The Power/Knowledge/Space Nexus

Edward Said, Joseph Conrad and a Dream of Non-Imperial Social Thought[1]

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"Do you see the story? Do you see anything?
It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream
– making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream
can convey a dream-sensation …
It is impossible to convey the life-sensation
of any given epoch of one's existence
– that which makes its truth, its meaning …."
Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness (2002 [1902], p. 129–130)

"Imagining their dreams, for they had dreams, as best I could, I realized I was separated from them by the life I'd lived, a life that was blasé compared with theirs"
Jean Genet, Prisoner of Love (2003 [1986], p. 10)

"The American man was captivated.
– Can we go and look for these Dreaming-tracks?
Out there, I mean? Like at Ayer's Rock? Some place like that?
– They can, she said. You can't.
– You mean they're invisible?
– To you. Not to them.
– Then where are they?
– Everywhere, she said.
– And only they can see it?
– Or sing it, Mrs Lacey said. You can't have a track without a song
… The song and the land are one."
Bruce Chatwin, Songlines (1987, p. 28)

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Introduction

Valuable innovations in social thought need inspiration no less than true revolutions in art, as Max Weber (2020, pp. 52–53) had already observed.[2] Indeed, artistic statements inspire scholars more often than they care to admit. But inspirational effects come when they want to, as Weber insisted. Inspiration is indispensable like passion but it can't be forced. It may come from a vexing paradox whose origins, when uncovered, shed light on more general issues. Consider the following example. Sociology of knowledge is an old subdiscipline wherein *space* is a relatively new theme.[3] Sociology of space is a young subdiscipline although its subject matter is immemorial. This pair of observations corresponds to two sides of the same coin, namely the somewhat disconcerting fact that "compared with time or the physical body, space has played a subordinate role in the sociologies of many societies or in 'international' sociological debates. This peripheralization of spatial theory has shifted substantially during the twenty first century" (Löw 2021, p. 499). Indeed, for a long time space seemed "far removed from grand houses of modern social theory" (Soja 1994, p. 135). The present essay elaborates this diagnosis through a new reading of Edward Said's oeuvre which was profoundly inspired by the literary art of Joseph Conrad, each of which thematized space. To think jointly with Conrad and Said about "peripheralization of spatial theory" is to recognize that what Löw problematized as the "subordinate role" of space in "many societies" had occurred mostly in social thought of specific imperial societies. Thus, a larger issue is revealed: it was the power structure of several modern colonial empires in which the epistemic "peripheralization" and reification of space as category was not only possible but durable, not only scientifically reductive but culturally instrumentalized, and not only intellectually contingent but politically timed.

Edward Said's groundbreaking books *Orientalism* (1994 [1978]) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) support this reading, just as they are buttressed by Joseph Conrad's depiction of imperialism and its colonial culture. Said took seriously both Conrad's scepticism about empire, and contemporary exhortation of Michel Foucault (1978, p. 9) to study the "repressive nature" of "power that operates in our society", especially

2 Weber's reflection on inspiration [*Eingebung*] is a significant part of his iconic lecture "Science as a Vocation" [*Wissenschaft als Beruf*] and this term is used in both the classic (Gerth and Wright Mills 1967, p. 136) as well as new English translations (Weber 2004, p. 9), including the latest one entitled "The Scholar's Work" (Weber 2020, p. 14).

3 See, for instance, Leandro Rodriguez Medina's statement in his *Centers and Peripheries in Knowledge Production* (2014): "The place and location where knowledge is manufactured have been only recently incorporated into the debates of the sociology of science. This concern with spatiality […] analyzed the importance of material environments and shed light on the constraints and potentialities that certain geographical areas impose on knowledge creation and development" (2014, p. 5).

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in its conjunctive form of "power/knowledge" (Foucault 1980). This meant researching co-dependencies between power and culture as well as power *of* culture. But Said went further still by insisting that when it comes to the modern power/knowledge nexus one must jointly discuss *imperial power* and *colonial geographies*. Hence the necessity to delineate the power/knowledge/space nexus. From this perspective, the original Foucaultian power/knowledge nexus alone could appear too diffuse. To expose the co-dependence of power and knowledge is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of genuinely critical theory; one must add space and empire to the equation. Foucault himself added space, Said added both.

In the 1982 interview tellingly titled *Space, Knowledge and Power*, Foucault (2000 [1994], p. 361) admitted that "space is fundamental in any exercise of power" and shared an evocative anecdote to show that back then space was neither accorded this importance nor elaborated as a cultural category: "I recall having been invited, in 1966, by a group of architects to do a study of space … at the end of the study a Sartrean psychologist firebombed me, saying that *space* is reactionary and capitalist, but *history* and *becoming* are revolutionary. This absurd discourse was not at all unusual at that time." It was against that reductive legacy that Said wrote *Empire, Geography and Culture*, the opening chapter of his *Culture and Imperialism* (Said 1993). That was his concretized analysis of what I provisionally call here the power/knowledge/space nexus, a perspective that he furnished empirically and which at the time of his death in 2003 made him – according to Tony Judt – "the best known intellectual in the world" (Judt 2008, p. 163). Prior to his work, these three domains could have appeared, at best, as a tentative Venn diagram with somewhat unclear overlaps; after Said, they have become inseparable.

Said's interpretation of the power/knowledge/space nexus via his triangulation of "empire, geography and culture" had not only transdisciplinary value but spawned a decolonial discipline. Through this prism he evocatively unravelled the arteries of modern body politic, while other seminal interventions highlighted capillary nature of power/knowledge (Foucault 1980) or the role of modern state and "ethnogenesis" along the power/space axis (Scott 1998; Scott 2009). Said's analyses were at once comprehensive and detailed, specific and generalizable. Taken together, they amounted to a new explicitly formulated dream of non-imperial and anti-imperialist social thought that was *contrapuntal* – to use his signature phrase – to the Western modernity's own "dream of reason" (Alexander 1995, p. 65). I call it a humanist "dream" rather than a theory because this term emphasizes its corrective moral aspirations and redemptive cultural potential, not just its scientific diagnoses. Moreover, as Joseph Conrad and Jean Genet indicated and I shall elaborate below, it implies also the presence of existential and intellectual barriers that one must try to see and transcend in order for a true non-imperial thinking to emerge. Thus, Said was an ethnographer of cultural discourses rather than their theorist. Here too the Conradian inspiration proved salient. "In 1895, Conrad wrote: 'Theory is a cold and

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lying tombstone of departed truth'. He thus anticipated, by about eighty-eight years, Edward Said's anti-theoretical theory" (Watts 2002, p. xxvii). Like some anthropologists of his time, Said realized that concrete democratic criticism of empire's insidious presence in culture and science is necessary, and that even "Foucault is often vague about questions of time and agency" (Cooper 1996, p. 15),[4] and – one could add – about hard questions of colonial space.

As a scholar trained in interpretation of texts, Said took the notions of authorship and speech act as vital templates for an original conception of autonomous cultural agency that resisted any kind of materialistic determinism. This led him to admit that "unlike Foucault to whose work I am greatly indebted, I do believe in the determining imprint of individual writers upon the otherwise anonymous collective body of texts constituting a discursive formation like Orientalism" (Said 1994, p. 23). But, as we shall see, his view of modern culture as co-dependent on imperial power and colonial spaces made him wary of any idealistic determinism. When he wrote that "words such as *orient* and *occident* correspond to no stable reality that exists as a natural fact" (1994, p. 331) he was pointing to the problem of ideological deployment of spatio-cultural signifiers by those in power (id est, symbolic violence), not to the allegedly purely constructed character of politico-economic facts. I will come back to this issue below.

My starting argument can be stated simply. If Martina Löw (2001; 2008) made a case for reconnecting *space* to *knowledge* in a constructivist way, Michel Foucault (1976; 1980) for establishing such connection for knowledge and power, and James Scott (2009) for a "radical constructionist" view of power/space nexus, then Said brought those axes together in a new way and invited us to see them as reciprocally conditioned. This is not to say that Said's triangulation was entirely unique. As mentioned above, Foucault (2000, p. 362) did reflect on the relation of space and power/knowlede nexus, and he did recognize the significance of "the spatialization of knowledge [as] one of the factors in the constitution of knowledge as a science", but he admitted he did not systematically advance spatial thinking. Likewise, in his seminal discussion of space and state power James Scott (1998) did tie it to questions of knowledge, albeit mostly as instrument of control and domination (or avoidance thereof). Conversely, while Löw's work is not devoid of power considerations, its key statements prioritized the hitherto under-represented phenomenological effects, not imperial power effects. Thus, the originality of Said's triangulation inheres in its distribution of emphasis and explicit tracing of cultural effects of imperial power/knowledge.

4 Frederick Cooper observes, "there is a need to understand how and in what contingencies disciplinary regimes were forged, as well as to ask how much the disciplinary notions of elites actually shaped the behavior of those being disciplined" (Cooper 1996, p. 15).

