

Chapter 5

Theorizing from the Global South: From Critique to Reconstruction in Postcolonial Social Theory

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1. Introduction

This chapter develops a constructive approach to postcolonial social theory by shifting the discussion from critiquing Eurocentrism to reconstructing sociological knowledge. Postcolonial scholarship has convincingly exposed the colonial and unequal foundations of theory production, but it has devoted less attention to how new sociological concepts emerge from historically marginalized societies. I argue that postcolonial social theory should retain the analytical strengths of disciplinary sociology while broadening the historical and geographical foundations from which the theory is developed. Drawing on my research on Bengali Muslim identity in Bangladesh, I show how empirical inquiry became conceptual inquiry and how a field site became a theoretical site. Rather than treating the Global South primarily as a source of empirical evidence, I argue that it should also be understood as a source of conceptual innovation. A genuinely global sociology depends on recognizing societies long positioned at the margins of theory production as places from which sociological concepts can also emerge.

Contemporary sociology now draws on an unprecedented range of empirical research from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle

East. As a result, societies that once occupied the margins of disciplinary inquiry have become central to many sociological debates. Yet one imbalance has proven far more resistant to change. While the Global South has become an indispensable source of empirical knowledge, it continues to play a much smaller role in shaping the concepts through which that knowledge is understood. Empirical materials circulate from South to North, while sociological concepts continue to move largely in the opposite direction.

This imbalance matters because theory influences what researchers see, the questions they ask, and the concepts they develop. When theoretical frameworks emerge from a relatively narrow range of historical and institutional contexts, they privilege some experiences while pushing others to the margins. Expanding the geography of empirical research does not, by itself, democratize knowledge production. It also requires a broader range of historical experiences to shape sociological concepts.

Over the past several decades, postcolonial and decolonial scholarship has transformed how sociologists think about knowledge production (Bhambra 2014; Chakrabarty 2000; Connell 2007; Go 2016; Mignolo 2011). Rather than treating modern social science as politically neutral or universally applicable, these scholars have traced its development through histories of colonialism, empire, and unequal global power. In doing so, they have shown that theoretical authority is historically produced rather than naturally given. Their work has fundamentally reshaped debates about how academic knowledge is created, circulated, and legitimized.

This achievement, however, leaves another task unfinished. Demonstrating the limits of Eurocentric knowledge does not by itself show how social theory should move forward. Critique is indispensable, but it cannot be the endpoint of intellectual inquiry. The more difficult

challenge is to develop concepts and theoretical perspectives that emerge from societies long positioned at the margins of theory production (Go 2013).

This chapter addresses that question by arguing for a constructive approach to postcolonial social theory. I argue for retaining the analytical strengths of disciplinary sociology while broadening the historical and geographical foundations from which theory is produced. A postcolonial social theory, as I understand it, reconstructs social theory by treating the historical experiences of the Global South as sites of conceptual innovation and sources of sociological concepts. The objective is to cultivate a genuinely global sociology in which theory emerges from a wider range of historical experiences.

To develop this argument, I draw on my research on Bengali Muslim identity in Bangladesh. I present Bangladesh as a theoretical site from which broader sociological concepts emerge. The analysis reconstructs how theoretical insights emerged through the research process itself. The chapter proceeds in four stages. I first revisit major postcolonial critiques of knowledge production, focusing on the contributions of Raewyn Connell, Syed Farid Alatas, and Boaventura de Sousa Santos. I then turn to Julian Go's call for a postcolonial social theory and develop it into a broader argument for theorizing from the Global South. Finally, I reconstruct how theoretical insights emerged through my research on Bengali Muslim identity in Bangladesh and consider what this process suggests for the future of social theory.

2. From Critique to Reconstruction: Toward a Postcolonial Social Theory

The uneven geography of theory production is rooted in the historical formation of the modern social sciences and the unequal global relations

through which academic knowledge has been produced, circulated, and legitimized (Alatas 2003; Connell 2007). This history helps account for why some societies have come to be seen primarily as producers of concepts and theoretical knowledge. In contrast, others have been treated mainly as suppliers of empirical material. One question is why the Global South remains underrepresented in theoretical debates. An equally important question is how the present organization of knowledge came to assign different intellectual roles to different parts of the world.

