The Politics of Location: Krishan Kumar's 'Westernized' Sociology of the Postmodern

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ABSTRACT:

While critiquing certain nineteenth century sociologists for their Eurocentric analyses, Krishan Kumar himself conducts a very Eurocentric analysis of the theories of post-industrial societies in his 1995 publication, *From Post-Industrial to Postmodern Society: New Theories of the Contemporary World*, stating that they "engage with the real life of the societies in which they appear" (vii) and "speak to *our* [emphasis added] contemporary condition . . . help us to understand that condition" (viii) and shows "how much recent theories can tell us about *our* [emphasis added] times and ourselves" (4). The questions that the paper poses are: whose reality is he talking about? Who constitutes this "our"? Whose theories are considered reflecting that reality? Who is included/ excluded from this reality and this analysis? Is he implying that everyone's reality is the same?

The paper contends that Kumar's arguments are based on extremely Eurocentric assumptions. His is a 'western' perspective. In his analysis of the theories of post-industrial society, he studies only western societies, draws his examples exclusively from the West, and concludes that these theories do reflect the reality of western societies. Kumar's "our" is actually only that of the West. He tends to generalize, universalize, and decontextualize. Despite his South-Asian origin, Kumar seems completely westernized, co-opted, indoctrinated and seduced by the homogenizing rhetoric of 'western' discourses.

KEYWORDS:

Krishan Kumar, politics of location, postmodern, South-Asian, sociology, Eurocentric.

In his 1978 publication, *Prophecy and Progress: The Sociology of Industrial and Post-Industrial Society*, Kumar states that the picture of industrialization presented by nineteenth century sociologists is far from reality; that they tend to generalize, universalize and decontextualize. He critiques nineteenth century western sociologists for not considering how change was born at different places and for generalizing what happened in Britain at one time, in one industry, in one town. He critiques their 'western' accounts for their Eurocentrism, for their tendency to universalize.

But in his 1995 publication, *From Post-Industrial to Postmodern Society: New Theories of the Contemporary World*, Kumar discusses how "our" reality has changed

significantly and how the theories of post-industrial society help us understand that change. He discusses how the birth of information as a concept and as an ideology is inextricably linked to the development of the computer; the evolution of systems of information technology in relation to the military and work requirements of the West, especially by the United States; the implications of the convergence of the computer with telecommunications for the production and dissemination of knowledge; how "the increase in knowledge is qualitative, not just quantitative" as the new media of communication allows narrowcasting (specialized, individualized) as well as broadcasting (standardized, for mass audience); how information technology revolution leads to compression of space and time; that "[k]nowledge does not simply govern, to an unprecedented extent, technical innovation and economic growth; it is itself fast becoming the principal activity of the economy and the principal determinant of occupational change" (*From* 10-1).

He conducts a very Eurocentric analysis of the theories of post-industrial societies, stating that they "engage with the real life of the societies in which they appear" (*From* vii) and "speak to *our* [emphasis added] contemporary condition . . . help us to understand that condition" (*From* viii) and shows "how much recent theories can tell us about *our* [emphasis added] times and ourselves" (*From* 4). The questions that arise are: whose reality is he talking about? Who constitutes this "our"? Whose theories are considered reflecting that reality? Who is included/ excluded from this reality and this analysis? Is he implying that everyone's reality is the same?

Kumar also discusses how Daniel Bell compiles data from various sources to suggest that the information economy in the US amounts to about 46 per cent of GNP and more than 50 per cent of all wages and salaries earned, that is, more than half of the national income and to conclude that "[i]t is in that sense that *we* [emphasis added] have become an information economy"; that this remarkable degree of information activity as suggested by Bell is matched by the rapid growth of information workers in the occupational structure (almost 47 per cent by mid-1970s in the US, according to Bell, more than 65 per cent by early 1980s in the US, according to Naisbitt, about 65 per cent by late 1970s in Britain, according to Barron and Curnow) (as quoted in Kumar, *From* 11-2).

Notice the use of the pronoun "we" by Daniel Bell. Instead of questioning who constitutes this "we" and whose economy is Bell referring to, Kumar uncritically uses the data to conclude that significant changes have taken place in the information society. Which societies are included/ excluded from the same is an issue that is conspicuous because of its absence. It is even more surprising that Kumar, who raises questions of perspective and critiques western sociologists for their Eurocentrism in 1978, ends up falling in the same trap in 1995. In fact, after reading his 1978 publication, one expects his critique to become more stringent and focused in his 1995 book. But instead of becoming more perspectival in his approach, he becomes more co-opted by the 'western' hegemonizing discourses by 1995.

