

Decolonising management science: The insights of three Global South scholars

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In France, the two types of debate currently running through postcolonial studies revolve around its supposed dominance and the origins and activism of its scholars. Such debates have caused a stir in the media but do not get to the heart of the foundational themes of this academic discipline.

There are also more fundamental questions of interest to those looking to contribute to “decolonising” management science.

This paper first aims to take stock of these debates, choosing to focus on major controversies instead of the media circus.

By examining three fundamental questions, all while avoiding a North-South controversy, we seek to show that a number of Global South scholars, namely G. Spivak, A. Quijano and A. Mbembe, have insights that are helpful to understanding these issues in the management science field.

“Postcolonial” and “decolonial” theories⁽¹⁾ regularly generate controversy in France.⁽²⁾

French researchers and intellectuals are pressured to “choose a side”: either agree with postcolonial/decolonial theories, or sign petitions denouncing their presumed dominance.

As is often the case, the heart of the issues at stake gets lost in the media fog.

Moving past the exchange of insults between sides, isn't it time to take another look at the specific points of the controversy?

Some usefully reference the “courage of nuance” (in French: *courage de la nuance*, title of the book by J. Birnbaum, 2021) in an era where everyone revels in taking the most extreme stance possible. On a subject like the decolonisation of thought (or of management science, in our case), can we add nuance to the debate by dialling down the overreactions and zeroing in on the real issues at hand?

“Postcolonial” studies is a complex academic discipline developed by Indian, Caribbean, Latin American and African scholars critical of the European philosophical tradition. It analyses the status of peoples from the

Global South as one of symbolic and political dependence under colonialism. It encourages new ways of thinking rid of the abstract universalism allegedly imposed by the West and emphasises the importance of local knowledge.

It was a welcome new line of intellectual inquiry and produced inspiring scholarship as early as the 2000s, first in the United States, the United Kingdom, India and certain African countries. Postcolonial studies also took root in Latin America at the impetus of sociologists and scholars lesser known in Europe.

The foundational scholars in postcolonial studies emerged in the 1970s and 80s (Said, Bhabha and Spivak). In the management science field, postcolonial thinking started to gain ground in the 2000s (Prasad, 1997 and 2003; Banerjee, 2001), but unevenly from one area of study and continent to the next, with most scholars writing in English (Ibarra Colado, 2006; Alcadipani, Khan, Gantman & Nkomo, 2012; Gantman, Yousfi & Alcadipani, 2015; Ozkazanc-Pan, 2015; Grey, Huault, Perret & Taskin, 2016).

Going beyond the histrionics and France's specific political backdrop, the current debates provide, in our view, an opportunity to lay the foundations for an actual discussion which could contribute to reviving intellectual inquiry on these issues in a management science context. A wide range of arguments are advanced in these debates: some are resoundingly

⁽¹⁾ For the sake of simplicity, our paper does not distinguish between these two disciplines, which may be seen as differing somewhat.

⁽²⁾ This article was translated by the Translation Center of the French Ministry of the Economy, Finance and Industrial and Digital Sovereignty

controversial,⁽³⁾ while others bring into focus some real problems with postcolonial studies. Some arguments date back over 20 years, and others still come from more recent clashes.

Several criticisms are frequently levied against postcolonial studies:

- **It does not have a unified theory**

Certain scholars critique postcolonial studies for its “disarray” (Taguieff, 2021).

The diversity of postcolonial studies has never been in doubt, and many of its scholars wear this plurality as a badge of honour. Few discuss “postcolonial theory” in the singular (Bancel & Blanchard, 2017). From scholars linked to subaltern studies to feminists, not to mention comparisons of Indian and Latin American scholars among themselves, it is apparent that many different subgroups exist, corresponding to different socio-historical contexts, for example. However, there is no denying that postcolonial studies draws on a common set of ideas revolving around the relationships between capitalism, colonial conquest and racism.

- **“It isn’t new”**

It is indeed ironic that a discipline which criticises the monopoly of European philosophy sometimes clearly and extensively draws on the likes of Nietzsche, Adorno, Derrida and Foucault. Bayart (2010) demonstrates that a substantial body of scholarship predating postcolonial studies highlighted some of the themes it covers, both from the perspective of anticolonialism (Césaire, Fanon, Memmi and Sartre) and history (empire building). Bayart also argues that postcolonial studies was not met with as much negativity in France as is commonly claimed. In his view, giving credit to the discipline’s forerunners and pioneers would prevent it from being lauded for originality and encourage its theorists to show more restraint.