Over the past several decades, the assumption that modern social science represents a universal and politically neutral body of knowledge has become increasingly difficult to sustain. Postcolonial scholars have shown that the production of social theory has been deeply intertwined with colonialism, empire, and global inequalities of power. Although Raewyn Connell, Syed Farid Alatas, and Boaventura de Sousa Santos approach this history from different directions, they share a common concern with how unequal relations of power have shaped the organization of sociological knowledge. Their work provides the point of departure for the argument developed in this chapter.

(1) Raewyn Connell and the Global Division of Intellectual Labor

Raewyn Connell's work provides one of the most influential accounts of why social theory remains so unevenly distributed across the world. She argues that this pattern cannot be understood apart from the histories of colonialism and the global expansion of modernity (Connell 2007). Sociology, in her account, developed through a global division of intellectual labor in which metropolitan centers became recognized as producers of theory, while societies in Asia, Africa, and Latin America were positioned primarily as sources of empirical knowledge. The unequal geography of theory is therefore not an intellectual accident but

the outcome of broader historical relations of power.

Connell's critique extends beyond where theory is produced to the authority it claims. She questions the assumption that concepts developed in Europe and North America possess universal explanatory power. Their authority, she argues, was established through a combination of intellectual achievement, imperial expansion, colonial administration, and the institutional consolidation of Western academia. The result was not simply the spread of particular theories, but the concentration of theoretical authority in metropolitan centers and the relegation of knowledge produced elsewhere to an empirical role.

Connell's intervention also changes how empirical research is understood. If the Global South continues to function primarily as a source of evidence through which concepts developed elsewhere are tested or refined, unequal knowledge production will persist regardless of how much new research is conducted. More fieldwork alone cannot democratize sociology if the direction of conceptual innovation remains unchanged. Her work therefore invites us to reconsider not only where research is conducted but also where theory is expected to originate. At the same time, it leaves unresolved the central question of this chapter: how might that unequal geography of theory actually be transformed?

(2) Syed Farid Alatas and Intellectual Dependency

Across much of the postcolonial academy, scholars work with concepts that were developed elsewhere. For Alatas, this is not simply a matter of intellectual preference but the outcome of a long-standing academic culture. Research agendas, university curricula, publication systems, and professional recognition continue to reward theoretical consumption more consistently than theoretical innovation. As a result, scholars become highly proficient at applying established concepts while having

far fewer opportunities to reshape them or develop alternatives. Alatas describes this condition as intellectual dependency (Alatas 2003, 2006).

One of Alatas's most important contributions is to show that a more diverse sociology does not automatically produce more diverse sociological theory. Representation alone changes very little if research continues to be organized around concepts and questions developed elsewhere. Intellectual autonomy requires more than geographical inclusion (Alatas 2006). It requires the capacity to define research problems, develop concepts, and engage with social realities on their own analytical terms. In this way, Alatas extends Connell's structural argument by showing how the global division of intellectual labor is reproduced through everyday academic practices.

His work also points to another question. If intellectual dependency is to be overcome, what kind of knowledge should autonomous scholarship produce? Is it enough to develop alternative theories within existing disciplinary frameworks? Or does the task require rethinking the epistemological foundations of social science itself? These questions lead directly to the work of Boaventura de Sousa Santos.

(3) Boaventura de Sousa Santos and the Politics of Knowledge

Modern social science has never treated all forms of knowledge equally. Some ways of knowing have been incorporated into disciplinary sociology as legitimate sources of theory, while others have been dismissed as belief, tradition, or culture. It is this hierarchy of epistemic legitimacy that concerns Boaventura de Sousa Santos (Santos 2014). Rather than asking who produces knowledge, he asks why certain forms of knowledge are recognized as authoritative while others remain outside the boundaries of legitimate social science.

