2012). In planetary conversations we take part in a dialogue without privileging our a priori ethnocentric point of view and open ourselves, our locational insights and presuppositions, to mutual interpenetration, sharing, questioning and transformation. While much East-West dialogue is still imprisoned within the existing logic of a priori fixation and an unconscious colonial constitution of our globe, planetary

conversations seek to transform these to conditions of mutual dialogue and an interpenetration of presuppositions.

Following this brief prelude, we will begin this dialogue with the concept of the self. In Asian countries there is a notion of self as a field that is not static but dynamic (Clammer 2008). It is a field of flows, of many rivers and streams. Our self is like the rice field. It is a field where *chi*, dynamic energy, flows. From both the Confucian and Kashmiri Saivism traditions we get a view of dynamic energy and consciousness. Recent social theory from scholars such as Pierre Bourdieu also emphasize the significance of field in understanding society. *Srimad Bhagavad Gita* also talks about the yoga of the field and the knower of the field. While Bourdieu's conception of field is primarily socio-political, in *Gita* the concepts of field and knower of the field are both socio-psychological and socio-spiritual. It is enriching to have mutually transforming dialogues between these conceptions of the field and thus deepen our conceptions and realizations of self, culture and society as fields (see Das 2010).[1]

Self is neither a peak nor a cliff.[2] In individualism self is looked upon as a cliff. But in Asian traditions and cultures there is a relational view of self which is, at the same time, ecological and transcendental. Self is the meeting point of the horizontal and the vertical.

Individualism is at the root of modern social theory and society. But a dialogue with Asian traditions helps us realize the transindividual dimension of individual and the transocial dimension of society. In his discussion of the work of Thai social thinker and Buddhist social theorist Sulak Sivaraksha John Clammer (2008) tells us that Sivaraksha helps us in understanding that individuals have a transindividual dimension. In the words of Clammer: "In much the same way that Louis Dumont has argued that Western individualism has its roots in Christianity and that the consequences of this individualism are profound for the arrangement of society and assumptions about how relationships within it work, so Sulak is arguing for a 'trans-individualism' that arises from Buddhist roots, and which has profound implications for the ordering of society" (2008: 190).

In modern Western society and modern sociology both individuals and society are conceptualized and realized in isolation from Nature and transcendence, they are imprisoned in isolated black boxes that Dallmayr (1998) calls "Enlightenment black boxes." Dialogue with Asian traditions enables social theory to conceptualize and realize individuals and societies as at the same time part of Nature and transcendence. There are also streams in Western traditions that look at individuals and societies as in a

relationship with Nature and Transcendence but modern social theory has not nurtured itself with such streams of vision and practice. For example, in Goethe we find ways of going beyond the modern Enlightenment black box and realize self and society as part of Nature and transcendence, but modern sociology has followed Newton rather than Goethe (Uberoi 1984). But border-crossing dialogue can contribute, for example, dialogue between modern social theory and Asian traditions of practice and reflection can contribute to creative memory work and the retrieval of traditions of a non-dualistic relationship between individual/society and Nature and transcendence.

SOCIAL THEORY AND ASIAN DIALOGUES: BEYOND THE TWO PREDICAMENTS OF SOCIO-CENTRISM AND SELF-CENTRISM

Daya Krishna, the pre-eminent Indian philosopher, tells us: "Society need not be considered the last term of human thought. The centrality may be restored to the human individual who, then, may be viewed as the nucleus of the social cell from whom all creativity emanates or originates. In this perspective, then, society would be conceived as a facilitating mechanism so that the individual may pursue his trans-social ends. Instead of art, or religion, friendship or love being seen as the lubricating oil for the functioning of the social machine, the machine itself would be seen as facilitating the emergence and pursuit of various values" (Krishna 1993: 11). In many cultures, including Indian, the social does not have the same ultimate status as it has in modern Western society and socio-religious thought. *The social in Indian thought does not have a primal significance and it is considered an intermediate field and an ideal society is one which facilitates our realization of potential as* Atman, *soul.* Daya Krishna calls it an *Atman*-centric approach and contrasts this with the socio-centric approach not only in the modern West but also in religious traditions such as Christianity. But one also finds a socio-centric approach in certain aspects of Confucianism, which accords primary significance to social relations and not, to the same extent, to processes of self-realization. Both approaches have their own limitations, what Daya Krishna calls the "two predicaments"—the Atman-centric predicament and the socio-centric predicament. The socio-centric predicament does not give enough space to self-realization, while "*Atman* centricity leads a people's attention away from an active concern with society and its betterment" (ibid.: 23). To overcome the one-sidedness in these approaches Daya Krishna

links them to a new realization of freedom, while Sri Aurobindo (1962) links them to evolutionary transformations, transforming the very constitution of the individual and the social beyond their present-day dualistic constitutions.[3]