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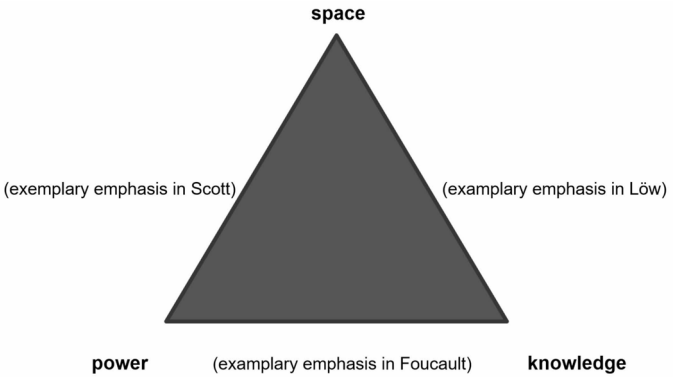
Figure 1: Power/knowledge/space nexus



In the context of the opening observation of this essay, Said's triangulation of empire, geography and culture posits that it has been an effect of Western colonial imperialism (*power*) that its social scientific culture (*knowledge*) rendered the complex meanings of geography (*space*) either peripheral or reductively secondary in its grand narratives. Put differently, Said insisted that without coordinated institutional deployment of cultural goods (for example, mobilization of knowledge and its symbolic boundaries through governments and universities), the instrumental control over geography, both its physical and imaginative resources, would not be strong enough to create an empire. This factor of "symbolic occupation" was not unknown to contemporary historians of European empires (Elliott 2007, p. 30). However, highlighting the symbolic efficacy of cultural ideas and ideals in *all* operations of power proved eye-opening. This is what Said means when he states concisely, "the enterprise of empire depends upon the idea of having an empire" (Said 1993, p. 11). Crucially, Said admitted that he owed that key insight to Joseph Conrad's own wrestling with power of culture which Conrad thematized as "the force of a word" (Conrad 2008, p. 205). And as we shall see, his lifelong reading of Conrad is one of the keys to understanding why and how he linked imperial power, space and culture the way he did.

Joseph Conrad was Said's guide of choice not only in the world of meanings of empire but also in what Francois Dosse (1999) called "empire of meaning". In Said's view, "only Conrad, a master stylist, can be considered along with Kipling, to have rendered the experience of empire as the main subject of his work with such force" (1993, p. 132). Both Conrad's biography and work made him a literary icon whose global peripatetic life of a Polish expatriate from the Russian Empire endowed him with a sceptical and somewhat eccentric vision that few of his British contemporary fellow writers could ever hope to develop. "If we ask why Conrad should have been exceptional in his scepticism about imperial expansion, one answer lies in his Pol-

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ish upbringing" (Watts 2002, p. xii). Perhaps most importantly for this essay, Said felt a deep affinity with Conrad's exilic life trajectory which he understood as the existential circumstance that significantly shapes one's sense of reality as well as ethical sensibility. Coming from periphery to the center, writing in the language of empire rather than in one's mother tongue, being literally and figuratively "out of place" (Said 1999), was crucial for both. As distinguished anthropologist James Clifford writes in his study of the impact of Conrad on anthropology, this way of being "out of place," this sharpened spatio-cultural awareness made for a "peculiarly advantageous 'ethnographic' position," one uniquely suitable for critically analyzing "the constitution of ordered meanings" and reflecting on knowledge "divided by cultural center and periphery" (Clifford 1988, pp. 98–99).

In what follows, I draw on this Saidian perspective to problematize the historically "subordinate role" of space in sociology. I heuristically see this history as one of imperial repression correlated with a curious epistemic myopia characteristic of dominant social scientific formations within modern colonial "centers" of Europe (section two). I then discuss some conceptual resources useful for critiquing this situation as "Eurocentric" predicament, or – more precisely – as an effect of the *Weltanschauung* that Mary Louise Pratt calls "imperial eyes" (Pratt 1992). One such remarkable resource is the conceptual distinction between the "royal/imperial" and "nomadic/minor" science offered by Deleuze and Guattari which I connect to Said's own de-centered critical approach (section three). I subsequently indicate how this "decentralization" of cultural understanding grew partly out of Said's reading of Conrad's classic texts and how it informed his distinctly humanistic dream of a non-imperial social thought (section four). A few concluding remarks are gathered in the fifth section.

The repression and the return of the repressed: A cultural sociological view

Said's main arguments, first presented in *Orientalism* (1994) and elaborated throughout his career, triggered a tidal wave of debates. Apart from its content, it had to do with his radically self-reflexive position of an outsider inside the empire, one who was remarkably close to the Foucaultian figure of *parrhesiast* who speaks truth to power (Foucault 2019; Judt 2008). To him, something like the historical "peripheralization" of space in social sciences would have seemed hardly accidental. On the contrary, it was a symptom, an explainable figuration within the center's official self-conception and its resultant views of the world. Likewise, assuming that the "shift" diagnosed by Löw occurred only in the twenty first century, it is because of what Said diagnosed as "astonishingly direct" connections between imperial power and discursive culture (Said 1993, p. 8). According to Said, these connections were never

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random and often constraining, if not downright repressive, and it is partly for this reason that the shift to reclaim space was so late in coming. Another reason was that *culture* had likewise been a somewhat under-rated and therefore belatedly incorporated category in sociology.

Space and culture

Raumsoziologie, a sociology of space developed by Martina Löw (2001; 2016) was a part of the larger process of effecting that shift toward space. Her new approach drew on sociology of knowledge which sought to denaturalize essentialist notions, including the so-called absolutist notion of space which, as Löw (2021, p. 230) explains, "has been dominant in everyday life". Concretely, this sociology finds the equation of space and territory, or space with physical space, to be conceptually "unhelpful" and "implausible" (Löw 2016; p. 231). Such equations are criticized by her because they regard space as a passive container *in which* social action happens. Instead, Löw argues that for space to become an actionable sociological concept it needs to be seen as relational arrangement of bodies and objects, discursive experiences and stocks of knowledge *through which* both social action and social structure are jointly coordinated and actualized. Thereby, the two sides of the academic coin that I mentioned at the start are counterintuively reconnected.

What is a potential lesson for a cultural sociologist? For one thing, as we must not reduce the signifier to the concrete referent, so is the referent not reducible to its representation. Space is neither a mere container nor an arbitrary metaphor for a Bordieuan social space. It is a sovereign third domain through which the expressive and the material shape one another. Literature and art seem to have known that all along. For example, as Chatwin poetically phrased it, "the song and the land are one" (1987, p. 28). The renowned Polish avant-garde painter and theater director Tadeusz Kantor (1991 [1986], p. 30) directly stated that "space is not a passive container in which we place objects and forms […] space conditions relation of forms". For sociologists to be able to see it, though, we must re-adjust our perception and consider space anew with all its affective and phenomenological meanings, not to regurgitate some of its reified conceptions (Bartmanski and Weidenhaus 2024; Bartmanski and Füller 2023).

But how can such a sociology of space make itself indispensable to the already firmly established relevant fields – decolonial studies, inequality studies, environmental studies, or humanitarian law – that deal with obdurate facts of space and geopolitics, both physical and imaginative as Said called them? How should sociology of space be operationalized to avoid self-referentiality and be of service to these fields? What exactly is the status of the 'physical' and of the territorial aspects of social life in the so conceived constructivist knowledge of space? Even if the unwanted specter of essentialism is kept at a safe distance by strongest axioms of social con-

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structivism, once we admit "space", we must consider its key derivations such as place, ecology, or what James Scott (2009, p. 40) aptly calls the "friction of terrain".[5] As British historian of European empires J.H. Elliott (2007, p. 36) phrased it, even powerful colonizers themselves were subject to "the dissolving effects of space." How can one avoid potential misconceptions in this difficult conceptual territory?

Some answers to all these questions can be derived from the lessons of the parallel development of cultural sociology. Interestingly, to a cultural sociologist, the story of peripheralization and eventual freeing of *space* as a previously suppressed category seems rather familiar. One could posit that *culture* used to be similarly bottled up, or at best deemed a secondary dependent variable, a superstructural epiphenomenon which – like space – was not quite worthy of those "grand houses of social theory" Edward Soja spoke about (1994, p. 135)[6]. As Jeffrey Alexander (2005, p. 22) boldly asserted:

> "Sociology has never allowed culture to speak its name. By contrast, the other arenas of society – whether economics, politics, religion or family – have been thoroughly described, their structures deconstructed and their internal logics articulated, even as analysts have connected such structures to forces 'outside'. This has not been the case for culture. It has been reduced to ideology or to values, and its contents have largely been read off the architecture of other structures, as a reflection or an inverted mirror."

Insofar as mainstream modern sociology conforms to this image, *culture* as category can be said, *mutatis mutandis*, to have had a similarly subordinate status. But it too has been reclaimed, and it also happened only in recent decades, arguably in an even more astonishingly successful manner. Astonishingly, because still in the 1980s "the very phrase 'cultural sociology' seemed an oxymoron […] cultural approach to sociology never existed before – not in the discipline's first hundred and fifty years" (Alexander 2003, pp. 4–5). While this assertion is debatable because it omits contributions of the overshadowed classics such as Florian Znaniecki for whom knowledge and "cultural reality" were crucial (Coser 1968 [1940], p. ix), this story does shed light on yet another example of a subordinated concept and the history of its suppression.

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5 It is for this reason that Scott's "radical constructionsim" may not be as "radical" as his original name suggested; in fact, it would be more in line with his empirical argumentation in this book to call this stance a 'restricted' constructivism. As he wrote to me in one of the last personal messages a couple of months before his passing in July 2024: "Your suggestion of restricted in the sense of geography makes more sense."

6 See also: Reckwitz, Andreas (2008): Die Kontingenzperspektive der »Kultur«. Kulturbegriffe, Kulturtheorien und das kulturwissenschaftliche Forschungsprogramm. In: Reckwitz, Andreas (ed.).: *Unscharfe Grenzen. Perspektiven der Kultursoziologie.* Bielefeld: transcript, pp. 15–45.