Colonial expansion did more than spread European forms of

knowledge. It also changed which intellectual traditions came to count as legitimate sources of social theory. Many traditions survived, but they increasingly appeared within academic scholarship as religion, folklore, or culture rather than as bodies of knowledge capable of generating sociological concepts. De Sousa Santos argues that this hierarchy was historically produced rather than intellectually inevitable. He describes this process of systematic devaluation as *epistemicide* (Santos 2018).

This argument extends the critiques developed by Connell and Alatas. If modern social science recognizes only a limited range of intellectual traditions as capable of producing theory, increasing geographical diversity alone will not change the hierarchy of knowledge. The challenge is to create conditions in which different intellectual traditions, historical experiences, and ways of reasoning can contribute to social theory. De Sousa Santos describes this possibility through his idea of an ecology of knowledges (Santos 2014). It calls for dialogue among different forms of knowledge without assuming that one tradition possesses universal epistemological authority.

Taken together, these three scholars illuminate different dimensions of unequal knowledge production. Connell traces its historical formation. Alatas shows how it is reproduced through everyday academic practice. De Sousa Santos shifts attention to its epistemological foundations. Together, they explain why social theory has become geographically concentrated. They also leave open the question that motivates this chapter: once those inequalities have been identified, how should sociology move beyond critique toward reconstruction?

(4) From Diagnosis to Reconstruction

Taken together, these discussions point toward a shared conclusion. Modern social science did not develop on historically neutral ground.

Its concepts, institutions, and intellectual authority emerged through colonial encounters, global inequalities, and uneven historical relationships. Recognizing that history changes how we understand sociology itself.

At the same time, exposing those inequalities does not tell us how social theory should move forward. Much postcolonial scholarship has concentrated on explaining how existing hierarchies of knowledge came into being. The equally important task is to ask how sociology can be reconstructed once those hierarchies have been identified. Critique reveals the limits of inherited frameworks. Reconstruction asks what new concepts and theoretical traditions might emerge beyond those limits.

Once critique has exposed the historical limits of modern social science, another question inevitably follows (Go 2013, 2016). What should sociology look like after the postcolonial critique? How can it be reconstructed rather than simply criticized? Julian Go places these questions at the center of his work. Rather than treating postcolonial sociology primarily as a critical project, he asks how sociology itself might be reimagined on broader historical and intellectual foundations.

3. From Critique to Reconstruction: Toward a Postcolonial Social Theory

(1) Julian Go and the Turn toward Reconstruction

The postcolonial critique has fundamentally changed how sociology understands the politics of knowledge production. Yet the work of critique leaves an obvious question unresolved. Once the historical, institutional, and epistemological limits of metropolitan social theory have been identified, where does sociology go from there? What does

reconstruction actually require? These are the questions that organize Julian Go's intervention (Go 2013, 2016).

Reconstruction requires more than expanding the geographical range of sociological research. It also requires rethinking the historical foundations from which theory is produced. Julian Go (2016) argues that postcolonial sociology should become a constructive intellectual project capable of reshaping the discipline itself. His concern is not simply to criticize sociology but to rebuild it on broader intellectual foundations.

Go's contribution is important because he rejects a simple choice between preserving disciplinary sociology unchanged and abandoning it altogether. Extending existing theories to new empirical settings leaves the unequal geography of theory production largely untouched. Rejecting sociology altogether means giving up analytical tools that still help us understand social life. Go points to another possibility. Sociology can be reconstructed from within by broadening the historical experiences, intellectual traditions, and empirical realities that contribute to theory.

Go provides the bridge between postcolonial critique and theoretical reconstruction. His work also opens another line of inquiry. If reconstruction is the next task of postcolonial sociology, what should guide that process? How can scholars develop concepts from historically marginalized societies without replacing one intellectual orthodoxy with another? These are the questions that shape the rest of this chapter.

