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Review

Globalectics: Theory and the Politics of Knowing

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o. Columbia University Press: New York, 2012.
120pp.

Annika Hughes*

“Life after theory is a text.”

—Derrida, “Following Theory: Jacques Derrida,” 27

A bit like Schrödinger’s cat, it is unclear to me whether or not theory has died and if it has, whether or not it should be resurrected. If it has indeed died and needs to be brought back to life, future theorists should certainly read *Globalectics: Theory and the Politics of Knowing* by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o before trying to revive it. For if Derrida’s theory is correct and life after theory is a text, one of the texts on that reading list should include Thiong’o’s account of a lifelong struggle with theory and the “politics of knowing.”

I was not previously familiar with Ngũgĩ’s work, having a background in political science rather than in critical literary theory. Having read this book, as well as learning about the major contribution that he has made to literature since he and a couple of colleagues wrote “On the Abolition of the English Department” in the late 1960s, it is now clear to me that this is a book that is multidisciplinary in scope and could greatly contribute to the future development of many a social science department. In a collection of short essays, *Globalectics* deals squarely with the continued need to decolonize theory

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from its traditional “Western” heritage and to open it up for “globalectical” discourse. Ngũgĩ’s writing style seamlessly blends personal narratives with complex theoretical discussions, taking the reader on a journey that combines his indisputable literary skills with an acute awareness of the theoretical landscape.

In Ngũgĩ’s own words, “[g]lobalectics embraces wholeness, interconnectedness, equality of potentiality of parts, tension, and motion. It is a way of thinking and relating to the world, particularly in the era of globalism and globalization” (8). His starting point for this “globalectical” journey is so-called poor theory, not as he says “to give dignity to poverty by according it theory, but rather to accord dignity to the poor as they fight poverty, including dare I say, poverty of theory.... I call it poor theory because initially it was no more than a few questions that simply demanded answers. The initial debates took place not in the academic corridors of the university, but in a rundown café on Koinange Street, Nairobi” (2–6).

Ngũgĩ subsequently goes on to account for his own experiences of studying English literature during Kenya’s struggle for independence from British rule. “How could my study of four and half centuries of English literature, from Beowulf to Virginia Wolfe... speak to my colonial situation and the changes I was witnessing?” (10) This is not the only time that the relevance of Ngũgĩ’s narrative to current day events strikes me whilst reading the book. The recent uprisings in the Middle East add to the urgency of Ngũgĩ’s call for a “globalectical” discourse that transcends colonial heritage and hegemonic theoretical underpinnings. Ngũgĩ himself comments on the continued difficulties in removing preconceptions created by cultural hegemony. At one point, he tells of two recent encounters with people who he had expected to have more open and modern concepts of eastern Africa, “[b]ut they clearly had a deep-rooted view of the continent that could not be shaken by any evidence to the contrary or that complicated the perceived notion of the continent” (35).

The book then moves on from exploring the literary to delving deeper into the theoretical implications of Ngũgĩ’s argument, since “the novel, though itself a view of society, cannot talk about itself or its relationship to others. It cannot contemplate itself.... Fiction as theory had its limitations, for it could not deal with itself; it could not read other fiction. It needed lenses with which to view it as a whole and its relationship to society and history” (19). Using Eze’s critique of the “colour of reason,” Ngũgĩ critiques the philosophies of, for example, Kant and Hegel, for being rooted in these philosophers’

own limited experiences of the world, mentioning that Kant never left Königsberg and so “he could only have based his knowledge on explorer narratives.... Many of these philosophers used each other as sources and proofs of their own observations; prejudice thus reinforcing prejudice till it became an accepted truth, an authoritative norm” (32–33).

Ngũgĩ does not expand on his critique of Kant, which is understandable, as it is not the main point of the book. It is here, however, that I begin to wonder what a “globalectical” discourse should look like. For while I completely agree with Ngũgĩ in his critique that mainstream social scientific discourse still suffers from being frozen in its “Western” origins, the question is whether a “globalectical” discourse should consequently completely disregard all that has gone before? Or should it instead actively try to include *all* that has gone before, *including* ancient African and Eastern philosophical discourses? Disregarding all of Kant’s writings on the logic of reason, for example, simply because of his origins and abilities to travel, seems somewhat to defy the point. Critiquing and problematizing Kant’s theses to place them in a modern, “globalectical” context however would not only rectify the problem of the continued “Western” dominance of the social sciences, but would also open up for new discourses to emerge from these critiques that synthesize the main teachings of *all* of the world’s philosophies. I am reminded here of Zillah Eisenstein’s call for a “polyversal inclusivity,” that is multiple and connected since, as she argues, “[w]e are more similar to each other than we are different” (Eisenstein 2004: 176). Such conversations, if multiple and connected, would avoid the dangers of being “a foreign national literature wearing the mask of universality” (Ngũgĩ 2012: 42) (of any origin) and would, perhaps for the first time in human history, allow for a truly “globalectical” discourse.