From the point of view of this aspiration to overcome *Atman*-centeredness or self-centrality and socio-centeredness we can look at Asian traditions in new ways. Take, for example, the case of Buddhism and Confucianism, two major Asian traditions of discourse and practice. In its reflections on humanity Confucianism focuses on webs of relationships while Buddhism emphasizes the need to transcend the limits of social relationships, particularly anthropocentrism. But both traditions have gone through many inner debates and contestations between them, giving rise to movements such as Neo-Confucianism, which urges us to pay simultaneous attention to webs of relationships and a nurturance of self-realization in our quest for human realization (Dallmayr 2004: 152–171). According to Tu Wei-ming, Neo-Confucianism involves a "continuous deepening of one's subjectivity and an uninterrupted broadening of one's sensitivity" (quoted in ibid.). It also involves a "dynamic interplay between contextualization and decontextualization. Hence, the self as a 'center of relationships' finds itself simultaneously in the grip of an ongoing decentering or displacement […] Just as self-cultivation requires self-overcoming, so cultivation of family and other relationships demands a transgression of parochial attachments such as 'nepotism, racism and chauvinism' and ultimately a transgression of narrow 'anthropocentrism' in the direction of the 'mutuality of Heaven and man and the unity of all things'" (ibid.: 164).

Thus in neo-Confucianism there is a simultaneous attention to social relationships and a deepening of subjectivity, which helps us go beyond the one-sided emphasis on either society or self. We find a similar emphasis on emergent sociality and self-realizations in neo-Vedantins such as Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo who urge us to cultivate creative relationships between self and society with an additional cultivation of the divine along with and in between. We can also find the resonance of similar concerns in Gandhi and Tagore. So it is helpful to cultivate further dialogue between Neo-Confucianism and Neo-Vedanta. This, in turn, calls for dialogue between Confucianism and Vedanta and not only between Confucianism and Buddhism. The dialogue between Confucianism and Vedanta has not yet been undertaken and for the making of a new world order it is helpful for us to undertake this. For example, Confucianism is

concerned with harmony but in the conventional manifestation of harmony in traditional China this can be hierarchical and anthropocentric. In the conventional articulation of harmony in Confucianism there may not be enough realization of the challenge of establishing harmony between humans and non-humans, society and Nature. Vedanta, with its concern for the unity of all life, can help Confucianism to realize this as Confucianism's emphasis on proper social relationships and its vision and practice of *Tian-Xia*—All Under Heaven—can make help us make Vedanta more social. For example, the Vedantic concern with unity of life should be practiced in the realm of social relationships, which in the traditional social order are dominated by caste and gender exclusion. Both Confucian harmony and Vedantic unity face the challenge of transforming hierarchy, monological domination and the authoritarian construction of unity.

Harmony and unity help us to come together with and beyond the traps of domination and exclusion. This is suggested in the vision and practice of *lokasamgraha* from the Indic tradition, which has a Vedantic root in a very open and cosmopolitan sense. *Lokasamgraha* is spoken about in *Bhagavad Gita* as a challenge to us to realize the gathering of people as not only a public gathering but also a soulful gathering. In modern social and political thought and practice, we are used to the vision and practice of a public sphere and we can realize and transform this as a field and practice of *lokasamgraha*, simultaneously public and soulful. *Lokasamgraha* is a field of mutual care and responsibility and it is a challenge at all levels of human gathering—from dyadic associations, institutions and movements, to the triadic and beyond, such as family, community, nation and the global order. In our present phase of globalization and the challenges of global responsibility via such trials as climate change and terrorism, we need to talk about global *lokasamgraha*. This global *lokasamgraha* becomes a field of a new cosmopolitan realization in which to be cosmopolitan is not only to be a citizen of the world but also to be a member of the human family (Giri 2006). It is not only epistemological and political, as is the dominant discourse of cosmopolitanism, but it is also ontological and spiritual. Global *lokasamgraha* is also a way of realizing the Chinese vision and aspiration of All Under Heaven—*Tian-Xia*.[4] Coming back to Daya Krishna's two predicaments in terms of thinking of society, we need to realize that our mode of being in the world as participant in *lokasamgraha* and *Tian-Xia* requires both socio-centeredness and *Atman*-centered attention. It also requires

decentering in a spirit of *Anatta* or no-self as it comes from paths of Buddhist vision and practice. We can realize both self and society as not only social and *Atman* but also as no-self, which is not fixed and closed within itself. This can then help us realize webs of interdependence as suggested in another Buddhist vision and practice of *patipadasamuc-chaya*—dependent co-origination. For realizing self and society as fields and circles of *lokasamgraha* and *Tian-Xia* we need to realize them as simultaneously fields and circles of sociality, self-engagement and nurturance of no-self, helping us to realize them as webs of what Vietanemese monk Thich Nhat Hahn calls both interbeing and transbeing. In terms of sociological theory we can relate *lokasamgraha*, *Tian-Xia* and *patipadasamucchaya* to a creative systems thinking and chaos theory in which systems are not just reproductions of mechanical systems of a priori ordering but are also unfolding configurations of communication and co-ordination (Giri 2002).