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If "cultural sociology is a kind of social psychoanalysis [and] its goal to bring the social unconscious up for view" (Alexander 2003, p. 4), then one can use it to concretely rephrase the "peripheralization of space" as a Saidian imperial repression.

The imperial repression

While Löw's spatial similes of "peripheralization" and "shift" are apt metaphors in this context, they can be heuristically specified as "repression" and the eventual "return of the repressed". A schematic two-pronged Saidian hypothesis may be proposed. First, space was a *peripheral* category in sociology partly because sociology was a self-descriptive power/knowledge of the global imperial *center,* devoted to and profiting from the spatial conquest. Such cultural self-definitions conveniently reified space as a container, and as something to contain! Second, such institutional imperial self-descriptions of sociology were partly predicated on constant referencing, explicit and implied, of the peripheral social "other"*:* The undeveloped, the traditional, the savage, etc. (Said 1994, p. 331). Put differently, the "peripheralization of space" as category was correlatively bound up with the larger repression or marginalization of spatio-cultural peripheries and their knowledges, both the directly colonized and not colonized, real and imaginative, distant and European, which – in Said's view – were exploitable by West European centralized empires not only physically, but also symbolically as their definitional "others", or as constitutive "fringes of modernity" (Weimann 1997). Such a reframing indicates two vital aspects of the problem at hand.

Firstly, it was not necessarily the category of "space" itself that was singularly suppressed; rather the specific reified triangulations of power/knowledge/space rendered any reflexive non-reductive handling of space peripheral in sociology. Secondly, it suggests preliminary answers to questions about etiology of that dysfunctional repression, and about what exactly constituted the "shift" toward space in the 2000s. In a nutshell, plausible answers have to do with colonialism and ongoing decolonization. These questions are not of purely historical value. Instead, presuppositions of sociological research are thus questioned. To check what and how has been sidelined or repressed when space (and culture) got repressed reveals the discipline's formative preoccupations and blindspots, and its enduring entanglements with power structures.

Of course, one could surmise that the problematic peripheralization of space denounced by Löw is just a variation on the old theme, namely that each enlightenment has its blind spot. As the German saying goes, *the foot of the lighthouse stands in the dark*, hiding a certain constitutive meaning [7]. Space was at the foot – quite lit-

7 It is not for nothing that the recent sociological book on forms of sense that hide even behind apparent non-sense is entitled "Der Fuß des Leuchtturms liegt im Dunkel: Eine ernshafte

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erally so – therefore, it remained unaccounted for. Now sociology must finally and fully reclaim the mundane, integrate it with its sacred themes, and move on. But the vexing questions are not thusly done away with. Researching spatial topics was not "repressed" just because "space" was at the foot. It is equally valid to posit that it was at the foot because spatial theorizing was truncated and suppressed; non-utilitarian socio-spatial theorizing was inconvenient for societies involved in extractive colonial systems that repressed a whole range of "peripheries".

Now, if one adopts this heuristic recasting of the peripheralization of space as a form of repression, then it is necessary to understand first, how has "space" remained in the dark of collective sociological subconscious for so long? Second, why could spatial awareness be so effectively suppressed specifically in this discipline? Third, at what exact crucible of place and time was space consigned to a subordinate status within sociology's dictionary? These questions were not left completely unaddressed in contemporary sociology. For example, in the context of German *Raumsoziologie*, one of the answers was proposed by Markus Schroer (2006, pp. 18–26). He rightly pointed out that the marginalization of space (*Raum*) as a category is related to the symbolic pollution of the German Nazi language that explicitly employed it. He also refers to the rigid disciplinary division of labor which anxiously separated sociology from other sciences, and the constraining identification of space with the European territorial notion of nation state in the classical sociological imagination. While this diagnosis is generally correct and particularly pertinent to Germany's experience, it is circumscribed to what one might call a *national-institutional* approach of the post-World War II era. While useful, this approach leaves out one big question: What occurred to permit such a narrowing of scope with such striking efficiency in the first place? Schroer's proposal draws on Doreen Massey's observation that invokes the deep negative connotations of 'space' as something static and inert, as opposed to the positively coded aspects of time like change and progress. As a "child of Enlightenment" (Schroer 2006, p. 20), sociology was heavily reliant on this idealized and ideologized binary coding. But what explains the lasting preponderance of such a slanted coding throughout the twentieth century? If one wishes to dig deeper, to where should the investigation go?

Enter Edward Said and his *spatio-cultural* approach. This perspective emphasized that the problem with otherwise precise sociological self-analyses has been their systematic repression of the fact that several cohorts of classics of sociology worked within the tacit conditions and political constraints of Western imperial colonial politics. This *angles morts* of much of the Western modern social thought is what the Saidian triangulation brings to light. Specifically, the exclusion or repression of intertwined complex dynamics of colonialism, imperialism and nationalism in the

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Studie zu Sinn und Sinnlosigkeit" (English: The foot of the lighthouse stands in the dark: a serious study of sense and senselessness) (Fuchs 2016).

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development of social sciences is correlated to an epistemic myopia of cultural self-description, rather than to neglectful oversight. Symptomatically, Edward Said is mentioned in Schroer's discussion only once, in a footnote, in the context of meanings of geographical "discoveries". No mention of Said's insight that concepts and theories are never innocent and that *how* their "supposed detachment came about is a problem for the sociology of taste and knowledge" (Said 1993, p. 258).

The myopia of cultural self-description

As adumbrated above, Foucault showed that as far as European cultures are concerned, there is no such thing as pure knowledge, and that "discourse is a political commodity" (Gordon 1980, as cited in Foucault 1980, p. 245). At the same time, it is thanks to a post-positivist cultural sociology that sociologists now acknowledge that "social theory is a mental recognition of its time, *not a reflection but a self-reflection* […] neither theory nor history can hope to break out of the self-conceptions of its time" (Alexander 1995, p. 65, emphasis DB). When taken together, these insights imply that sociology has lived with the risk of a distinct epistemic myopia, a self-descriptive role which tended to be tightly circumscribed. Circumscribed, on the one hand, by the interests and desires of watchful power, and on the other hand, by the fact that no eye can see itself directly. Even if the discipline does obtain a reflection of itself, it is prone to narcissistic and idealizing distortions. One can extend this line of reasoning and assert that a concrete power/knowledge nexus – for example certain classical sociological theories – was a cultural self-description.

As sociologists like Löw and Schroer rightly note, in the mainstream sociologies, *time* has been significantly more sacred a category than *space*, which tended to connote the mundane, the passive, the base. The Western European centers from which such ideas emanated saw themselves as the privileged agents of history[8]. The *centers* were viewed as metonymic of the historical progress, whereas the *peripheries* – inside and outside Europe – were seen as mere parts of the more or less distant (battle)ground, id est as synecdochic of the inert malleable space, a *pars pro toto* of the stage on which the imperial performance takes *place*, again quite literally.

This conjunction of the metonymic image of an active, discovering, and male-dominated center, with the synecdochic image of a passive periphery that is 'being discovered' was primordialized in the imperial West as the deep cultural binary. This informed other politico-cultural binaries legitimizing the Western imagination: civil and non-civil, civilized and barbarian, rational and emotional, masculine and feminine, progressive and regressive, scientific and traditional, west and east, north

8 See: Kant, Immanuel (1911 [1784]): Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht. In: Münzer, Paul (ed.): *Kants Populäre Schriften*. Berlin: Georg Reimer Verlag, pp. 206–223.

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and south, city and country, etc., the centuries long "pernicious distinctions" that "have always and everywhere carried a surplus of meaning" (Alexander 2006, p. 199). As Alexander underscores, it was Edward Said whose *Orientalism* provided examples of this process wherein he "iconically demonstrated how Islamic areas of North Africa and the Middle East became simultaneously 'Eastern' and 'other' to Europe's imperial powers" (2006, p. 199). Of course, sociology as a specific power/knowledge formation was hardly unique as a self-referential product of the imperial center. The broader cultural landscape of the Western world which gave rise to it shaped all significant fields of cultural production and impacted various discursive formations, including also the so-called progressive ones. As Edward Said emphasizes:

> "[E]ven oppositional thinkers like Marx and Engels were no less (colonial) than French and British governmental spokesmen; both political camps relied on colonial documents, the fully encoded discourse of Orientalism, for example, and Hegel's view of the Orient and Africa as static, despotic, and irrelevant to world history" (Said 1993, p. 168).

Similarly, Frederick Cooper (1996) pointed out that decolonial and subaltern studies first began to question if "narratives of universal progress defined the framework in which even opposition to colonial rule was asserted" (1996, p. 9). These critical disciplines were "not only against elite nationalism but also against a Marxism which reduces the colonial subject to a stick figure in a drama written elsewhere" (1996, p. 9). "Elsewhere" being the metropolitan centers of imperial power. Moreover, in Said's view, not only scientific discourses but also literary and political ones were subject to the imperial power/knowledge formation. One must reckon with the following:

> "[D]espite their fineness and reticulation, [even] the inclusive cultural forms dealing with peripheral non-European settings are markedly ideological and selective (even repressive), so far as 'natives' are concerned, just as the picturesqueness of nineteenth century colonial painting is, despite its 'realism', ideological and repressive: it effectively silences the Other […] it rules over and represents figured by occupying powers, not by inactive inhabitants" (Said 1993, p. 166).