Ngũgĩ himself imagines such conversations in the third essay of the book, entitled “Globalectical Imagination: The World in the Postcolonial.” That these conversations are as yet imagined, despite technological advances in global communication, could perhaps depend on the condition that they are postcolonial, a condition that arguably has not yet been fully achieved. Postcolonialism itself is as yet imagined. Ngũgĩ compares the continued and very real control that the IMF and the World Bank have over the economic policies of many of the world’s countries to the powers of the imagined Global Ministry of Finance in his novel *Wizard of the Crow* (46) and questions the meaning of the term “postcolonial”—“It could refer to the period after

the act and fact of colonization. Is the colonial period that follows the act also postcolonial? Can you then have postcolonial colonialism? This raises the specter of countless *posts*” (49). Ngũgĩ adds that he always devotes one seminar to the “neo-in-the-post of postcolonialism” whenever he has given courses in postcolonial theories and narratives. “Neocolonialism is not simply a continuation of the colonial but it carries the sense of the continuities of colonial structures in changed political forms.... The neocolonial is an important feature, though not necessarily the sole defining feature, of the postcolonial” (50–51).

The book also raises the very interesting question of which languages “globalectical” discourse should be conducted in, when Ngũgĩ questions whether the dominance of European languages in global communication is a result of metropolitanism or colonialism. “When Asians and Africans write in English, their product is surely part of English language cultural universe. Can this writing be defined within a purely national boundary?” (53) Ngũgĩ himself does not seem to think so, arguing that “[i]n such a world of shared intellectual property, organizing the teaching of literature on the principle of national boundaries is outmoded, and even more so the export of national literatures as a superior knowledge” (55). Here, Ngũgĩ uses his own literary skills to describe the kind of “globalectical” discourse that he is imagining:

World literature would be like the sea or the ocean into which all streams from all corners of the globe would flow. The sea is constituted of many rivers, some of which cross many fields, but the rivers and their constituent streams do not lose their individuality as streams and rivers. The result is the vastness of the sea and the ocean. Confronted with the possibility of that reality, and, quite frankly, its vastness, it is easy for organizers of literary knowledge to stop in fright and stay within a national boundary, taking comfort in the certainty of the structures already tried and passed on as a tradition. The traditional organization of literature along national boundaries is like bathing in a river instead of sailing in the ocean, or trying to contain a river’s flow within a specific territory (55–56).

Reading “globalectically” requires self-reflection. Although Ngũgĩ argues that translation is “the language of languages,” a “language” that allows all languages access to “globalectical” discourse, it is not enough just to read a text in one’s own native language. “Globalectical reading means breaking open the prison house of imagination built by theories and outlooks that would seem to signify the content within is classified,

open to only a few.” And here Ngũgĩ makes perhaps the most important point in the book with regards to its relevance to social scientific study. “This involves declassifying theory in the sense of making it accessible—a tool for clarifying interactive connections and interconnections of social phenomena and their mutual impact in the local and global space, a means of illuminating the internal and the external, the local and the global dynamics of social being. This may also mean the act of reading becoming also a process of self-examination” (61). “Globalectical” discourse thus requires the removal of not only external boundaries but also internal ones, so that we not only hear each other, but also stand a chance of actually listening to and understanding what is being said.

Finally, Ngũgĩ explores the possibilities of combining oral and written languages in the new global world of cyberspace. He defines this combination of orature and literature in the cyberworld as “cyberture” and sees this new form of communication as offering “endless possibilities” (85). Prior to this, Ngũgĩ argues that orature has been deemed to be of less value than literature, as a result of the printing press, the dominance of capitalism and colonization (64). The reintroduction of orature as an academic pursuit that is of equal worth to literature has already opened up the study of language to other verbal forms such as riddle, proverb, story, song, poetry, drama, dance and myth (77). Cyberture, as an online combination of orature and literature, further pries open the possibilities for global communication, leaving Ngũgĩ with the “hope that this means that no cultures and communities need be denied history because they had not developed a writing system.... Network, not hierarchy, will free the richness of the aesthetic, oral or literary” (85). “Globalectics,” as such, promises not only to unleash a multitude of voices but also to unlock a wealth of materials with which to communicate these narratives. The more traditional world of the social sciences would thus do well to take note of, not only Ngũgĩ’s call for a “globalectical” discourse, but also the methodological and theoretical implications that this entails.

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