Recent scholarship suggests that this movement toward reconstruction is already underway. Tarumoto's (2023) discussion of immigration in Japan provides one example. Revisiting the concept of super-diversity, he argues that the Japanese experience is better understood through the concept of *medium-diversity*, which emerged from the Japanese case. Chang and Choi's (2025) study of Vietnamese

marriage migration to Taiwan and South Korea provides another. Drawing on life-history interviews with Vietnamese marriage migrants, they develop the concepts of *marriage channels* and *temporal inequality* to explain how different migration pathways shape women's opportunities to exercise agency before migration. Similar efforts can also be found in Comaroff and Comaroff's (2015) work on theory from the South.

(2) Reconstructing Social Theory

The discussion so far points toward a different way of thinking about where social theory comes from. Expanding the range of voices is important, but it does not by itself change the sources from which sociological concepts emerge. If postcolonial scholarship has shown that modern social science developed through unequal relations of power, the next challenge is to ask what happens when historically marginalized societies become places from which concepts themselves are developed.

I am not suggesting that sociology abandons its existing analytical traditions. The task is to broaden the historical and geographical foundations from which sociological concepts are developed. For much of its history, sociology has treated concepts produced in Europe and North America as the natural starting point for understanding societies elsewhere. A postcolonial social theory asks what new concepts become possible once that direction of theorizing is no longer taken for granted.

This position also avoids a false choice that often appears in debates on decolonizing knowledge. One position assumes that existing theories possess universal explanatory power and need to be applied more widely—the other risks fragmenting sociology into disconnected bodies of local knowledge (Bhambra 2014). I suggest a different approach.

Social theory should be understood as an open intellectual project. Its concepts are continually revised, challenged, and expanded through engagement with diverse historical experiences.

Colonialism, migration, postcolonial state formation, religious pluralism, and informal economies have usually entered sociology as empirical subjects. They are studied because they expand what we know about particular societies. But they can do something else as well. They can unsettle inherited concepts and open new directions for sociological thinking. Seen from this angle, the Global South is more than a geographical category. It becomes a vast archive of historical experience from which sociological concepts themselves can emerge. The question, then, is not only whether theory travels. It is whether concepts can also travel outward from these histories and reshape broader sociological debates (Comaroff and Comaroff 2015).

The shift begins in the research process itself. Empirical inquiry is no longer limited to testing existing concepts; it also becomes a way of generating new ones. Field sites therefore become more than locations where evidence is gathered. They become places where concepts are questioned, refined, and sometimes transformed through sustained engagement with particular social worlds.

Seen in this way, empirical research is asked a different question. Instead of treating societies primarily as cases through which existing theories are tested, researchers ask what concepts emerging from those societies might contribute to sociology more broadly. The objective is a genuinely global sociology in which theoretical authority is continually reshaped through dialogue among different historical experiences.

(3) From Theoretical Argument to Theoretical Practice

Up to this point, the discussion has remained at the level of argument.

The more difficult task is to see what reconstruction actually looks like in the course of research. Saying that historically marginalized societies can become sites of theoretical innovation is only a beginning. The stronger claim is that concepts can emerge through the ordinary work of empirical inquiry itself. The discussion that follows examines how that happened in my own research on Bengali Muslim identity in Bangladesh.

My own research did not begin by looking for new concepts. It began with historical questions that existing concepts could not fully answer. Those moments of friction gradually changed the direction of the inquiry. Instead of treating them as problems to be resolved, I came to see them as opportunities to reconsider the categories I had inherited. Theory, in this sense, did not precede empirical research. It emerged through sustained engagement with the historical materials themselves (Bourdieu 2004).

Nothing in this argument can be established in the abstract. It has to emerge through the movement of research itself. My own work on Bengali Muslim identity began as an attempt to understand a particular historical formation. It gradually became something else as the questions raised by that history exceeded the concepts I had brought to it. The discussion that follows reconstructs that movement.

4. Theorizing from Bangladesh

The argument developed so far grew out of a research project that began with a much narrower ambition. I set out to understand the historical formation of Bengali Muslim identity in Bangladesh, not to rethink how postcolonial social theory might be constructed. That broader argument emerged only gradually as the research unfolded. The following section reconstructs how that shift took place.