To be sure, not unlike literature or the arts, sociology was not monolithically imperial, nor were European empires and their ways to "colonize minds" all the same (see Cooper 1996). I will return to that issue later. Then and now, there has been a complex interdependence between the colonized and the colonizers. The asymmetry of epistemic power is not a one-way street of imperial influence; the asymmetry is perpetuated by periphery "without being noticed as such by the members of the peripheral field" (Rodriguez Medina 2014, p. 6). However, Said argues that at the apex of colonialism, the asymmetry was by and large ruthlessly asserted. Furthermore,

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although "European imperialism indeed developed European oppositions between the middle and the end of the [19th] century […] still, people like Froude, Dilke and Seelay represented the overwhelmingly more powerful and successful pro-imperial culture" (Said 1993, p. 166).

Indeed, Charles Wentworth Dilke's 1869 popular book *Greater Britain: A Record of Travel in English Speaking Countries in 1866 and 1867* provides proof for Said's observation. Proof not only in its unapologetically imperial letter and spirit,[9] but also in some of its visual figures. Symptomatically, one of the very few landscape graphics included in the American 1869 edition of the book published in New York features "the American river – the place where gold was first found" (Dilke 1869, p. 158).

The elements of the language and social vision of the British Empire that such works expressed survived well into the twentieth century, recirculating images and notions of empty unoccupied wild territories that await civilizing interventions of Westerners. *A Literary and Historical Atlas of America* published in 1930 in Everyman's Library series provides a telling example. In preface to the revised edition, Samuel McKee, Jr. from the Department of History at Columbia University wrote:

> "Vast lands of almost incalculable potential wealth were unoccupied except wild animals and a sparse Indian population […]. The process has been an uninterrupted movement of expansion and colonization. The transformation, bit by bit, of a wilderness into the category of a Europeanized civilization" (McKee 1930, p. vii).

The disciplinary formation of sociology in Europe at the turn of the 19th and the 20th century and its consolidation in subsequent decades coincided with these cultural imaginaries and the historical culmination of global colonial control exercised by Western Europe and the USA. It is worth recalling the following, nearly half a century after Dilke's grand tour:

> "European empires in 1914 held a grand total of roughly 85% of the Earth as colonies, protectorates, dependencies, dominions, and commonwealths […] [a]nd in Europe itself at the end of the nineteenth century, scarcely a corner of

9 The book's unapologetically imperial mindset is applied not only to "cheaper races" (Dilke 1869, p. 545) from the position of "the grandeur of our own race" (1869, p. ix) but also to Europe and its states, past and contemporary. Dilke concludes his book noting that the Greater Britain he described was "four and a half times as large as the Roman Empire at its greatest extent […] Chili, La Plata and Peru must eventually become English: the Red Indian race that now occupies those countries ca not stand against our colonists […] No possible series of events can prevent the English race itself in 1970 numbering 300 millions of beings […] Italy, Spain, France, Russia become pigmies by the side of such a people" (1869, pp. 545–546).

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> life was untouched by the facts of empire; the economies were hungry […] for hugely profitable land" (Said 1993, p. 8).

Sociology's formative preoccupation with the accelerating race to modernity at the expense of theorizing spatial conditions thus correlated with the high imperial zeitgeist of the second half of the 19th century. "As we know, the great obsession of the nineteenth century was history: themes of development and arrest, themes of crisis and cycle, themes of accumulation of the past" (Foucault 1998, p. 175). It is in this context that grand social scientific stories can be approached not just as "children of Enlightenment" or offspring of modernity but as distinctly myopic, even if sometimes insightful, visions of "imperial eyes" (Pratt 1992).

"Imperial eyes" and the return of the repressed

Foucault had a point, and so did Said, when they connected culture to power. They were not the first to notice, though.

> "Long before the powerful theoretical proposals of Michel Foucault made 'knowledge' a term that seemed irrevocably linked to power, and before Edward Said so provocatively opened up discussion of the relations between power and knowledge in colonial discourses, Bernard Cohn had begun to apply an anthropological perspective to the history of colonialism and its forms of knowledge" (Dirks 1996, as cited in Cohn 1996, p. ix).

But it needs to be acknowledged that between the seminal statements of Frantz Fanon and empirical studies of Cohn and Said, "the cultural effects of colonialism have too often been ignored or *displaced* into the inevitable logic of modernization and world capitalism" (Dirks 1996, p. ix; emphasis DB). Western empires defined themselves as historical, even providential agents of superlatively connoted modernizing development, each of which happened to be among the classic themes of sociology. The focus was on the temporally defined transformations, not on spatially elaborated environments of action. The emphasis on linear time/history yielded all kinds of 'progressive' narratives, both affirmative and critical. Research on space was "ignored or displaced", as Dirks argues, or ridiculed as "reactionary", as Foucault recalled, partly because it would involve thinking in terms of simultaneity and nonlinearity abhorred by classic historiographic notions of causality; moreover, it would likely be conducive to facing "the heart of darkness" which kept reminding that "the conquest of the earth is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much" (Conrad cited in Said, 1993, pp. vii). Those who did look were never a majority, and in the zeitgeist of that brilliant cohort of Conrad (1857–1924), Freud (1856–1939), Durkheim

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(1858–1917) or Simmel (1858–1918), the openly anti-imperialist subversive thinkers were a narrow minority indeed, and they mostly hailed from subaltern milieux.

The above quote from Conrad's iconic novel *Heart of Darkness* was used by Said as the epigram at the start of his *Culture and Imperialism* to frame one of his leading arguments there, that "we must not forget that there was very little domestic resistance to these empires, although they were very frequently established and maintained under adverse and even disadvantageous conditions" (Said 1993, p. 10). Despite their critical aspirations and comprehensive ambitions, classic sociologies also did not decisively break out of the imperial self-conceptions of their formative time and – one must add – of *their place*. Said (2014 [2003]) reiterates in one of his last lectures titled *Freud and the Non-European*:

> "Freud's ethnographic curiosity hardly goes beyond looking at and citing aspects of these cultures (sometimes with numbing repetitiveness) as supporting evidence of his argument [….] To Freud, the Pacific, Australian, and African cultures he took so much from had been pretty much left behind or forgotten, like the primal horde, in the march of civilization". (2014, p. 15)

It is worth adding that this was the case despite the fact that Freud was seriously challenged by the master ethnographer of his day Bronislaw Malinowski who explicitly based his "ethnographic self-fashioning" on Conrad (Clifford 1988, p. 92).

If the protracted peripheralization of space was correlated with the myopia of self-description of the imperial power/knowledge nexus, it was not a coincidence that the recent spatial turn in social sciences was approximately coeval with the decisive postcolonial turn, each of which gained critically important momentum in the 1980s and 1990s (Bachmann-Medick 2006, p. 185, p. 284). Likewise, the emergence of that "shift" to space and the turn to decolonial critique can also be correlated. This shift toward systematic thematization of spatiality of social life can be seen as a symptomatic "return of the repressed" whose emergence has been decisively aided by the pressure from the peripheries. It is not accidental that powerful impulses for decolonial critique first entered the social sciences of the center not from within but from without: Out of experience with imperial repression and its double standards, notably through thinkers hailing from "peripheral" colonial spaces that were ignored or seen as undeveloped in sociology. In this respect, consider Aime Cesaire (1913–2008) and Frantz Fanon (1925–1961) from Martinique, or the Jamaican British sociologist Stuart Hall (1932–2014) who catalyzed the development of the seminal Birmingham School of Cultural Studies. Even if such critiques did operate from within a center of the imperial world, they emerged from subaltern groups. Think about Harvard educated Black American sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963), and his trenchant statement about the position of black person in the imperial world, "a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets

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him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self *through the eyes of others*" (Du Bois 1996 [1903], p. 5; emphasis DB).

For Du Bois, whose masterpiece *The Souls of Black Folk* "has not been generally known as a classic in American Literature," (Gibson 1996, p. xxxv) the imperial myopia of sociology was closely related to the silencing powers of the larger cultural system of the West that he so penetratingly analyzed. He paid a personal price for it too. "Of course, the same tides against which Du Bois fought during his lifetime are responsible for his not having received the recognition he so clearly deserves" (1996, p. xxxv). Moreover, Du Bois saw a distinct irony of a culture obsessed with history of which sociology was but a part:

> "The silently growing assumption of this age is that the probation of races is past, and that the backward races of today are of proven inefficiency and not worth the saving. Such an assumption is the arrogance of peoples irreverent toward Time and ignorant of deeds of men [….] Two thousands years ago such dogmatism would have scouted the idea of blond races ever leading civilization. So woefully unorganized is sociological knowledge that the meaning of progress, the meaning of 'swift' and 'slow' in human doing, and the limits of human perfectability, are veiled, unanswered sphinxes on the shores of science" (Du Bois 1996, p. 214).

Du Bois's view was exceptional and ahead of its time rather than typical in sociology. Subaltern or peripheral critiques of empire first thrived in newer, more decisively decentering disciplines such as cultural studies or comparative literature. "Post-colonialism" has been "stronger in cultural studies and literature than in science and technology studies" which "are insensitive towards post-colonial legacies" (Rodriguez Medina 2014, p. 2, p. 4).[10] For instance, it was cultural scholar Paul Gilroy (1993), a student of Stuart Hall, whose *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* decisively pushed Du Bois's work nearly a century later in an explicitly spatio-cultural direction through the exploration of "diasporic culture" and its meanings. In short, for space to become less peripheral as concept in sociology, sociology first needed to become more decentered as a cultural self-description (id est, less centralized and less ethno-centric). As Bulgarian-French cultural theorist Tzvetan Todorov (1982 [1977], p. 223) put it, what was urgently required was "the exposure of a series of 'centrisims': ethnocentrism, anthropocentrism, adultocentrism (the word is Piaget's), logocentrism."