When it comes to management science, the spread of the reassessment of colonialism and the acknowledgement of the dominance of Western models are relatively new developments. In the 1970s and 80s, most professor-researchers were educated in North America and the Global South had no standing in the realm of research and teaching. Entire branches of management science were imported to Europe from the United States, undermining, incidentally, past schools of thought and methods, including French ones. Management historians have only very recently rediscovered these intellectual contributions (Poivret, 2018). After Europe, Global North scholarship was exported to other continents.

- **Researchers or activists?**

The Human and Social Sciences community in France has recently contended with a heated debate over the age-old problem of the respective roles of researchers

⁽³⁾ Our paper refrains from addressing such academic controversies as the purportedly dubious credentials of postcolonial scholars, the fact that some individuals have made a lucrative career out of it and the formal quality of postcolonial research.

and activists. Many people took stances and signed petitions advocating each side, with some defending the standard roles of activist researchers and others endorsing axiological neutrality (Heinich, 2021). In the field of management science, which rarely addresses these issues, the debate has ushered in the concept of “critical performativity” (Huault et al., 2017) and field research methods, such as participatory action research, that bring together members of the social sector and seek to combine research and tangible action. As important as they may be, these issues are neither new nor specific to the group of intellectual who support decolonising management science.

Going beyond the debates about postcolonial studies’ importance, originality, American origins, reception in France and lack of restraint, some fundamental questions have been raised and should, in our view, inform management science researchers.

We divide them into three groups which have been explored by Global South scholars (regardless of whether they align themselves with postcolonial studies). In other words, we find that their writings already provide guidance and cautionary advice that would be eminently beneficial to those looking to rid management of hegemonic patterns.

Leaving aside cyclical disputes, these intellectuals’ views help avoid some of the impasses we see today. As the African philosopher E. M. Mbonda puts it, “such an undertaking should gauge the impasses, traps and ruses to be able to stave them off or thwart them” (2021, p. 245⁽⁴⁾).

Our paper draws on three scholars with a complex message pointing the way forward for postcolonial studies while also calling attention to its potential pitfalls. All are from the three main cultural hubs of the intellectual Global South (India, Latin America and Africa).

We address the following three groups of question:

- The first involves giving a voice to marginalised populations and recognising the value of indigenous cultures, with Spivak providing insights into these questions
- The second involves the system of colonial domination as a main analytical tool, with Quijano offering his insights
- The third involves the trend of epistemological relocation and the associated risk of becoming closed off, with Mbembe’s serving as our guide

Giving a voice to the “subaltern” without essentialising them: Spivak’s insights

Do we not run the risk of stereotyping or encouraging an artificial dichotomy of dominator versus dominated, clearing the conscience of researchers identifying with, quite naturally, the “right” side? What do we mean when we refer to marginalised, “subaltern”

⁽⁴⁾ Note from the translator: Page numbers always refer to the versions of the texts indicated in the bibliography.

populations? And how should researchers conduct themselves, particularly if they are from the Global North, to establish a connection with them? These are just some of the questions directed at postcolonial theorists regarding the groups of people overlooked by the social sciences.

Researchers' more or less artificial support of the "cause" of the populations they are studying has long been an issue for anthropologists. The fascination and affinity that develop between researchers and the group they are living with and getting their information from has frequently been studied. In the context of management science, it is clear that the close relationship professor-researchers have with business leaders (who may even fund their research) makes for findings that are hardly neutral. Management science is faced with the major challenge of becoming more inclusive of other populations, include those overlooked until now, but having said that, it should not fall victim to the same pitfalls as anthropologists once did.

This risk has already been noted. Olivier de Sardan (2008), for instance, uses "cognitive populism" to refer to the pseudo-"discovery" of a people by the researcher and the resulting moral reaction to it. Subsequently, in describing the people's "misery", the researcher adopts a "miserabilist" posture that takes the form of two registers which can be complementary: a posture of "compassion" and a posture of "denunciation" (Olivier de Sardan, 2008, p. 228).