(1) Bangladesh as a Theoretical Site

The project began with a question about Bengali Muslim identity rather than with an ambition to develop postcolonial social theory (Mahmud 2022). I wanted to understand how a Muslim majority population that experienced colonialism, Partition, and the creation of an independent nation had continued to negotiate questions of history, religion, and collective identity. As the research progressed, those historical questions began to unsettle some of the conceptual assumptions I had initially taken for granted. My research on Bengali Muslim identity did not begin with these questions. It began as a historical study of the formation of Bengali Muslim identity. Like many studies of identity, I wanted to understand a particular society through its history, historiography, and competing interpretations. At that stage, Bangladesh appeared as an empirical setting that required explanation. I had not yet begun to think of it as a source of sociological concepts.

The historical materials did not point toward a single or stable understanding of Bengali Muslim identity. Instead, they revealed a series of political and intellectual struggles over how that identity should be understood at different moments. Colonial rule, the Partition of India, the Pakistan period, and the emergence of Bangladesh each reorganized the relationship between religion, language, and national belonging in different ways (Ahmed 1981; Bose 1986; Chatterji 1994). As these historical layers accumulated, it became increasingly difficult to explain Bengali Muslim identity through any single conceptual framework.

As I worked through these historical materials, one pattern became increasingly difficult to ignore. Political change repeatedly altered the language through which Bengali Muslims understood themselves, yet none of those shifts completely displaced what had come before.

New political projects accumulated upon earlier histories rather than replacing them. What initially appeared to be a succession of historical periods gradually revealed itself as an ongoing negotiation over identity, memory, and belonging.

It was at this point that I began to question whether existing concepts adequately captured what I was observing. The issue was not simply that Bengali Muslim identity had changed over time. Rather, the historical materials suggested that continuity and transformation were unfolding simultaneously. That tension eventually led me to develop a different way of thinking about identity formation.

The shift did not happen all at once. It emerged through repeated encounters with historical materials that resisted the categories I had initially relied upon. Each time I thought a familiar concept was sufficient, another episode complicated that interpretation. Rather than producing a single explanatory framework, the research gradually redirected my attention toward the historical conditions through which Bengali Muslim identity was continually being reworked.

Gradually, it became increasingly difficult to describe these historical processes with the conceptual vocabulary I had inherited. The problem was not simply that the existing concepts were incomplete. They directed attention toward some dimensions of the historical record while leaving others largely invisible. The concept developed in this study emerged from that dissatisfaction rather than from an attempt to replace one theory with another.

Looking back, this was also the moment when Bangladesh became more than an empirical field site. It had become a place from which new sociological concepts could emerge. In this sense, Bangladesh became a theoretical site. More broadly, a field site becomes a theoretical site when empirical inquiry begins to revise inherited concepts.

(2) Challenging Inherited Narratives

The turning point in the project did not come from discovering new archival materials or previously unknown historical evidence. It came while reading the historiography on Bengali Muslim identity. I began in a fairly conventional way. I aimed to determine which interpretation offered the most convincing account of the historical emergence of Bengali Muslims. Richard Eaton (1993) emphasized the relationship between Islamization and agrarian expansion in eastern Bengal. Asim Roy (1983) focused on the accommodation between Islamic and Bengali cultural traditions. Other scholars, writing from nationalist, religious, or postcolonial perspectives, offered different explanations. My initial task was to decide which account was most convincing.

Reading these historians one after another, I expected their disagreements to produce very different ways of understanding Bengali Muslim identity. They certainly disagreed about chronology, historical causation, and the significance of particular events. Yet I kept running into the same language. Whether the discussion centered on Islamization, nationalism, colonialism, or culture, familiar oppositions resurfaced—Bengali and Muslim, religion and language, indigenous and foreign, syncretism and orthodoxy. I began marking these recurring terms in the margins of my notes long before I understood why they mattered. Only later did I realize that the categories themselves had remained remarkably stable even as historians argued intensely over their historical interpretations (Ahmed 1981; Chatterji 1994).