Confucianism and the Calling of Planetary Conversations

Confucianism is a major influence in Asia, especially in China, Japan, Korea and many parts of South East Asia and has been used in various ways in histories and contemporary societies. Many a time it has been used to justify authoritarianism. But there is a new democratic consciousness brewing in South East Asia and China which calls for rethinking Confucianism beyond the prism of authoritarian justification (Han 1998). Another issue is that of pluralism. Confucianism has existed in societies that have not valued pluralism as a way of life. Most of the societies in which Confucianism is present are monological, characterized by the dominance of one ethnic group, for example that of the Han Chinese in China, Japanese in Japan and Koreans in Korea. In this context we have to link Confucianism to pluralism. This in turn calls for dialogues across borders and making Confucianism part of varieties of planetary conversations.[5]

Such planetary conversations can begin at home, for example, with the now, already noted, pluralities in China via some creative interpreters. For example, Tu Wei-ming talks about the five teachings of China—Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity. In Chinese histories and intellectual streams there have been visible and invisible dialogues between these teachings. During a visit to the Muslim town of Nagu in Yunnan province (in July 2009), I asked an interpreter what had

been the mutual influence between Islam and Confucianism. She said while Confucianism has made Islam much more worldly, Islam has given Confucianism a new understanding of the meaning of Heaven. Though scholars such as Tu Wei-ming have carried out a dialogue between Confucianism and Christianity and not with Islam there is now an urgent need for further dialogue in this field. Especially since the current Chinese Government is promoting Confucian Institutes all over the world. Such Institutes should give rise to mutually transforming dialogue between China, India, the Middle East and the rest of the world, rather than be centers to promote official Chinese nationalism.

Dynamic Harmony and Dynamic Emptiness

Harmony is a key concern in Confucianism and many other Asian traditions. But usually this is taken as static and has been used to justify authoritarianism. We need to rethink harmony and build upon traditions such as dynamic harmony.[6] In his study of Japanese religion, where Buddhism has interacted with Shintoism and Confucianism, sociologist of religion Robert Bellah tells us that Japanese religion is concerned with a harmony—among persons and with nature—that is not static but dynamic. For Bellah (1985: 62–63),

> What has been said about the unity of man, nature and divinity should not be interpreted as a static identity. Rather it is a harmony in tension. The gratitude one owes to superordinate benevolent entities is not an easy obligation but may involve the instant sacrifice of one's deepest interests or even of one's life. Union with the ground of being is not attained in a state of coma but very often as the result of some sudden shock in daily living. Something unexpected, some seeming disharmony, is more apt to reveal the Truth than any formal orderly teaching. Japanese art and aesthetic attitude toward nature are also concerned with the unexpected

Compassion here is not imprisoned in the logic status quo rather it is animated by a spirit to unsettle existing harmony and invite the unexpected in a spirit of dynamic harmony. The realization of dynamic harmony is also an animated aspiration in the paths of Kashmir Saivism. As Harish Deheja (2006: 422; emphasis added) writes:

> Kashmir Saivism postulates that *Parama Shiva* contains the entire universe, pulsating within it, just as the seed of the mighty *nyagrodha* potentially

contains the entire tree. At the immanent level, the transcendent *prakashavimarshamaya* splits into *prakasha* and *vimarsha*, Shiva and Shakti, *aham* and *idam*, I and this, subject and object, held together in pulsating, *dynamic harmony* […] At every level there is differentiation into subject and object, *aham* and *idam*, but the differentiation is based in, and unified by the non-duality of consciousness.

Kashmir Saivism seeks to achieve dynamic harmony by realizing differentiation without dualism. The realization of non-duality is also an animated goal in the paths of Buddha and Kashmiri Saivism possibly has contributed the work of dynamic consciousness to this pursuit of non-duality. There is an occasion for mutual learning on the part of Buddhism and Kashimiri Saivism as all concerned can learn from experiments in these traditions.[7]

Dynamic harmony can be accompanied by dynamic emptiness. Emptiness is an important concern in Buddhism but this emptiness is not static but dynamic. Emptiness is not only there in the beginning, we are perpetually invited to realize emptiness in all our modes of thinking and being. As the Dalai Lama tells us: "Things and events are 'empty' in that they do not possess any immutable essence or absolute 'being'" (The Dalai Lama 2005: 49).

Both dynamic harmony and dynamic emptiness are important contributions from Asian traditions to revitalize modern social theory and dialogue with modern Western social theory can help to make both these concepts more transformationally dynamic, as in Asian traditions there is a tendency to conserve the status quo in the name of either harmony or emptiness.

Meditative Verbs of Pluralizations

Dialogues help us realize pluralities in our singularly conceptualized and constructed identities. There are pluralities in Europe as there are in Asia, and each of the countries, cultures and civilizations in both these spheres. We need to build our understanding upon these pluralities. But in order to understand we need to have a dynamic view of pluralism by contributing to the process of creating a more plural understanding and society. But our activities of pluralization need to be not only activistic but also meditative in thinking about and realizing our identities and in reflecting upon themes in social theories.

Social Theory and Asian Dialogues:
From Judgmental Comparison to Generous
Comparison of Comparisons

When we think about any two units together it is easy to be engaged in a judgmental comparison. This is much more so when thinking about valorized units, such as modernity and tradition in Asia and Europe, India and the West, East and West and so on. A challenge before us is to acknowledge our propensity for judgmental comparison and through labor and a love of learning move towards generous and more capacious understanding and realization. While we talk about Europe and India it is easy to state that Europe is material and India is spiritual but there are vibrant streams of spirituality in Europe and materialism in India. So a more worthwhile comparison is between materialism in Europe and India and between spiritualism in Europe and India.