Management science needs to open up, unless it is content to join the ranks of the social sciences which "pay no significant attention to the fact that societies are profoundly divided and inegalitarian and that a high percentage of their population is excluded from power, knowledge, or wealth" (op. cit., p. 227). International management scholars have, for example, called on the research community to be more "inclusive", with Prasad (2016) asking "How might we study international business to account for marginali[s]ed subjects?" and "How can we make such knowledge serve in the interests of the many—the 'two-thirds world' [...]—rather than in the interest of the few in the 'one-third world'?" (Jack et al., 2008, p. 881). Basically, how can we be inclusive without being miserabilist?

Through her complex, evolving work, Spivak⁽⁵⁾ provides two main insights into these questions.

Spivak quite naturally draws attention to "the subaltern",⁽⁶⁾ i.e. those (and particularly women) who, in addition to being dominated, have no collective identity.

⁽⁵⁾ Born in 1942, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has translated work by Derrida. A Professor of Literature at Columbia University and former colleague of E. Said, her most famous work is *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988), which was translated into French in 1999 and 2020 (the latter edition being referenced in our paper). She does not consider herself to be a postcolonial theorist, even though major scholars of postcolonial studies frequently cite her work.

⁽⁶⁾ The term "subaltern" originally comes from A. Gramsci and was "discovered" by R. Guha's (1923) Subaltern Studies Group. It was used from the founding of this "school" in the 1970s. For more on how Gramsci's work is used in management science, see F. Palpacuer & N. Balas (2009).

They are not at the bottom of the social ladder but outside of it. They are the "nameless" who have nowhere to express themselves. They can physically speak (which answers the book title's question) but cannot be heard, according to Spivak. They do not have a class consciousness: "The working class is oppressed. It's not subaltern" (p. 132). They are "[o]n the other side of the international division of labo[u]r" and, as women, are "doubly in the shadow" (p. 68). Spivak means Bengali peasants as well as all other populations on the margins of the global economic system, including domestic and service-sector workers. We can add to this list sailors aboard Flag of Convenience ships, miners in illegal mines, construction workers in the informal sector, Pakistani workers in the United Arab Emirates and Singapore, etc. – those who do not show up in any statistical "dashboard". These subalterns are, in this instance, women: "the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow", Spivak writes (p. 65). On top of their social domination, they are dominated by an oppressive patriarchal system.

Nevertheless, in reality the subaltern population is diverse and they should not be "essentialised" as inherently marginalised individuals. The point is not to ascribe to them a sort of purity entailing the limitless support of the intellectual taking up their cause.⁽⁷⁾ Moreover, Spivak adopts a harsh stance towards out-of-touch intellectuals (particularly Westerners) who, believing themselves to be supporting a moral cause, are only perpetuating a condescending view of the "other". As Spivak argues, the researcher's usual position, relying on the "native informant" with whom the Northern researcher sympathises but sees as a completely "exotic other", does not actually give a voice to local populations or allow the researcher to listen to them. For this reason, other forms of cooperation and coproduction of knowledge should be explored.

It is therefore important to factor in this "subalternisation" of (many) populations, but by recontextualising them in both economic and ideological "macrostructures".

Nor does getting the "subaltern" – and thus often indigenous populations – to speak necessarily involve, according to Spivak, delving into the past. A large branch of postcolonial studies, consistent with the critique of Eurocentrism, seeks to promote ancient knowledge. The return of African languages, the revival of ancestral Aboriginal wisdom and the use of Native American ritual practices, for example, are presented as alternatives to imported European models. In the management science context, this "nativist" branch has introduced "authentic" forms of organisation that draw on original cultural principles. A number of avenues have been proposed, such as Indian-style trust management (Nayar, 2011), pastoral democracy (Moussa Lye, 2014), *ubuntu* communitarianism (Mangaliso, 2001), the spiritual revolution of Afrotopia (Sarr, 2016), and indigenous methodologies and statistics (Kovach, 2009).

⁽⁷⁾ Spivak does not agree with the position taken in recent writings by scholars with decolonial leanings, such as N. Ajari (2019), who asserts the existence of a special essence (of "Black life", in this case) related to the conditions of "indignity" which outstrips all other divisions.