Critical and profoundly revisionist programs that all these authors called for have proven to be a protracted, vexing challenge for the mainstream sociology of

10 For example, the German publication *Ränder der Moderne: Repräsentation und Alterität im (post)kolonialen Diskurs* (Weimann 1997) published by Suhrkamp is a relevant early volume that features mostly literary scholars.

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the 20th century, partly because sociology was self-descriptive not only in terms of its Western-centric optics (id est, relying on the few "canonized" sources of logocentric paradigms and methods), but also in terms of the predominant directions of its gaze (id est, the distribution of empirical emphasis). Sociology excelled mostly in self-analysis with a distinct textual fixation, often ignoring illiterate *others*. It was talking mostly about its restrictively defined *internal* 'modernization' issues, largely bracketing the *external* colonized 'traditional' communities and the "dissolving effects" of their more or less remote spaces. Without colonization, however, the imperial centers possibly would not be able to develop all signature features of their own modern societies. As Foucault (2003, p. 103) observed in his 1976 lecture at College de France, "it should never be forgotten that while colonization obviously transported European models to other continents, it also had a considerable boomerang effect on the mechanisms of power in the West. A whole series of colonial models was brought back to the West, and the result was that the West could practice something resembling colonization, or an internal colonialism, on itself." It is precisely this context that the comparative literature scholar Mary Louise Pratt (1992) thematizes in her tellingly titled book *Imperial Eyes as* "the vast, discontinuous and over-determined history of imperial meaning-making" (p. 4). In her view that which was repressed by the imperial narratives proved crucial for historical understanding of "modern history".

> "For what were the slave trade and the plantation system if not massive experiments in social engineering and discipline, serial production, the systematization of human life, the standardizing of persons? Experiments that proved profitable beyond any European's wildest dreams. The wealth that fomented the French Revolution was created in Santo Domingo, which by 1760s was the most productive place the earth had ever seen. Plantation agriculture stands out clearly as a crucial setting for the Industrial Revolution and the mechanization of production. Similarly, even by the early seventeenth century, there were no bureaucracies like colonial bureaucracies" (1992, p. 4)

Said, on his part, offers a Conradian reading of this spatio-economic constellation and puts an important epistemic/cultural spin on it.

> "[T]he authority of the observer, and of European geographic centrality, is buttressed by a cultural discourse relegating and confining the non-European to a secondary racial, cultural, ontological status. Yet this secondariness is, paradoxically, essential to the primariness of the Europeans" (Said 1993, p. 59).

What scholars like Foucault, Pratt and Said underscore are not narrowly historical issues and their literary or philosophical expressions. Rather, insofar as these thinkers catalyzed the return of the repressed spatio-cultural themes, they achieved

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it because they saw continuities of specific power structures in Western systems of knowledge. While "in our time, direct colonialism has largely ended; imperialism, as we shall see, lingers where it has always been, in a kind of general cultural sphere as well as in specific political, ideological, economic and social practices" (Said 1993, p. 9).

That "overdetermined history of imperial eyes" (Pratt 1992, p. xx) was one of the problems that inspired Said's continual return to historical icons like Conrad. To discuss the epistemic myopia of what Todorov (1982) dubbed "centrist" legacies is to recognize the persistent, often subliminal effects of imperial ethnocentric vision. But this is not yet quite enough for a full-fledged criticism of Saidian cast. A deeper characterization is in order, one which can provide a model of how the myopic kinds of Eurocentric knowledges (*savoir, Wissen*) rely on specific spatially situated kinds of "will to knowledge" (*connoisance, Erkenntnis*)(Foucault 1976). This leads us to a consideration of the key distinction of "royal" and "minor" sciences by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.

Beyond the "royal" Eurocentrism

In their landmark work *A Thousand Plateaus,* Deleuze and Guattari (2002 [1987], pp. 361–372) distinguish between two kinds of knowledges: One they call variably as "state", "imperial" or "royal" sciences, and another they call "minor" or "nomadic" sciences. Importantly, they couple them with distinct assumptions about space. The latter is an "approximate" kind of knowledge which assumes "smooth", heterarchical, centered conception of space. The former assumes what they call "striated" (metric) conception of space which is "counted in order to be occupied." It "only tolerates perspective if it is static, divesting it of its heuristic capacities", and which "implies the permanence of a fixed point of view that is external." They contrast the "imperial" or "royal" knowledge with the "nomadic" one by saying that "what is proper to royal science, to its theorematic or axiomatic power, is to isolate all operations from the conditions of intuition, making them true intrinsic concepts or 'categories'." (2002, p. 373). On the other hand, what they define as "imperial" knowledge seems to align well with the classic sociological outlook. Notwithstanding its sense of modern crisis and multiparadigmatic nature, sociology seems to have been more in the business of consolidating itself as a "royal science" rather than a "nomadic" one.

Of course, the story is not so straightforward. Deleuze and Guattari point to an important dynamic that complicates the picture:

> "State science continually imposes its form of sovereignty on the inventions of nomad science […] it turns the rest into a set of strictly limited formulas without any real scientific status, or else simply represses and bans it […] most signifi-

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> cant are perhaps *borderline* phenomena in which nomad science exerts pressure on State science, and, conversely, States science appropriates and transforms the elements of nomad science" (2002, p. 362; emphasis DB).

No wonder Edward Said (1993) regarded "this immensely rich book" as "mysteriously suggestive", even though he found it "not easily accessible" (1993, p. 331). Moreover, he noted that it jointly develops concepts of "movement and space to a highly eccentric study" (1993, p. 331). Echoing Malinowski's criticism of Freud, Said saw Deleuze and Todorov as rare and laudable exception among the major French theoreticians who were "churning out theories of Marxism, language, psychoanalysis and history with an implied applicability to the whole world" (1993, p. 278). It is hardly surprising that *A Thousand Plateaus,* despite its abstruse character, attracted Said's attention, since much of his own work epitomized the decentering critical role of "borderline" sciences that connected different but always "overlapping territories", and seemingly distant cultures. He emphasized that "it is difficult to connect these different realms, to show the involvements of culture with expanding empires but we must attempt this [….] Territory and possessions are at stake, geography and power. Everything about human history is rooted in the earth" (Said 1993, p. 7).

Crucially for the present essay, Said saw his task as exposing "a quite serious split in our critical consciousness" because it enabled different prominent Western authors to elaborate upon their aesthetic theories "without giving attention to the authority that their ideas simultaneously bestowed on the subjugation of inferior peoples and colonial territories" (1993, p. 12). He was careful to add that "this by no means involves hurling critical epithets at European, or generally, Western art and culture by way of a wholesale condemnation. Not at all" (1993, p. 12). But what this approach did involve was incessantly scrutinizing the effects of that split. Among the most interesting effects in Said's view were the distortions and repressions of the "royal" Eurocentrism. It is precisely through his insights into the worldview of the otherwise powerful thinkers active in European centers, from Tocqueville and Marx to Gide and Camus, that Said (1993, p. 207, p. 241) revealed ethnocentric limits to these most iconic emancipatory modern visions. He pointed to the fact that while colonialism was debated in Europe, "an imperialist and Eurocentric framework is implicitly accepted" (1993, p. 240). He argued that even the greatest embodiments of Western democratic values – such as Tocqueville's work exhibit – have clear limits imposed by colonialism and attendant double standards of evaluation, the double standards typical of what Pratt called "imperial eyes".

> "[A]s one reads Tocqueville on Algeria, the very norms with which he had humanely demurred at American malfeasance are suspended for French actions […] the apparent universalism of his language for America is denied, willfully denied application to his own country" (Said 1996, p. 92).

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In short, Said emphasized that most of the so-called canonical representatives of modern thought were, despite obvious differences between them, unmistakable emanations of the male, metropolitan, mostly north-western European milieux shaped by the "long" colonial 19th century and the ethnocentric idealization couched in "an urban lettered bourgeois discourse" (Pratt 1992, p. 34)[11]. This corresponds with Löw's observation that throughout the second half of the 20th century, which was shaped by what she calls the experience of the "long sixties" (Löw 2023, p. 21), the main themes of linear historical temporality – for example, evolution and revolution, late- and post-modernity – would overshadow the themes of spatiality of human life.[12]

It is partly for this reason that Said (1993, p. 278) deplored the fact that in the 1990s even Frankfurt School critical theory was "stunningly silent on racist theory, anti-imperialist resistance, and oppositional practice in the empire". Leading figures like Jürgen Habermas claimed to "have nothing to say to anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist struggles in the Third World, even if – Habermas added – 'I am aware of the fact that this is a eurocentrically limited view'" (1993, p. 278). Importantly, Said goes on to admit that "much the same thing can be said of most Anglo-Saxon cultural theory" (1993, p. 278). This brings us back to his contention of the fundamentally imperial/modern, rather than the merely nationalist character of the reductive repression of the spatial, and therefore to the "necessity of a rigorously anti-imperialist position" (Said 1993, p. 241).[13] Such a position necessitates a thorough critique of Eurocentrism – both its subconscious and conscious layers – embedded in much of the modern Western sociology. A tradition of anti-ethnocentric social thinking that Scott dubbed "decentering" is now as impactful as ever. The chain of interconnected works of celebrated cultural anthropologists – from Pierre Clastres to Scott, from Bernard Cohn to David Graeber – have consolidated such a view.