Another aspect of this comparative engagement is that instead of comparing systems and units in a totalizing way we engage in partial comparisons. This builds upon a plural understanding of each of these systems, exploring partial connections between and across and being engaged in partial rather than wholesale comparisons of systems. We have to move beyond systemic comparisons and attend to the complexities that lie in between and beyond. As Beteille (1983) tells us, the wholesale comparison of civilizations such as India as *Homo Hierarchicus* and in the West as *Homo Equalis*—as happens in the comparative sociology of Louis Dumont—is not only unhelpful but perpetuates Western ethnocentrism (see also Giri 1998). Similarly, Touraine's perspective argues that the distinction between modernity and tradition in terms of individualism and hierarchy—à la Louis Dumont—is not helpful in understanding either of them. As he writes (Touraine 2000: 86; emphasis added):

> The distinction between social and non-social definitions of the individual seems to me to be even more important than that between the holistic societies of old and modern individualistic societies. *Both types of society are Janus-faced, because there is no fundamental difference between an individual who is trapped in the roles imposed on him by the community and an individual whose actions are determined by his social situation and the highly effective blandishments of the market. At the same time, there is a similarity between the renouncer and the modern individual who appeals to the universal rights of man and in particular the dissident or resister who risks his life by challenging a social order which, in his view, is an affront to human dignity.*

Thus we need a comparative global and even planetary engagement that is interested in exploring pathways of partial connections rather than a wholesale comparison of civilizations and systems: "Partial connections require images other than those taxonomies or configurations that compel one to look for overarching principles or for some core or central features" (Strathern 1991: xviii). Based on her work in New Guinea, Marilyn Strathern writes: "attempts to produce a typology of societies from the application of constant principles may also evaporate. For instance, principles of reciprocity as they affect the organization of transactions and the role of leaders as Great Men or Big Men may well appear to discriminate effectively between a handful of cases; but the discrimination cannot be necessarily sustained at that level—an expanded version reveals that principles radically distinguishing whole clusters of societies are also replicated within them" (Strathern 1994: xviii; also see Strathern 2002).[8]

Social Theory and Asian Dialogues: Genealogy, Generosity and the Calling of a Post-colonial Cosmopolis

Many Asian societies were subjected to colonial domination and the struggle for liberation and freedom constitutes an important part of the historical experience of Asian societies. Social theories in Asia build upon such anti- and post-colonial struggles for freedom (Mohanty 1994). Post-colonialism has been an important intellectual movement in our recent past. Post-colonial critics and social theorists however very rarely take part in continued liberation struggles in their own societies. Most write only in English and teach in elite academic institutions in the Euro-American world. They very rarely write in the mother language of the people in a country such as India. Their theoretical discourse is very much part of global metropolitan discourse. These critics very rarely enter into dialogue with traditions of thinking and reflection in their cultures and societies. Though they operate in the Euro-American world they have a monolithic view of Europe and Asia. Moreover they very rarely pluralize the colonial experience itself. Post-colonial critics from Asia mostly work within the framework of British colonialism in India and there is very little work on comparisons between Japanese colonialism in Korea and China and British colonialism in India. Post-colonial criticism itself needs to be part of planetary conversations doing comparative historical work on varieties of colonialism and struggles for liberation under these conditions.

In this context it is enriching to think about Partha Chatterjee's genealogical investigation of modern normative political theory, what he calls "Lineages of Political Society" (2009). Chatterjee uses lineage as a method in Foucault's genealogical sense but, like Foucault, presents a unitary view of modern knowledge, in this case modern normative political theory, without exploring the plurality of streams of contestation within this constructed single field of normative theory. For example, in this normative space nobody justified colonialism as an exception to the norm of normative political theory. Chatterjee seems to have a singular notion of norm, such as representative democracy, but this single theme itself hides a plurality of streams, not to speak of a well-known tension between equality, liberty and fraternity. In modern Europe the Scandinavian experiments with people's enlightenment and democratic transformations were not just a variation of the Anglo-Saxon experience but gave more attention to education, participatory democracy and people's enlightenment (Das 2007). Chatterjee uses lineage as an approach supposedly to go beyond linearity, but this is deployed more to tell multiple stories from "most of the world" than multiple streams of normative struggle, social mobilization and contestation from the Euro-American world. The language of lineage is used to construct a linear and one-dimensional object of critique, in this case the "mythical space of" normative political theory, but the object of critique also has a lineage of plurality as the historical experience of "most of the world" from which such a critique is being launched. We probably need a new genealogical method that is equally generous to the lineages of plurality in all parts of the world and not only in colonized and post-colonial societies.