Recognizing this pattern changed the direction of the project. The more I read, the less interested I became in deciding which interpretation was historically correct. Instead, I found myself returning to the categories themselves. I wanted to understand why they continued to organize the historiography despite profound disagreements over

historical interpretation. Without quite realizing it, I had begun reading the historiography differently. My attention gradually shifted from explaining Bengali Muslim identity to examining the conceptual vocabulary through which that history had been written.

Once my questions changed, I found myself reading the literature differently. I was no longer treating historiographical works simply as sources of historical interpretation. They had become part of the historical record themselves. Reading colonial scholarship alongside nationalist and postcolonial histories, I became increasingly interested in the categories that traveled across these different traditions. Their conclusions often diverged, but their assumptions about identity, religion, nation, and culture proved surprisingly resilient. The literature itself had become evidence—not only about Bengali Muslims, but also about the historical production of sociological categories.

One recurring debate illustrates this shift. Much of the historiography has been organized around the question of whether Bengali Muslims were fundamentally Bengali or fundamentally Muslim. Different scholars answered that question in different ways, but almost all accepted its underlying premise—that “Bengali” and “Muslim” referred to separate identities whose historical relationship required explanation. As I returned to the historical record, I found this opposition increasingly difficult to sustain. The communities I encountered did not move between two separate identities. Their linguistic, religious, regional, and political affiliations developed together through intertwined historical processes. The binary seemed to organize the historiography more effectively than it explained the historical evidence.

I did not arrive at these questions by deciding to become more theoretical. They emerged because the historical explanations I was reading increasingly left another problem untouched. I could compare interpretations of Bengali Muslim identity, but I still could

not explain why those interpretations relied on the same conceptual vocabulary. At that point, my research was no longer concerned only with reconstructing the past. It had begun to investigate the categories through which that past had been made intelligible. Looking back, that was the moment when a historical study gradually became an exercise in theorizing from the Global South.

(3) Reconstructing Categories: Identity, Religion, and Nation

Changing the question also changed the way I read the historical record. I was no longer looking only for evidence that supported one interpretation of Bengali Muslim identity over another. Instead, I became increasingly interested in the categories that made those interpretations possible in the first place. The more I worked through the literature and the historical materials together, the more difficult it became to treat those categories as neutral analytical tools. They, too, had histories that required explanation.

The first category I reconsidered was identity itself. Much of the historiography treated Bengali Muslim identity as something waiting to be recovered from the historical record. Scholars disagreed over whether language, religion, ethnicity, or regional culture formed its defining feature. Yet they generally shared one assumption. It was treated as a relatively stable entity. As I read the historiography more closely, I found that assumption increasingly difficult to maintain.

One of the first things that struck me was how differently religious affiliation functioned across the historical record. In some periods, particularly with agrarian expansion and the spread of Islamic institutions, it became increasingly prominent in public life. Yet that prominence did not remain constant. Later debates shifted toward language, regional politics, and nationalism, each reorganizing how

Bengali Muslims understood themselves. Reading across these different moments, I found it difficult to treat religious or linguistic identity as permanent historical categories.

The question returned in a different form when I turned to discussions of religion and nation. Much of the historiography treated Bengali linguistic identity and Muslim religious identity as competing loyalties, asking which ultimately mattered more (Ahmed 1981; Eaton 1993; Roy 1983). Yet that question became increasingly difficult to sustain as I worked through the historical materials. The people I encountered did not appear to move back and forth between two separate identities. Their religious, linguistic, regional, and political affiliations unfolded together through the same historical processes. Gradually, I became less interested in deciding whether people were primarily Bengali or primarily Muslim. I began asking why the historiography had assumed that these identities needed to be separated in the first place.

Only gradually did I realize that I was no longer trying to produce another interpretation of Bengali Muslim identity. The more I worked through the historical materials, the less satisfied I became with the conceptual framework that had organized so much of the historiography. Instead of treating categories such as identity, religion, nation, and language as neutral analytical tools, I began asking how they had acquired that status in the first place. They, too, had histories, shaped by particular political projects, intellectual traditions, and historical experiences. My attention was no longer directed only toward the writing of history, but also toward the concepts through which that history had been written.