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11 Said points out that also Foucault's oeuvre remains rather strictly confined to specific imperial contexts, although we now do have evidence to believe that the Foucault of power/knowledge was influenced partly by his experience of 1968 in Tunisia, not in Paris (see Schroeder 2023). Towards the last fin de siecle, sociologists themselves problematized the fact that many notable producers of grand sociological narratives were mostly preoccupied with – and saw themselves as parts of – "progress" within the modern state-dominated culture, understood as the "distinguishing notion" on the list of the "underlying motifs of the twentieth century" (Alexander 1995).

12 This timeline may need to be qualified as part of the unique disciplinary experience in Germany where sophisticated sociological accounts have tended to explicitly privilege French, English and German traditions while discussing the cultural self-conception of their discipline (Lepenies 2002 [1985]).

13 This contention is confirmed today by other social scientists in their respective fields, for example by inequality scholar Mike Savage (2021: 198) who writes about "the return of the classic divides that characterized imperial modernity."

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This view questions seemingly obvious analytic categories of Western European social sciences (for example, the classic Weberian notion of power). Behind these lurk unexamined assumptions which, when examined, look more like *localized* political dogmas than conceptual hypotheses. This kind of critique is a legacy of the French student of Claude Levi-Strauss, Pierre Clastres, quoted by Scott in the sole opening epigram to his book, *The Art of Not Being Governed*:

> "Ethnology wants to situate itself directly within the realm of universality without realizing that in many respects it remains firmly entrenched in its particularity and that its pseudo-scientific discourse quickly deteriorates into genuine ideology […] it is not a scientific proposition to determine that some cultures lack political power because they show nothing similar to what is found in our culture. It is instead the sign of a certain conceptual poverty. Ethnocentrism is not, therefore, a negligible hindrance to reflection, and the importance of its implications is greater than one might think." (Clastres 1989 [1974], p. 17).

In sum, Said's work on intersections of imperial power, space, and culture provided a contrapuntal statement to the "royal" Western ethnocentrisms and supported a progressive reception of spatial turn in human sciences of the 21st century. He challenged social scientists, both epistemically and normatively, to consider that "royal" disciplines such as "economics, politics, and sociology in the modern academy are ideological sciences," (Said 1994, p. 9). Hence the plea for a new dream of non-imperial cultural theory, and a new "democratic criticism" (Said 2004). This critique warns that some effects of ethnocentric visions remain active today; they exist just below the threshold of scholarly attention, subject to inertial epistemic myopia. Some ethnocentric visions are present even in such valid and important spatial categories of critique like *Eurocentrism*. "Europe" here remains an unduly truncated spatio-cultural signifier that stands for the particularized visions stemming from just a select few imperial states. It obscures a constellation of royal Eurocentrism in the Deleuzian sense, it is a conceptual totalization that glosses over (and thus represses) the oppositional character of domestic outliers as well as "primitivist" visions (Hiller 1991). By the same token, it also tends to gloss over differences between various imperial state systems, such as Great Britain, France and Germany. That is to say, thinking simply in terms of "Eurocentrism" has a liability of "extensive dependence on the model of the British Empire" (Berman 1998, p. 16). Arguments of similar kind – but with a decisively more international perspective than Berman's that focuses only on Germany – can be and have been made about the "West" and European Enlightenment (Graeber 2007, 2019) as well as the Northern European assertion of "civilizational centrality" and its adoption of the legacy of the Mediterranean (Pratt 1992, p. 10).

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Of course, sociology of the second half of the 20th century was not entirely oblivious to the traditions of critical debates and the skepticism they entailed, so it did generate important self-critical discourses as well. For example, it was Edward Said's colleague at Columbia University, Immanuel Wallerstein, who, in Said's view (2004, pp. 52–53), offered "sustained intellectual critique of Eurocentrism". Said streamlines one part of this critique in his last book, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*:

> "[S]ocial science (and I would argue, the modern humanities) emerged in response to European problems (in basically five countries, France, Great Britain, Germany, Italy and the United States) at a point in history when Europe dominated the whole world-system. It was virtually inevitable that its choice of subject matter, its theorizing, its methodology, and its epistemology, all reflected the constraints of the crucible within which it was born. However, in the period since 1945, the decolonization of Asia and Africa, along with the sharply accentuated political consciousness of the non-European world everywhere, has affected the world of knowledge" (Wallerstein 1997, pp. 93–94, additions in parentheses by Said 1994, p. 135).

In a similar vein, James Scott argued that spatio-cultural categories of the Western thought that were "normative for the twentieth century nation-state" are rarely adequate in other socio-spatial contexts (Scott 2009, p. 61). In particular, what seems to have escaped many sociologists in the past is the fact that when it comes to the canonized expressions of Western "sociological imagination", one would look in vain for a great plurality of non-imperial European narratives, or for subjugated European oral histories and voices without backing of a powerful state, let alone those deprived of their own state or deemed to be *outside* altogether. If we recall the adage by Yiddish scholar Max Weinreich that language is a dialect with an army, we begin to see Said as someone who is fundamentally anti-ethnocentric. This is because he believes that knowledges of "dialects" and *minor* languages, or otherwise undisciplined nomadic idioms, are not inferior to knowledge of those who inhabit imperial centers and their languages. Furthermore, two-way non-hegemonic translations between those spheres are not only possible, but necessary. As long as geopolitical asymmetries exert their pressure, speech acts from the margins or fringes are indispensable to realize Said's dream of non-imperial thinking within *centers*. Said's own work is an example of how such off-center perspectives prove invaluable for the task of analyzing historical conjunctions of empire, geography, and culture in a constructive rather than narrowly critical way. This work and its cultural reflexivity were not entirely unprecedented though. One of the key sources for Said was Joseph Conrad's inexhaustible ironic vision.

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Edward Said, Joseph Conrad, and non-imperial thinking

Jozef Konrad Korzeniowski, known to global audiences as Joseph Conrad, was for many reasons Said's lifelong literary companion and a flagship inspiration. "A Polish expatriate" and a "master stylist" of English language, Conrad was to Said a curiously relatable author, one who "also had an extraordinarily persistent residual sense of his own exilic marginality" (Said 1993, pp. 23–24, p. 132). Unlike ancient Roman writers who were exiled from Rome to peripheries of the empire, Conrad and Said were more like outsiders inside empire's center, feeling somewhat "out of place" there. This overtly spatial metaphor was then used by Said (1999) as the title of his memoir. But insofar as they felt so displaced in the *center*, this condition was inextricably connected to their intimate knowledge and experience of *peripheries*.

Born and raised in Jerusalem to Christian Palestinian parents in 1935, Said and his family had to leave the city in 1948 for Cairo, just six months before the British terminated their colonial mandate in the region. Cairo, in his memory, was a city with more grandeur and wealth, and had a less homogenous population than Jerusalem, which was then still "made up mainly of Palestinians" (Said 1999, p. 111). From there he embarked on a cosmopolitan educational path that eventually led him to Princeton and Harvard. Said's preoccupation with Conrad's writings culminated in a doctoral thesis that became his first book (Said 2008 [1966]). The condition of exile as a central inspiration for a literary voice from the fringes of modernity to address imperial centers' colonial core was not the exclusive province of Conrad. The Guyanese writer Wilson Harris, a contemporary of Said, directly tackled space and colonialism (Wicht 1997, p. 210). Why Conrad then?

Timing is key. Conrad had made his powerful statements much earlier, before World War I, writing at the peak of the colonial era with unparalleled irony and intellectual engagement that profoundly impressed great figures such as Bertrand Russell (Najder 1980, p. 174). Crucially, "Conrad called himself 'homo duplex': the double man, [and] there are many senses in which that epithet is apt," and many ways in which it translated into recurrent themes in his works (Watts 1991, pp. x–xi). Perhaps it was Conrad's own version of what Dubois called "double consciousness", one shaped by a long trajectory of an expatriate from an imperial semi-periphery who then shook an imperial center to the core, and which made him intriguing and enduringly relatable to Said. Born Polish in the Russian Empire that joined the Prussian and Austrian empires in the dissolution of Polish Kingdom at the end of the eighteenth century, Conrad is said to have "felt intensely loyal both to Poland and to his adopted country" (Watts 1991, p. x).[14] At the same time, he was detached from his noble social origins and explicitly anti-bourgeois in his sentiments (Najder 1972, p. xxvi–xxviii). This geo-cultural background of Conrad's biography could not have

14 Conrad took British nationality in 1886 and renounced the Russian citizenship.

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been lost on Said who was born in the British mandate of Palestine that had been created in the wake of the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement: The secret treaty that divided the Levantine provinces between the United Kingdom and France with assent from the Russian Empire. As a U. S. American citizen who had strong ties to Palestine but was nevertheless an epitome of the "rootless cosmopolitan" (Judt 2008, p. 163), Said studied closely Conrad's being *inside* the empire of his day and yet not *of it*, a spatio-cultural condition of paramount importance for a mysteriously suggestive writer who declared that he "lives in his work […] but the disclosure is not complete" (Conrad 2008, p. 206).