For Chatterjee, the challenge before "postcolonial political theory" is "to break the abstract homogeneity of the mythical time-space of Western normative theory […] The second is the even greater challenge to redefine the normative standards of modern politics in the light of the considerable accumulation of new practices [from colonial and post-colonial societies as well as from the Euro-American world]" (2009: 23). But this project does not explicitly realize the need for cross-cultural dialogue. Furthermore, this does not include the challenge of understanding and learning the languages of normative thinking in traditions such as India. For example it is said that King Janaka, father of Sita, nurtured his people as a mother. Learning much more about such languages of governance would bring new enrichment and imagination to post-colonial political and social theorizing. But how is that possible when our post-colonial advocates mostly interact with knowledge emerging from the Euro-American world and

rarely go inside other traditions of thinking and realization? The possible significance of nurturing one's subjects as a mother is explored in the following poem:

> King Janaka nurtured
> His People as a mother
> And Could not our Janakas—
> Our fathers in politics, family and religion
> Nurture us as mothers?
> Could not God and His arrogant servants
> Be a Manifestation of Creative Motherhood
> And our state and society
> A Flow of Motherhood. (a poem originally written by the author in Oriya)

Theorizing as Walking and Dancing Meditations: The Calling of Cultivating New Words and Worlds

Cultivating social theory and Asian dialogue calls for us to be engaged in varieties of creative learning and memory work, going deeper into our multiple traditions and border-crossing conversations. It calls for us to learn across borders and create new fields of mutual learning and responsibility. We learn by walking and dancing together, not just sitting in libraries and looking at old manuscripts as documents of truth, or doing field work in an alienated way. Theorizing is not only an abstract, deductive and discursive activity; it is a multi-dimensional practice involving dancing and walking together, cultivating dialogue across borders and taking part in planetary conversations. Such practices of theorizing call for new languages of learning, inquiry and communities of seeking. We are invited to go beyond the available discourses and practices of theory in Asia, Europe, West, East, India and the world and contribute to new journeys of self, social and planetary realizations.

Social Theory and Asian Dialogues: With and Beyond Epistemologies from the South

Theorizing as the cultivation of new words and worlds also challenges us to go beyond existing dominant epistemologies in what Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls Northern Epistemologies. In his *Epistemologies From the*

South: Justice, Santos ([2014](#)) challenges us to realize the limits of dominant Eurocentric epistemologies. Social theory and Asian dialogues as planetary conversations thus share the critical epistemological task that Santos cultivates in his works. It resonates with Santos' exploration of alternative epistemologies from the South and with his interlinked visions and practices of the ecology of knowledge and intercultural translation as pathways in the present towards a different future of knowledge, human liberation and world transformations.

But Santos' engagement with epistemology does not explore the limits of the epistemic itself and in social theory and Asian dialogues we need to pursue this and go beyond the primacy of the epistemic in modernity and neglect of the ontological. The limits of the epistemological are not overcome by proliferating the epistemologies from North to South but by transforming them, which includes a simultaneously epistemic and ontological engagement I call the ontological epistemology of participation (Giri [2006](#), [2017](#)). Here our exploration of alternative epistemology as part of alternative theorizing needs to be part of an ontological epistemology of participation which involves not only epistemic and ontological engagement but also cross-cultural and planetary realizations of these themes, modalities of being and understanding. While Santos challenges us to realize a new epistemology, a new politics and a new relationship between the two, we need to meet the challenge of a new ontology and spirituality and strive to cultivate a new relationship, not only between epistemology and politics but also between epistemology and ontology, epistemology and aesthetics,[9] epistemology and spirituality, and epistemology and deeper cross-cultural and philosophical dialogues, all part of what can be called planetary conversations and planetary realizations (Giri [2013](#)). Planetary realizations challenge us to realize that we are children of Mother Earth and as children we have an inborn debt and responsibility to learn about each other and our cultures.

Planetary realizations challenge us to rethink the language and discourse of the South, which is a valorized category not only in Santos but also in Rawenn Connell's ([2011](#)) influential *Southern Theory*. Neither North nor South are mere geographical locations in Santos, nor are they fixed, impermeable boundaries. They are multi-dimensional complex interpenetrating realities in our world, historically and contemporaneously, and they raise important issues of fact and norms of life. To fully appreciate the limits of the valorized discourse of the Global South, which

has implications for our engagement with social theory and Asian dialogues, we need to understand the limits and transformation of an earlier mode of area studies. After the Second World War, the area studies approach continued the geopolitical division of the world. It became subservient to the geopolitical production of the world and an uncritical and oftentimes slavish bearer of Northern epistemologies and North Atlantic theoretical imperialism and universalism, while considering areas as *tabula rasa* (Dirks 2015; Trouillot 2003). But now we need to transform area studies into the study of creative global studies, in which areas are not empty plates for applying and testing so-called epistemologies and theories coming from the North, but are zones of thinking, being and becoming. Each of our areas, whether in North or South, Asia or Europe, are loci of thinking as well as regions of connection and disjunction with the world. These are pregnant cosmopolitan zones of thinking as they embody communication across boundaries in life worlds and worlds of thought (Bose and Manjapra 2010). Areas as locations of life and thinking are zones of inheritance, communication, emergence and divergence; they bore the brunt of colonization as well as the processes of resistance and transformation. Social theory and Asian dialogues carry this transformational conception of area, regional and global studies as part of planetary conversations and are not imprisoned within a valorized discourse of Global South, which still persists a bit in Santos and Connell.