The theoretical contribution of the project emerged from this change in perspective. Bangladesh became conceptually productive because sustained engagement with its history exposed the limits of inherited

concepts and made their reconstruction necessary. These concepts emerged through dialogue with a historical experience that has long remained at the margins of theory production.

For me, this is what it means to theorize from the Global South. The value of historically marginalized experiences lies not simply in adding new empirical cases to sociology, but in creating occasions to question concepts that have long been taken for granted. My own work on Bangladesh convinced me that careful historical inquiry can become one way of rethinking those concepts.

(4) From Bangladesh to Social Theory

Looking back, I came to think differently about the relationship between empirical research and conceptual development. The theoretical contribution of the project did not arise from applying an existing framework to Bangladesh. It emerged through sustained engagement with a historical experience that gradually exposed the limits of the analytical categories I had inherited. What changed in the process was not only my understanding of Bangladesh, but also the concepts through which I had initially approached it.

This experience also changed the way I think about empirical research more generally. Much sociological research begins with established concepts and asks how well they illuminate a particular case. That tradition has produced an enormous body of valuable scholarship, and my own project began in much the same way. Over time, however, I became more aware of one of its limitations. Concepts usually travel to field sites, while field sites are expected to supply evidence (Connell 2007). As a result, theoretical authority tends to remain where concepts originate rather than where empirical encounters begin to reshape them.

My research on Bangladesh followed a different path. Existing

concepts did not disappear when the project began. They provided the language through which I first approached the historical materials. As the research progressed, those concepts became increasingly difficult to sustain. The archival and historiographical materials repeatedly exceeded the categories I had inherited from the literature. I came to see this as an invitation to rethink the concepts themselves. Theory emerged through an ongoing dialogue between inherited concepts and the resistance of the historical record (Go 2016).

Working through the history of Bengali Muslim identity also changed the way I came to think about comparison. I found it increasingly difficult to assume that concepts remained stable while only historical cases varied. Different societies are usually compared through categories whose meanings are treated as self-evident. My own research suggested another possibility. Historical comparison can also reveal the limits of those categories and invite us to reconsider them. Comparison, in this sense, becomes more than a way of identifying similarities and differences between societies. It also becomes a process through which sociological concepts themselves are revised and refined.

The agenda outlined above reflects the path I have taken over time. I began with a Weberian approach to remittances, focusing on migrants' motivations (Mahmud 2014), and subsequently to a Durkheimian interpretive approach (Mahmud 2017) and then a realist approach (2020). That framework soon felt insufficient. It could not fully account for what I was observing in the field. This pushed me to shift the question. Instead of asking why migrants remit, I began to ask what remitting does. From there, I developed the idea of *remittance as belonging* (Mahmud 2024). What started as an empirical puzzle gradually became a conceptual intervention grounded in migrant practices.

I now see this trajectory differently. It is not simply a change in topic or framework. It shows how concepts can emerge from sustained

engagement with migrant lives. In that sense, my own work speaks to broader calls to rethink how sociological concepts are produced and where theory is located (Connell 1997; Seidman 1991). This perspective also shapes the present chapter, where migrant practices are treated not only as empirical material but as sites of conceptual work.

The argument developed here grows out of a longer research trajectory in which empirical work repeatedly unsettled the concepts I began with. Early research on marginalized actors showed how established categories failed to capture lived social realities (Mahmud 2008). A similar difficulty appeared in work on migration intermediaries, where terms such as “broker” or “exploiter” could not account for the relational character of migration processes (Mahmud 2014). Later research on remittances raised related questions. Migrants described remitting in terms of obligation, care, and responsibility, which did not fit prevailing economic models (Mahmud 2014; 2017; 2020). The new concept of remittance emerged from this tension (Mahmud 2024). Across these studies, the field did more than provide evidence. It required concepts to change. This process culminates in the formulation of *remittance as belonging*, which reconceptualizes remittances not as economic transfers but as practices through which migrants sustain social ties, moral obligations, and a sense of home. This illustrates a cumulative process in which sustained empirical engagement progressively reveals the limits of existing concepts and enables their transformation.