These and other parallels between Conrad and Said were acknowledged not only by Said himself, but also interpreters of his work (Rubin 2008 [1966], p. ix–x). Even if such parallels should not be overstretched, Said's lifelong insistence on Conrad's significance is irrefutable: To him, "no other writer is so capable of conveying the 'aura of dislocation, instability and strangeness' […] the sense of being in and out of language, being in and out of worlds […] just gripped me more than any other writer" (2008, p. x). Consequently, Said considered Conrad a perennial literary classic, an ironically "eccentric" and unlikely chronicler of empire. He was "a French-speaking, self-exiled, extremely articulate Pole who had been a sailor and was now a writer of so-called adventure stories" in Great Britain; a sailor who befriended Bertrand Russell and made an overwhelming impression on the famous philosopher upon their first meeting, such that Russell, who noted his "aristocratic" conduct that "had nothing to do with the sea", continued their exchange in person and in letters, which indicates that Conrad's mind was indeed complex enough to not be "patronizingly" dismissed "as merely the creature of his own time" (Said 2008, p. 4, p. 14, 2012 [2001], p. 27; Najder 1980, p. 174; 8). To Said, not only this eccentricity of Conrad's literary voice was of high import, but also the related fact that his "stake in the structures of experience he had created was absolutely crucial" (Said 2008, p. 12).

Conrad's formal allegiance as subject of the British empire bore the mark of its colonial time, but the substance of his existence as person was more nomadic than royal. Unavoidably shaped by imperial historicity of that period, his vision of space was nonetheless extraordinarily ironic, wide and mobile, transcending the ostensible confines of his stories, turning the sailor's gaze *from the water toward the land* into a potent transcultural metaphor, one that prefigured the ethnographic pluralization of container-like space into spatial figures such as territory or route (*Bahn*) as conceived of by Löw. Said seems to have sympathized with Conrad's explicit sense of estrangement and uprootedness:

> "[H]aving broken away from my origins […] removed by great distances from such natural affections as were still left to me, and even estranged, in a measure, from them by the totally unintelligible character of the life which had seduced me so

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> mysteriously from my allegiance, I may safely say that through the blind force of circumstances the sea was to be all my world." (Conrad 2008, p. 207)

Moreover, as I indicated at the start of this essay, Said was both inspired and troubled by the ambivalence of Conrad's solitary vision which famously thematized the seeming impossibility to describe the life sensations of one's existence. Yet Said could not have missed the fact that Conrad was nevertheless perpetually honing his craft, incessantly "trying to tell a dream" and to convey the ineffable, however imperfectly. As Paul Gilroy (1993, p. 73, 77) observed, the "unspeakable" is "not inexpressible". This sentiment – which for Said is at once of epistemic and ethical significance – is present also in Jean Genet's remark quoted above, one that he symptomatically makes at the outset of his last book which Said found so singularly audacious and important. In short, even if Conrad's literary existentialism assumed that "we live as we dream – alone" (1993, p. 24), he still felt compelled to share his dreams and sensations, and he insisted to write about the horrors and meanings of empire in the language of the empire. And so did Said.

To write about any empire in empire's language, to speak against it with it, to try to tell truth of the *margins* through the languages of the *center*, to incessantly bear witness to what one sees as heart of darkness, and to reflect about the status of language along the way; all this was a kind of passionate Weberian vocation for both Conrad and Said. Since the latter could learn from the former, this vocation came to fruition with a seemingly unprecedented force actualized by Said along two major lines of thought: writing as an autonomous cultural act, and speaking truth to power as an autonomous ethical act, each of which implied a series of distinctly spatial tropes and commitments.

Epistemic stance: The relative autonomy of culture

Inhabiting at least two very different linguistic spaces as a native, yet "always at a slight tangent to his affinities," (Judt 2008, p. 165), Said treated narratives not as mere aestheticized mirrors of reality, but as invested cultural constructions of power that assist the (re)production of space. By binding cultural knowledge to worldly practices of power, he at the same time saw cultural discourses as having their own logic, not unlike Löw who also saw urban spaces as endowed with *Eigenlogik*. In *Culture and Imperialism*, he argued that "culture" understood as "all those practices of description, communication and representation have *relative autonomy* from the economic, social and political realms" (Said 1993, p. xii, emphasis DB).[15] Importantly, though,

15 Note again the correspondence to the aforementioned reclamation of culture as a formerly subordinate category. Roughly in similar period cultural sociologists also insisted on culture's "relative autonomy" (Alexander 2003).

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Said aimed to be more of a phenomenologist of language than a strong structuralist. Tony Judt noted:

> "[R]adical antifoundationalism, the notion that everything is just a linguistic effect, struck him as shallow and 'facile': human rights, as he observed on more than one occasion, 'are not cultural or grammatical things, and when violated they are as real as anything we encounter'" (2008, p. 164).

In other words, his was a carefully calibrated, *restricted* constructivism, one which nevertheless radicalized both the culturalization of space and spatialization of culture, and which took both narrative and space seriously. According to such a restricted constructivism, the song and the land are indeed one despite being analytically distinct. To realize this approach means to flesh out a non-imperial social theory, one whose success critically depends on problematizing and redressing asymmetries between *centers* and *peripheries*.

Said's aforementioned notion of culture as symbolic practices that have "relative autonomy" is rooted in Conradian notion of the power of words. "You cannot fail to see the power of mere words […] shouted with perseverance, with ardour, with conviction, [they] set whole nations in motion and upheaved the dry, hard ground on which rests our whole social fabric" (Conrad 2008, p. 205). Unpacked and applied in Said's *Culture and Imperialism* and mediated through his reading of seminal anticolonial authors such as Frantz Fanon, this insight helped define not only Saidian style of non-imperial interpretation but many subsequent efforts of this kind until today. Consider Ukrainian writer and literary critic Oksana Zabuzhko, and her commentary published in the *Times Literary Supplement* in the wake of the Bucha massacre:

> "[H]ow the West could have become so culturally disoriented that, for more than twenty years, it stubbornly ignored a textbook example of the growth and ripening of a new totalitarianism in Russia […] all this could have been understood much earlier if only a separation had not been made between the Russian state and Russian literature, and if it had been understood that literature is of one flesh with the society for which and about which it writes" (2022, p. 7).

For Said to either subordinate culture and space to power, or to separate them from other domains of life was equally problematic; hence his aforementioned triangulation. But, in the zeitgeist dominated by debates on infinite shades of linguistic constructivism, his skepticism toward abstraction and distaste for royal academic jargon assumed special epistemic and ethical urgency. To him, the postmodern antifoundationalism was an epistemic exaggeration that required not only a diagnosis but a therapy. The relative autonomy of culture was Said's attempt to avoid the ide-

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alist bias and the realist reduction, both equally prone to co-optation by imperial power. Said's reading of Conrad aimed at distilling the power of words to move people, the power of culture and knowledge which shuns any epistemic exaggeration. This approach is traceable to Conrad's controlled intellectual estrangement. "In order to move others deeply we must deliberately allow ourselves to be carried away beyond the bounds of our normal sensibility [...] but the danger lies in the writer becoming the victim of his own exaggeration" (Conrad 2008, p. 209).

In Said's time, one major challenge that he viewed as a concretization of this dilemma was related to the fact that Western empire as cultural space exhibited an overly nominalist compulsion in doing theory and an overly realist compulsion in doing politics. He wished to redress this imbalance.

> "All the energies poured into critical theory, into novel and demystifying theoretical praxes like the new historicism and deconstruction and Marxism have avoided the major, I would say determining, political horizon of modern Western culture, namely imperialism. This massive avoidance has sustained a canonical inclusion and exclusion" (Said 1993, p. 60).

This was an epistemic statement that echoed Clifford Geertz's observation:

> "[T]he gap between engaging others where they are and representing them where they aren't, always immense but *not much noticed*, has suddenly become extremely visible. What once seemed only technically difficult, has turned morally, politically, and epistemologically delicate" (Geertz 1988, p. 130; emphasis DB).

Said wished to address that gap too. Geertz merely related the "decline of faith in unsituated knowledge" to the fall of "imperialism in its classical form," (1988, pp. 130–131), whereas Said offered a new non-imperial form of knowledge to expose and critique the ongoing incarnations of imperialism. Said saw this new form of knowledge as key to his ethics of democratic criticism.

Ethical stance: Space-conscious critical humanism

Having never really made himself fully at home within the empire, Said seems instead to have embraced Conrad's peculiar experience of what George Lukacs called 'transcendental homelessness', one that tends to be "oppositional" and makes one "write back at an imperial discourse" (Clifford 1988, p. 266). Said defined cultural criticism as something that approximates the definition of parrhesia which Foucault (2019) worked out toward the end of his life, going beyond the power/knowledge paradigm. Indeed, among the reasons for Said's reputation of "one of the most

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influential scholars of the late twentieth century," Tony Judt cites precisely "his authentic voice of the independent critic speaking truth to power," one which broached highly politicized topics that "many people would prefer to avoid" (Judt 2008, p. 166, p. 176)[16]. This included speaking about interconnected issues of space and politics, and it meant two things. First, in his own research, until the end, Said insisted that humanism of scholarship is:

> "[T]he means, perhaps the consciousness we have for providing that kind of antinomian or oppositional analysis between the space of words and their various origins and deployments in physical and social place, from text to actualized site of either appropriation or resistance, to transmission, to reading and interpretation, from private to public, from silence to explication and utterance, and back again, as we encounter our own silence and mortality – all of it occurring in the world, on the ground of daily life" (Said 2004, p. 83).