Multi-*topial* Hermeneutics

Planetary conversations move across borders and go beyond closures of both Eurocentrism and ethnocentrism. This calls for a new hermeneutics of theorizing and moving across borders. It embodies not only what Santos, building upon Raimudo Panikkar, calls *diatopical* hermeneutics in which we stand in two cultures, but also what can be called multi-*topial* hermeneutics, in which we stand in multiple cultures, philosophies and theoretical traditions of humanity and theorize with our bare feet, seeking and praying with open palms.[10] Here putting our feet, mind, head and heart in multiple cultures and traditions, footwork and foot meditation in landscapes of self, culture and society is part of a trigonometry of creativity which involves footwork, open historical engagement and a philosophical quest (Giri 2012).[11] Hermeneutics does not only mean reading texts and cultures as texts but also foot-walking with texts and cultures as foot walks and foot works resonating with what Heidegger calls a hermeneutics of

facticity (Mehta 2004).[12] It also means walking and meditating with cultures and texts as foot-working meditation while, as Thoreau (1947) would suggest, we walk like camels and ruminate while walking. This involves a creative engagement with travel, truth and translation, where truth is not just discursive as part of an existing system of power but is also a challenge for us to realize Truth as a landscape of meaning, which calls us for to transcend our limited and determined views of self, society and social theory.[13] This transforms hermeneutics itself into a manifold act of democratic and spiritual transformation that involves related processes of root works, route walks, root meditations, route meditations, memory work and cultural work.[14]

Hermeneutics, as it involves travel, truth and translation, and as it is part of what Santos calls intercultural translation, is linked to creative foot work as part of a cross-cultural memory work. This is also a truth work and meditation where one walks and meditates with Truth. This truth work is an aspect of *satyagraha* and it has both an epistemic and ontological dimension. Translation as *satyagraha* is thus part of an alternative epistemology and ontology, which is a creative dynamic in the work of ontological epistemology of participation in our lives. Alternative social theorizing not only involves what Santos calls epistemological direct action but also *satyagraha*. *Sataygraha* as a *sadhana* and struggle for Truth is not confined to the political domain but touches our modes of knowing, understanding and theorizing.[15]

Multi-*topial* hermeneutics is accompanied by the cultivation of a new logic which can be called multi-valued logic and living. It goes beyond the binary logic of either or and cultivates a new logic of both and. This helps us in creative translation, communication and theorizing across borders. Philosopher J.N. Mohanty (2000) tells us how multi-valued logic can build upon creative dialogues across philosophical traditions such as the Jaina tradition of *Anekantavada*, which emphasizes many paths of Truth realization, the Gandhian tradition of non-violence and the Husserlian phenomenology of overlapping contents.[16] In the pregnant thought of Mohanty, which he crafts like a jewel:

> The ethic of non-injury applied to philosophical thinking requires that one does not reject outright the other point of view without first recognizing the element of truth in it; it is based on the belief that every point of view is partly true, partly false, and partly undecidable. A simple two-valued logic requiring that a proposition must either be true or false is thereby rejected, and what the Jaina philosopher proposes is a multi-valued logic. To this

multi-valued logic, I add the Husserlian idea of overlapping contents. The different perspectives on a thing are not mutually exclusive, but share some contents with each other. The different "worlds" have shared contents, contrary to the total relativism. *If you represent them by circles, they are intersecting circles, not incommensurable, [and it is this model of] intersecting circles which can get us out of relativism on the one hand and absolutism on the other.* (Mohanty 2000: 24; emphasis added)

Cultivating Planetary Conversations

Theorizing is a multi-dimensional process of being and becoming as it involves multi-valued logic and transpositional dancing with reality and possibility. It is a movement with and beyond not only towards what Appadurai (2013) calls an ethics of possibility but also towards an aesthetics and spirituality of possibility as the unfoldment of potential. It involves meditative verbs of co-realization across borders going beyond the limits of Eurocentrism and ethnocentrism and entrenched dualisms of various kinds, such as between the epistemic and ontological, the political and spiritual. Social theory and Asian dialogues strive to cultivate rooted planetary conversations across borders going beyond the violence of the existing exclusion of Eurocentric theorizing as well as ethnocentric certitude and absolutism.[17]

Notes

1. Self is a process and it is possible to make a dialogue between semiotic and Buddhist traditions. As Bakker (2010) writes, "In the combined Peirce-Mead model of the 'semiotic self', the Neo-Darwinian ideas of Charles Sanders Peirce and George Herbert Mead are synthesized to establish a kind of Global adaptation of the Buddhist notion of the flow of the self. The self is not a static thing. The self is not like an apple or a billiard ball. The self is a process. The process consists of one's 'mind' continually sifting through experiences and making plans. At any one stage of our lives we are 'me-I-thou'. Then, only a few seconds later, we are again a new 'me-I-thou'."

2. The following extract from a poem, written by the author originally in Odia, about peak and peak experience may be of interest:

   I am a peak
   I am not only a peak

> I am also a plane
> A plane seeking embrace
> Experience of the peak
> Is not confined only to the peak
> It is there in all planes of life
> Circles of relationships.