The contribution of the Global South extends well beyond diversifying empirical research. Colonialism, migration, religious pluralism, postcolonial state formation, and frontier societies are sources of conceptual innovation. The Global South expands the historical experiences through which sociological concepts are developed, questioned, and revised.

This is what I mean by theorizing from the Global South. It represents another way of doing sociology. Empirical research becomes more than the application of inherited analytical categories. It becomes a way of questioning and reconstructing them. Bangladesh shows how a society long treated as an object of theory can also become a place from which theory emerges. The movement from studying Bangladesh to theorizing from Bangladesh is more than a change in research strategy. It is a different way of thinking about where sociological concepts come from and how a genuinely global social theory can be built.

5. Conclusion

Writing this chapter has reinforced for me a problem that extends well beyond postcolonial sociology. Contemporary sociology now draws upon an increasingly global range of empirical research, yet the production of sociological concepts remains concentrated within a relatively small number of intellectual centers in the Global North. Postcolonial scholarship has done much to reveal how this imbalance emerged through colonial histories, institutional arrangements, and unequal epistemic authority (Connell 2007; Go 2016). The question that stayed with me throughout this chapter, however, was what comes after that critique. My answer has been that the next task is reconstruction.

I have argued that reconstruction expands the historical experiences from which sociological concepts emerge while retaining the analytical strengths of disciplinary sociology. It requires expanding the historical experiences from which sociological concepts would be constructed. A postcolonial social theory is a different way of thinking about knowledge production. It asks researchers to approach empirical inquiry as a source of conceptual development. The challenge is to diversify the sources from which sociology develops its concepts.

The discussion of Bengali Muslim identity shows how theoretical reconstruction is possible through one research process. My argument is that sustained engagement with one historical setting can expose the limits of inherited concepts and contribute to their reconstruction. Bangladesh contributes to sociology through engagement with its history. That engagement reconstructs sociological concepts and shows how a field site can become a theoretical site.

The implications go beyond Bangladesh and the Global South. They invite sociologists to reconsider the relationship between empirical research and theory. Fieldwork does more than provide evidence through which existing concepts are tested or refined. It can become a place where those concepts are questioned and reconstructed. Theory becomes stronger through continued engagement with diverse social and historical worlds. This is what a postcolonial social theory makes possible.

The future of postcolonial social theory depends on developing new practices of theorizing. The question is no longer whether social theory can travel to the Global South. It has done so for generations. The more important question is whether the Global South can increasingly become a place from which social theory also travels. The geography of sociology will change as historically marginalized societies become recognized as places where sociological concepts emerge (Bhambra 2014). That, I believe, is the promise of a postcolonial social theory.

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4. Dr. Hasan Mahmud



Chapter 5. Theorizing from the Global South: From Critique to Reconstruction in Postcolonial Social Theory

Dr. Hasan Mahmud is Associate Professor in Residence of Sociology in the Liberal Arts Program at Northwestern University in Qatar. He received his PhD in Sociology from the University of California, Los Angeles, and his MA in Global Studies from Sophia University, Japan, where he studied as a Japanese Government (MEXT) Scholar. His research is based on nearly two decades of ethnographic work in Bangladesh, Japan, Qatar, and the United States.

His work focuses on migration, belonging, and social theory, with particular interests in temporary migration, South–South migration, and ethnographic research. Much of his scholarship examines how migrants negotiate home, family, religion, and social mobility across different migration regimes. In recent years, he has become increasingly interested in the relationship between empirical research and theory, exploring how sociological concepts can emerge from the historical experiences of societies that have traditionally been treated primarily as sites of fieldwork.

Mahmud is the author of *Remittance as Belonging: Global Migration, Transnationalism, and the Quest for Home* (Rutgers University Press, 2024), which develops a sociological understanding of remittances as practices of belonging rather than simply economic transfers. He is also the author of *Bangali Musoloman Proshno* (*The Bengali Muslim Question*, 2022) and co-editor, with Min Zhou, of *Beyond Economic Migration: Social, Historical, and Political Factors*

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