While this research is consistent with the necessary goal of decentring and provides a number of insights, at times it is based on the belief that focusing on local values and knowledge (often handed down from the past) will ensure the relevance and efficiency of the solutions put forward.

Spivak argues that “reverse ethnocentrism” should be avoided, as it is motivated by nostalgia for a pre-colonial purity that is largely a myth anyway.

She goes further, seeing, based on the Indian case, this “return to the homeland” as an argument used by the post-independence elites to “ensure the continuation of their power after the colonisers were gone”. It also serves as a way to legitimise the nation-state as the inevitable system under which action takes place,⁽⁸⁾ when, as she points out, supranational solutions should be explored.

Identity politics is a trap to be avoided (Spivak, University of California video conference, 2008). Spivak went as far as leaving the Subaltern Studies Group⁽⁹⁾ because she felt it was going in an overly backward-looking and essentialist direction.

Along the same lines, Hurtado-Lopez writes that “[t]he idealisation of the subaltern amounts to a simple reversal of Eurocentrism” (2017, p. 48).

Using a colonial perspective suited to contemporary contexts and without a single model: Quijano’s insights

If we constantly view history under the lens of colonialism, doesn’t that serve to suspend history in a period that ended long ago? Aren’t the colonial origins of some societies on the verge of disappearing? Doesn’t postcolonial studies ultimately crystallise the idea that there was only one unequivocal, universal experience of colonialism, responsible for every woe? Consequently, doesn’t it articulate a mechanistic vision of the processes of domination, replacing “class conflict” with a conflict of peoples with the same characteristics of a social-historical “law” from which no one can escape?

Cooper (2009) views colonialism merely as a form of imperialism, a much broader phenomenon than Europe’s 19th-century relations with Africa and other overseas territories (such as the Russian and Ottoman empires). In this wider vision, forms of political and social organisation vary considerably. For one thing, colonised populations did not remain idle and played a role in shaping certain parts of the societies in question. Bayart (2010) refers to postcolonial studies’ “reifica-

tion” of colonialism, noting that the field overlooks the specific historical contexts of regions and countries as significantly different as the Caribbean, India and sub-Saharan Africa. Moreover, it is “obsessive in its reinterpretation of history” (Taguieff, 2020).

We can use A. Quijano’s body of work to avoid at least some of the pitfalls highlighted by different scholars.

Quijano, a Peruvian sociologist,⁽¹⁰⁾ argues that while political colonialism had effectively disappeared since the success of Latin American independence movements, the colonial structure of these societies persists. In his view, colonisation consolidated the first “world-system” in history: global capitalism, which at that time acquired an unrivalled structural coherence.

Quijano uses the concept of “coloniality of power” to refer to a set of forms of power that contribute to the persistence of a concentration of economic, social and cultural power.

More than an extensive historical analysis, Quijano puts forward a tool for analysing societies, made up of four inextricably linked elements:

- The control of work and labour (formerly slavery and today taking the form of insecure and informal employment and the exploitation of farming communities)
- The control of authority (revolving around the nation-state, a necessary component of capitalism)
- The control of sex (revolving around the heterosexual family)
- The control of intersubjectivity (models imposed from the outside at the expense of indigenous cultures)

In management science, the concept of coloniality of power can help us examine the methods of organisation and control used by certain multinational companies, as well as the ideological influence of managerial orthodoxy, which has spread globally. Quijano emphasises that our mentalities are pervaded by supposedly universal patterns. His main contribution is that he shows how this coloniality of power produces “social classifications” regarding production, gender and race. Race is, he argues, the most recent and least theorised distinction. It is indeed unexplored by management science research, even in a subfield such as international and intercultural management where it would seem to be more relevant (Jack et al., 2008). He adds that race is “the most efficient instrument of social domination produced in the last 500 years” (Quijano, 2020).

For Quijano, this does not mean that the forms of control are identical everywhere and correspond to a single model. All these elements of control exist elsewhere and were historically known, but are in a sense being reused

⁽⁸⁾ The current political situation in India, under the leadership of N. Modi, seems to prove her point.