3. For Sri Aurobindo: "In the relations between the individual and the group, this constant tendency of Nature appears as the strife between two equally deep-rooted human tendencies, individualism and collectivism. On one side is the engrossing authority, perfection and development of the State, on the other the distinctive freedom, perfection and development of individual man. The State idea, the small or the vast living machine, and the human idea, the more and more distinct and luminous Person, the increasing God, stand in perpetual opposition. The size of the State makes no difference to the essence of the struggle and need make none to its characteristic circumstances. It was the family, the tribe or the city, the *polis*; it became the clan, the caste and the class, the *kula*, the *gens*. It is now the nation. Tomorrow or day after it may be all mankind. But even then the question will remain poised between man and humanity, between self-liberating Person and the engrossing collectivity" (1962: 272–273).

4. Fred Dallmayr brings together Hannah Arendt, Martin Heidegger and the idea of *lokasamgraha* from *Bhagavad Gita* in a piece that deserves our careful consideration: "As an antidote to the spread of 'worldlessness' in our time, Hannah Arendt recommended the restoration of a 'public realm' in which people would actively participate and be mutually connected. Digging beneath this public forum, Heidegger unearthed the deeper source of connectedness in the experience of 'care' (*Sorge*, *cura*) in its different dimensions. From the angle of human 'being-in-the world,' care penetrates into all dimensions of this correlation—in the sense that existence is called upon to care about 'world' and its constituent features (fellow-beings, nature, cosmos). Differently put: There cannot be, for Heidegger, an isolated 'self-care' (*cura sui*) without care for the world—that includes care for world maintenance (without which *Dasein* cannot exist). In this latter concern, his work does not stand alone. In the Indian tradition, especially the *Bhagavad Gita*, we find an emphasis on a basic ethical and ontological obligation: the caring attention to 'world maintenance' or loka-samgraha. According to the Gita, such attention needs to be cultivated, nurtured and practiced in order for human life to be sustainable and meaningful" (Dallmayr 2016: 51–52).

5. In this context the work of Dallmayr is enriching. He tells us about the affinity among these different streams of thought and practice—pragmatism, Confucianism, Gandhi's experiment with truth and paths of Swaraj.

First Dallmayr (2007) writes the following about Gandhi and pragmatists like William James and John Dewey: "In speaking of interconnectedness and the 'play of mutual forces' Gandhi displays an affinity with the spirit of Jamesian and Deweyan pragmatism. But the parallel can be carried further. Like William James and Dewey, and perhaps even more emphatically, Gandhi was an ethical and spiritual pragmatist, in the great tradition of Indian spirituality. […] Gandhi deliberately chose the path of action or praxis (*karma yoga*) demanding continuous ethical engagement in the affairs of the world. Again like Dewey he did not assume that human beings are free and equal by nature (or in an original 'state of nature'); rather freedom and equality for him were achievements requiring steady practice—a practice involving not only change of outward conditions but primarily self-transformation" (2007: 10).

Then Dallmayr writes the following about Confucius, Dewey and Gandhi: "Despite his deep modesty, Confucius himself can be seen and was seen, as an 'exemplar' or 'exemplary person' (*chun-tzu*) who taught the 'way' not through abstract doctrines but through the testimony of daily living. At this point, the affinity with the Deweyan philosophy comes clearly into view—a fact perhaps not surprising given Dewey's extended visit to China after World War 1. As in the case of Gandhian *swaraj*, leading a responsible life in society involves self-restraint and the abandonment of domineering impulses. In Confucius' own words, humanness or to be properly human (jen) means to 'conquer oneself (ke-chi) and to return to propriety (fu-li)'" (ibid.: 15). These reflections of Dallmayr's can help us to probe further the affinities between the paths of Confucius, Gandhi and pragmatists like Dewey as part of planetary conversations.

6. Dynamic harmony has a dimension of harmonization: it is dynamic harmonization.

7. It must be noted here that differentiation and integration are perennial human concerns and have been key themes in social and political theory over the last 300–400 years. In our recent theoretical discourses, Niklas Luhman urges us to realize the need for distinction, for example, between system and environment; Derrida urges us to understand the work of difference, which is not just mere difference but has the capacity to resist temporal and spatial incorporation; Parsons and Habermas, in their own different ways, looked at the need for integration and communication. All these attempts can be enriched by the Kashmiri Saivism quest to realize differentiation without dualism, as can the Buddhist quest for non-duality (see Loy 1988). It can also help us to rethink identity and difference in contemporary social and political theory.

8. In their recent work following reflections on Tocqueville's method, Parth Chatterjee and Ira Katznelson help us to understand how Tocqueville also followed a creative historical comparative method of partial comparisons:

"Tocqueville followed a method that strove for a theoretically grounded comparative analysis of political formations, but one in which each formation also had to be situated within deep and complex structures of their own historical evolution. He did not think of historically constituted political formations as mere cases of comparative theoretical types, or of variants within a type, as though one formation might just as easily be exchanged for another of the same type. Consequently his study of democratic institutions in the United States, as well as his comparative reflections on political institutions in France, is marked by detailed empirical observations that were drawn, as we would say today, from long and arduous fieldwork using a variety of textual and oral methods, followed by theoretical work seeking to draw sustainable formulations belonging to a general comparative order while respecting the historical specificities of each institutional form […].