Second, although praised for his ability of cosmopolitan bridge-building (Barenboim and Said 2004 [2001]), in his scholarly critiques Said used strong language designed to move others, and had little patience for "rarified kinds of writing" (2004, p. 17). These, in his view, were widespread in human sciences and guilty of the meretricious glossing over the spatial and practical aspects of life. Pure theory seemed to him dangerously close to pure obnubilation. Consider an excerpt from a 1993 interview with Joseph A. Buttigieg and Paul A. Bove:

> "Conrad says he was moved by a few very simple ideas. I feel the same thing. For intellectual discourse, and for intellectual activity, one has to be stimulated not by highfalutin ideas in the appallingly solemn Habermasian sense – you know, the public sphere and the discourse of modernity, which is all just hot air, as far as I'm concerned – because there is no moral center to what Habermas does. I think there has to be a kind of moral view, as you find it in Chomsky or Bertrand Russell […] The problem in this country [USA] is geography. The dispersion […] there isn't a sense of commonality […] Also, the usurpation of the public space, of the common space, by the media and the corporations, is really very, very, very disheartening […] Those are some of the questions that need to be talked about. Not further refinements of the fifth seminar of Lacan or that sort of thing; I find that to be extremely distracting and pulling the wool over people's eyes" (Said 2004 [1993], p. 205).

16 As Judt adds, although Said was a "consistent critic of political violence" driven by a "deeply felt humanistic impulse", he had "firsthand experience" of violence directed at him, for example when he and his family received death threats and when his office at Columbia University in New York City where he worked his whole life was fire bombed.

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It is in this context that Said's lifelong preoccupation with Conrad appears clearer. Unlike the critiques of many seemingly progressive Western social thinkers, the critical but anti-revolutionary temperament of Conrad offered a template for ethical stance that Said found closer to his brand of humanism. One of the statements of Said's that illustrates this approach can be found in his text, *Through Gringo Eyes: With Conrad in Latin America* (see Said 2012, pp. 277–278):

> "Conrad was both an anti-imperialist and an imperialist – progressive when it came to rendering the self-confirming, self-deluding corruption of the West's colonial drive […] But lest we think patronizingly of Conrad as merely the creature of his own time, we had better note that we today appear to show no particular advance on his views. Conrad was able at least to discern the evil and utter madness of imperialism, something many of our writers and certainly our government is still unable to perceive. Conrad had the wherewithal to recognize that no imperial scheme – including 'philanthropic' ones – ever succeeds."

Thus, on the one hand, in Said's view Conrad was not unlike Freud who retained basic binaries of empire in his work.

> "Freud posits a qualitative difference between primitive and civilized that seems to work to the latter's advantage, but that difference, as in the fiction of his equally gifted subversive contemporary Joseph Conrad, doesn't excuse or in any way mitigate the rigour of his analyses of civilization itself, which he sees in a decidedly ambiguous, even pessimistic, way" (Said 2014, p. 20).

But, on the other hand, Said argues that Conrad did more to thematize the culturally fundamental role of "imperial/gringo eyes" for the European and non-European knowledges of colonial spaces:

> "Heart of Darkness, whatever you think about it politically, is the novel about Africa. Many African novelists, who attacked it so, felt the need to engage with it. Not because it's a racist text, but because it is the most formidable work of the imagination by a European about Africa. It has that quality. It's strategically central because it has that quality" (Said 2004, p. 212).

One could perhaps turn Said's critique of Eurocentric reading on himself and say he overstates the novel's importance. But even if he does, he at the same time provides evidence that although Conrad "saw no alternative to colonialism," (Said 2004, pp. 337–338) he did condemn colonial abuses in rather strong terms (Watts 2002, pp. xvii, xxii), and showed how discourses and ideas were used to co-create the space of empire, not just its depiction, and how insidiously powerful they can be in this capacity. It is precisely this aspect of his work that guided Said to develop one of

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his most transformative theses: "the enterprise of empire depends upon the idea of having an empire, as Conrad so powerfully seems to have realized" (Said 1993, p. 11). In *Through Gringo Eyes* Said goes even further and appears to suggest that perhaps Conrad saw no alternative because "as rigorously as Marx, Conrad saw that commodity fetishism can incorporate anything and anyone. Imperialism therefore has the capacity to reproduce itself indefinitely […] Conrad perceived that imperialism is a system" (Said 2012, p. 280).

In lieu of conclusion

The unorthodox and explicitly decolonial thought of Edward Said has helped to discern consequential parallels between key phases of social scientific knowledge production and history of Western imperial colonialism. It was profoundly inspired by Conrad's paradoxical view of language and power, in particular the iconic vision of *Heart of Darkness* (Conrad 2002 [1902]) which consists in "effectively communicating the difficulty of effective communication" (Watts 2002, p. xix). As Cedric Watts underscores, "an important political aspect of this theme is displayed by the tale's demonstration that there is an imperialism of discourse which both licences and conceals the excesses of economic exploitation" (2002, p. xix). Throughout the twentieth century, the use and misuse of reductive definitions of *culture* and *space* retained rigidly instrumentalized meanings within the dominant power/knowledge systems of the West. Thus, Said may have been right to insist that "the most interesting problems are […] the history and sociology of connections between Orientalism and the societies that produced it" (Said 1994, p. 343). Yet his legacy is multifaceted enough to inform several other complex themes that comprised his dream of non-imperial thinking. His pursuit created a vibrant intellectual context in which sociology of space can and should make itself known. One of the central elements of this context is Said's insightful triangulation of empire, geography and culture, which I defined here as the power/knowledge/space nexus. If Foucault can be credited with the iconic problematization of "power/knowledge", and Scott with delineating power/space dimension, then Löw thematized the knowledge/space axis which helped to complete this paradigmatic triangulation. Said provided a fertile context that enables new forms of joint critical reinterpretation of these three interlocking frameworks.

Beyond this conceptual geometry, it is Said's exilic trajectory and its intersections with Conrad's eccentric experience that reveals to us a characteristically ambivalent mode of modern social thought. It shows that writers' diasporic experiences and the joint thematization of language and space can and did have profound effects, especially in epistemic and ethical domains. To think with Conrad and Said about space and culture means considering the processes of simplifi-

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cation and instrumentalization of spatio-symbolic boundaries between *we who come from here* and *they who come from there*. While topical areas ebb and flow, this old binary and its pernicious derivatives exhibit cultural inertia operative both at conscious and subconscious levels of social discourse. However, these binaries continue to exist not only as discursive codes, but also as experiential, reductively spatial antinomies of here/there, center/periphery, metropolis/province, west/east, north/south, close/far, private/public, ordered/amorphous, etc., each of which capable of reproducing the divisive purity/danger dualism. As Said writes,

> "[a]ll such geographical designations are an odd combination of the empirical and imaginative […] since the struggle for control over territory is part of history, so too is the struggle over historical and social meaning. The task of the critical scholar is not to separate one struggle from another, but to connect them, despite the contrast between the overpowering materiality of the former and the apparent otherworldly refinements of the latter" (Said 1994, p. 331).

Said's detractors might point to instances when his conceptual reach exceeds his empirical grasp. Others might argue that there are Western humanist notions and allies that "escape Said's oppositional analysis" (Clifford 1988, p. 266). Yet, one thing seems certain: his ability to make cultural critique irrepressible, indeed indispensable, both in politics and in social sciences. Said was decisively inspired by Conrad to draw on his own transcultural life trajectory as a resource and a trope. This enabled him to unequivocally expose the cultural ramifications of imperialism that the imperial centers of his time could not or did not want to see, and are unable, or unwilling, to comprehend still to this day. Even if Said appears to be a limit case, or a non-replicable expression of minoritarian iconicity in the Western world, his position established a lasting inspirational reference for pluralistic non-imperial thought. What he saw as the perennial importance of narratives such as *Heart of Darkness* or *Lord Jim* stemmed from the iconic power of their archetypal meanings (Bartmanski and Alexander 2012, pp. 2–3), one in which "the problems Conrad raises entail the radical possibility of representing and knowing the world in nondominating and noncoercive ways – the main aim and overriding intention of Said's oeuvre" (Rubin 2008, pp. xiv–xv). By audaciously splicing together several lines of humanistic criticism that have rarely been articulated together, he aimed to write with the force of a Foucaultian parrhesiast rather than a rhetorician or a narrowly focused specialist. He aspired to be a concerned "amateur", refusing to be a conformist "professional" (Said 1996, p. 65–83). To the extent that he formulated a distinct social philosophy, it was more of a philosophy as ethics, a "philosophy as a way of life" (Hadot 1995), rather than a theory of a "classroom technician that intimidates nonexperts" (Said 1996, p. 72) and eschews moral responsibility by staying in the narrowly defined 'professional' lane.

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It is worth concluding on the following note: the big inspiration of Conrad proved crucial also for his younger compatriot, the aforementioned classic of social anthropology Bronislaw Malinowski who became an icon of Western social thought in his own right (Bartmanski 2012). Malinowski was explicit about his famous desires as a writer: the desire to be "the Conrad of anthropology" (Clifford 1988, p. 96) and the desire to convey the "native point of view". He too traveled extensively, acquired British citizenship, and wrote masterfully in English to become a celebrity author in Britain who, among other things, prefigured John Austin's speech act theory as well as Wittgenstein's influential conception of language. According to Ernest Gellner (1998), that prefiguration was not accidental. In fact, in his last book, *Language and Solitude: Wittgenstein, Malinowski and the Habsburg Dilemma*, Gellner argued that the late nineteenth century imperial Austrian background provided those two different personalities – one from the then imperial Vienna and another from the then provincial Krakow – with inspirational structure for problematizing the contextual character of language and meaning-making. It was Malinowski that recognized this issue earlier, and, in Gellner's view, proved less ethnocentric and more "nomadic" in his life's work. But that's a story for another occasion.

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Figures

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