⁽⁹⁾ Note that the Subaltern Studies Group, created by R. Guha in the 1970s, originally brought together Indian and British PhD students keen to reclaim the historiography of the working classes. G. Spivak jointly edited with R. Guha a number of the 11 volumes of collected works produced by the collective between 1983 and 2000. A selection of these works, titled *A Subaltern Studies Reader 1986-1995*, was published in 1997 by the University of Minnesota.

⁽¹⁰⁾ Anibal Quijano (1928-2018) was a leading Latin American postcolonial theorist who in 1992 began participating in the renowned Modernity/Coloniality Group alongside R. Grosfoguel, W. Mignolo and S. Castro-Gomez, among others. The quotations of his work appearing herein were translated from the original Spanish into French by the author of this paper. A chapter is dedicated to both Quijano and Spivak in the French-language anthology *Les grands auteurs à la frontière du management* (M. Bidan and Y. F. Livian, Éditions EMS, 2022).

to advance the interests of capitalists. Quijano's definition of power is therefore neither that of a capacity held monopolistically by a single social group (as Marxists defined it) nor that of a diffuse and fluid phenomenon, as in the postmodernist view.

Nor does the "coloniality of power" mean that there is a stable, dominant model that individuals have no possibility of changing. Conflicts do arise between social actors and can bring about new arrangements.

Accordingly, it is not about exposing a general, unequivocal model and trying to replace it with another one: Quijano is wary of "major systems". Researchers have to get out in the field and "observe [people's] social action, their relationships and the processes in which they participate" (Quijano, 2020, p. 305).

Postcolonial global capitalism reemploys methods already observed at other times in history, but articulates them so as to advance its objectives. Current forms of labour control, clearly historicised by Quijano, refer to contemporary realities: not only the wage-labour relation (on which Marxism has focused too exclusively, according to Quijano), but also the informal employment system in the Global South, pseudo-"independent" employment, insecure jobs and the 40 million people still living in slavery (based on a 2016 report from the International Labour Organization).

Quijano's work thus addresses some of the criticisms levelled at a postcolonial vision for supposedly being monolithic and ahistorical.

Decentring from the West towards a new universalism: Mbembe's insights

Doesn't putting the West at a distance mean favouring a return to compartmentalised knowledge? Doesn't claiming an identity, however legitimate of a claim it may be, mean abandoning the search for a (human, scientific) community?

Mbembe⁽¹¹⁾ agrees with the critical analysis of capitalism laid out by postcolonial scholars and, like Quijano, highlights the production of racial hierarchies linked to colonisation and the triumph of capitalism, accomplished in the name of "universal" values. But he puts forward a modern vision, observing that the condition of "the Black man" (i.e. a being who has been stripped of all identity) is becoming the most common state in a globalised world: "[A]ll those currently viewed by the neoliberal economic order as forming a surplus of humankind" (2014, p. 73).

According to Mbembe, we are living in an economic system that exploits not only new territories (colonies) but its very home base in that it exploits workers and resources. "[C]apitalism [...] recolonise[s] its own cent[re]" (Mbembe, 2013, p. 257). What is referred to as "subalternisation" following Spivak's work is here "the becoming black of the world" (idem, p. 257), i.e. the

fact that the state of discrimination and insecurity under which "Blacks" lived during colonialism has become the lot of every population group (he recently reiterated this idea using the notion of "brutalism" (2020) as a system universalising extraction and predation). While there is cause for revolt regarding this "becoming black of the world", a number of pitfalls should be avoided that he sees as particularly prevalent in the postcolonial studies orbit. First, overly sharp dichotomies (dominator/dominated, emancipation/subjugation) are to be dispensed with. Taking the case of Africa, the power gained after independence movements also involved violence, including fratricide. What Mbembe describes as the "postcolony" (2020) is a "private government" in which the new independent elites seize resources, sometimes with the complicity of the people, who are themselves prone to "the stupefaction experienced in pleasure".

As Mbembe puts it, "[...] by insisting too much on difference and alterity, this current of thought [postcolonialism] has lost sight of the weight of the fellow human (*le semblable*) without whom it is impossible to imagine an ethics of the neighbour" (p. 17). Today's world should disregard borders and encourage mobility.