The great attraction of a Tocqueville-inspired method for us is that it offers the possibility of partial and contingent normative theories based on the configurative study of specific political institutions in two or more countries without resorting to totalizing notions of 'stages of civilization' or 'levels of development.' We believe it is possible to engage in comparisons of political formations that do not assume any particular form of democratic modernity, either existent or hypothetical, as the *telos* of development. Even if Tocqueville believed that democracy was being driven by an irresistible historical force, his analytical method makes it clear that its particular forms were the result of specific historical configurations of causes" (Chatterjee and Katznelson 2012: 2, 4).

9. This means realizing, as John Clammer (2017) argues, that aesthetics is a mode of knowing. I also argue how aesthetics helps us realize both threads of connections and dynamics of disjunctions across different domains of knowledge and life (Giri 2006). Gregory Bateson also helps us understand the link between epistemology and aesthetics as he writes: "Our loss of the sense of aesthetic unity was, quite simply, an epistemological mistake. […] more serious than all those minor insanities that characterize older cosmologies which agreed upon fundamental unity" (1973: 19). For Bateson, "Mere purpose rationality unaided by such phenomena as art, religion, dream, and the like, is necessarily pathogenic and destructive of life." Building upon Bateson and Plato's idea of *paideia* William Ophuls argues how we now need to restore beauty not only to epistemology but in the "pantheon of human values" (Ophuls 2011: 101).

10. Building upon the seminal work of Raimundo Panikkar, Santos thus tells us:

The aim of *diatopical* hermeneutics is to maximize the awareness of the reciprocal incompleteness of cultures by engaging in a dialogue, as it were, with one foot in one culture and the other in another—hence its *diatopical* character. *Diatopical* hermeneutics is an exercise

in reciprocity among cultures that consists in transforming the premises of argumentation in a given culture into intelligible and credible arguments in another. (2014: 92)

11. Open historical engagement goes beyond a disciplinary view of history and resonates with Guha's challenge to explore history at the limits of world history (Guha 2002).
12. It is helpful to explore further the link between my proposed path of foot working and foot-meditating hermeneutics with Heidegger's pointer to a hermeneutics of facticity. Following J.L. Mehta's creative interpretation of Heidegger is helpful: "Even in his earliest lectures, long before *Being and Time*, Heidegger conceived the main task of phenomenology [as understanding] how our factual life as actually experienced hides a depth which its spontaneous self-explicating activity must bring to light [...] [For Heidegger, for this] a way must be found to eliminate the baggage of traditional ontology and to interpret factual life afresh by means of a 'hermeneutics of facticity,' as Heidegger called it" (Mehta 2004: 239–240).
13. This is explored in my poem

Three T and More:

Travel, Truth and Translation
Travelling with Truth
Translating Truth in Travel
In Between the Relative and the Relational
Absolute and Approximate
Translating While Travelling
Self, Culture and Divine
Beyond the Annihilating Tyranny of the Singular
A New Trinity of Prayer
A New Multiple of *Sadhana* and Surrender

14. I explore this in the following poem of mine:

Roots and Routes: Memory Work and Meditation

Roots and Routes
Routes within Roots
Roots with Routes
Multiple Roots and Multiple Routes
Crisscrossing with Love
Care and *Karuna*

> Crisscrossing and Cross-firing
> Root work and Route Work
> Footwork and Memory Work
> Weaving threads
> Amidst threats
> Dancing in front of terror
> Dancing with terrorists
> Meditating with threat
> Meditating with threads
> Meditating with Roots and Routes
> Root Meditation
> Route Meditation
> Memory Work as Meditating with Earth
> Dancing with Soul, Cultures and Cosmos
>   [UNPAR Guest House, Bandung Feb. 13 2015 9 AM]

15. There are many critiques of dominant politics of knowledge around the world but one wonders whether the epistemological direct action it involves embodies *Satyagraha*. For example, we can explore if both post-colonialism and post-modernism as critique of knowledge embody Satyagraha. Similarly we can explore if the critique of knowledge coming from such scholars as Ashish Nandy and Shiv Visvanathan who present themselves as intellectual street fighters involve a vision and practice of *Satyagraha*. Many a time their critique of science and West is self-certain and one-dimensional. As Connell writes: "There are some troubling limits to Nandy's thought. In *The Intimate Enemy*, this cast list was almost entirely male, the only woman to play a significant role was the sneaky French woman" (Connell 2011: 190). Connell here refers to Nandy's critique of Sri Aurobindo but Connell herself does not bother even to name the woman referred to here who is called The Mother whose original name is Mira Richards who is a spiritual co-traveler of Sri Auorbindo.

16. Jaina tradition refers to *Anekantavada*, multiple perspectives of Truth. Building on this, I talk about *Anekantapatha*, multiple paths of Truth.

17. We realize the normative challenge of overcoming violence as we walk and meditate with the following thoughts of Jurgen Habermas: "Only when philosophy discovers in the dialectical course of history the traces of violence that deform repeated attempts at dialogue and recurrently close off the path to unconstrained communication does it further the process whose suppression it otherwise legitimates: mankind's evolution toward autonomy and responsibility" (Habermas 1971: 315).

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