Consequently, Mbembe believes it is out of the question to succumb to the temptation of Afrocentrism: "We have to move beyond the issue of origin and enclosure" (2017, p. 385). Most of us, he points out, have multiple affiliations (at times including Western influences).

The perpetual return to origins and to authenticity only ends up "encourag[ing] Africans to think of themselves as victims of history" (2017, p. 390). Mbembe argues that we need to abandon our obsession with identity and work on forging "common ground". We have to "accept cosmopolitanism" (p. 385) and work to improve the movement of people and ideas.

This building of a new "universal", rid of the hegemonic ambitions of the West, should incorporate the practice of sharing, a "mutuali[s]ation of knowledge", following the example of African cultures, he adds, which "have been shaped by movement and mobility". Hence his critical stance on a number of postcolonial works he judges "outdated" and "which serve for nothing more than appeasing the conscience of the ones performing such charity, and which cultivate in the recipients of such gifts a logic of resentment and a posture of irresponsibility" (2017, p. 390).

Conclusions

This paper has sought to show that, going deeper than recent media debates, non-Western scholars provide insights into the fundamental questions raised by postcolonial studies and caution against the potential for impasse.

Drawing on the work of major Global South scholars, some promising avenues for decolonising management science include (i) research that takes marginalised populations into account, while avoiding the pitfalls of exclusivity and populism; (ii) a socio-historical analysis of capitalism that incorporates race but does not

⁽¹¹⁾ Achille Mbembe, a Cameroonian philosopher born in 1967, is Research Professor at the University of the Witwatersrand (South Africa) and a Visiting Professor at Duke University.

promote a single model; and (iii) a perspective decentred from the West, but “pluriversal”. These avenues appear to avoid what could be considered the early problems of postcolonial studies, such as nostalgia for the past and identity-based division.

Our paper is not comprehensive and more work in the same vein should be conducted. In the research sphere, two trends have recently raised serious questions:

- The casting of doubt on science in general and clumping it together with Western domination, a point of view that has been spread by some postcolonial scholars, are bound to cause concern. Without even evoking “white reason”, we observe how some researchers have gone too far in claiming that any form of science is colonial. The colonisers “built prisons, slums / Laboratories and roads”, writes, for instance, an Australian [sic] researcher (Smith, 2020); (scientific) research being one of the ways by which imperialism took place, in her view.

Moreover, research methodologies should “privilege the voices and goals of indigenous populations” (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Aside from the fact that such an “indigenous methodology” approach dispenses entirely with critical distance and research freedom, it is putting scholars under the obligation to speak on behalf of their community (and their community only),⁽¹²⁾ thus running the risk of an “identity assignment” (Roudinesco, 2021). Some consider that such an individualistic approach to research is, ironically, in line with the neoliberal ideology condemned elsewhere (MAUSS, 2018).

- The negative, if not downright “declinist” tone of postcolonial writings has also sparked a wide backlash. The Algerian writer K. Daoud once described postcolonialism as “stifling” him (*Le Point*, 2017, cited by Gauthier in the French journal MAUSS). And for the Cameroonian philosopher J.G. Bidima, “[p]ostcolonial studies prevents us from thinking about the collective” (2020). Without abandoning a critical stance, a number of scholars feel it is time to rediscover “the good, the just and the beautiful” (the title of a special edition of MAUSS, a journal that is far from a bastion of neoliberalism, published in the first half of 2018), so as to bring about a “generous, creative and anti-utilitarian” critique.

While making sure to avoid these pitfalls, the work to contextualise and historicise management science must continue to be undertaken: for example, by incorporating overlooked dimensions (gender, race), by recontextualising international management practices in Global North-South power dynamics, and by opening up institutions and research methods to a more diverse array of continents and languages.

At any rate, the postcolonial perspective in management science should be seen more as a space for inquiry than as the “single, better alternative to existing management theories” (Frenkel & Shenhav, 2006). This space should be one where topical fundamental

questions can be explored once secondary disputes have been set aside. This space is essential today if we want to succeed in “elevating” management science to a field that is broadened, open and multipolar.

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⁽¹²⁾ At symposiums and conferences on indigenous methodologies, which are held frequently in Canada, Australia and New Zealand, researchers often begin their talk by indicating which tribe they belong to.

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