Further, Kumar argues that knowledge has become the driving force of the economy, changing the very mode of production and wealth creation; that "just as industrial society replaced agrarian society, the information society is replacing the industrial society, more or less in the same revolutionary way" (*From* 13). He adds that theoreticians like Tom Stonier[i] and Yoneji Masuda[ii] stress the positively utopian dimensions of the post-industrial information societies: it eliminates need for war, it encourages peace, democracy, learning and leisure for everyone, it is an era of plenty, a classless society, a computopia on earth; that therefore,

> It would be perverse and foolhardy to deny the reality of much of what the information society theorists assert. The common experiences of daily life alone are enough to confirm that. Automatic tellers in banks, automatic billing at supermarket check-outs, the virtual disappearance of cheques along with cash in most monetary transactions, word processors and fax machines, direct on-line hotel and airline bookings, direct broadcasting by satellite from any part of the world: all these are facts of everyday life for most sections of the population in the advanced industrial countries. (*From* 15)

One would like to ask: Whose economy and whose reality is Kumar talking about? How does he assume that fax machines and computers will work at so many under developed places in the world which do not even have a stable electricity supply? Clearly, he excludes whatever lies outside "most sections of the population in the

advanced industrial countries" (*From* 15) – that is – the majority of the world. A certain 'western' perspectival approach is more than apparent here.

After tracing the debates within the discourse on information society, Kumar concludes by stating that, "'The information society' may be a partial and one-sided way of expressing the contemporary social reality, but for many people in the industrial world it is now an inescapable part of that reality. To describe this as 'false consciousness' misses the point" (*From* 34). So information society is both an ideology and a reality. Whether the radical changes brought about by development in information technology result in an information revolution or not, Kumar is not sure, but he does admit that the remarkable speed and potential to bring about radical change of information technology's diffusion cannot be denied. So he argues that: changes – yes, but revolution – no, there is continuity plus change and information society is both a reality (though only partially so) and an ideology.

Here, he does mention that the reality reflected by the theories of the information society is partial and that these developments widen the gap between producers and consumers (Third World countries) of new technology but in an extremely peripheral manner, as a tokenistic recognition of the existence of the Third World. He ultimately concludes that the information society is both a reality and an ideology for "most" people (*From* 15).

In his analysis of Fordism and post-Fordism, Kumar states that while the theory of the information society emphasizes the forces of production, post-Fordist theory emphasizes the relations of production. Throughout his analysis he uses western theorists and western examples. He evaluates the case of The Third Italy[iii] in detail as he thinks that Italy is "a good example because it was developments there that first gave rise to post-Fordist theory" (*From* 37). He also discusses debates around flexible-specialization[iv] and disorganized capitalism and concludes that the latter "is a new phase of capitalism . . . [it] expresses capitalism's inherent instability and restlessness in a more extreme form than ever before, and so points to qualitative changes of culture and politics in the future" (*From* 49).

But where are these developments in the production styles taking place? Clearly, they are affecting the West. And what is happening in the West is seen to be relevant and applicable everywhere else. Throughout his analysis, the focus on western societies is quite evident. Nowhere does he talk about how these changes manifest themselves in non-western societies; how these developments in technology impact non-western cultures; the conflict and the turbulence these changes cause in the social, economic, political, and cultural life of non-western peoples. Obviously, the change to the post-industrial order was not endogenous, even, welcome and natural in all parts of the world. The complete absence of the non-West in Kumar's analysis is disturbing, to say the least.

Kumar also deals with the relationship between post-modernity and post-modernism; the overlaps between theories of Post-Modernism, Post-Industrialism, Post-Fordism and the Information society; the relationship between post-modern theory and reality; the debates within the discourse of post-modernism: its origins and development; the relationship between post-modern culture and post-modern society; the post-modern condition; the relationship between post-structuralism and post-modernism; and the debate around the question whether post-modernity represents a new period in history, a coming into being of a new society or civilization? Needless to say, questions like – Whose society? Whose civilization? Whose reality is being talked about as postmodern? – are again not raised by Kumar. He focuses on questions of validity of these theories and not on questions of location and perspective.

Kumar concludes that though there are continuities with developments in the past and the basic principles are the same but the range, intensity, speed and scope of change that the information society represents is far greater:

The information revolution is a reality, and *we* inhabit that reality. It has affected the way *we* see the world and the way *we* live in it. The flow of images and information does indeed give rise to the sense of the 'hyperreal', as Baudrillard and Eco claim. *We* do live in the 'society of the spectacle', as the Situationists of May 1968 in France were already proclaiming. *Our* image-saturated world, ceaselessly fed by the electronic media, does change *our* perceptions of what is

real, and makes it less easy than formerly to distinguish image from reality. [Emphases added] (*From* 162)

Once again, one can notice the use of pronouns like "we" and "our" in the above quoted passage. Kumar is extremely unselfconscious while he uses these terms. It is an indication of the extent of his co-option within 'western' discourses.

Kumar states that post-modernity is lived-existence, is to be found in the practices and discourses of everyday life, is "familiarly lived" (*From* 185). For him, post-modernity *does* represent a new face of capitalism and it is important "to recognize the novelty of *our* times" [emphasis added], the miraculous changes happening world over (*From* 200). Kumar asserts that the theories considered in this book

> . . . do speak to *our* current condition. Like all theories they are one-sided and exaggerated. That is why they are useful and stimulating. No doubt they leave out much that needs to be considered. Arising as they do out of the recent experiences of western societies, they may carry too much the marks of their origins in particular cultures and even particular classes. . . . They are ambitious in their scope, sensitive to historical change, and unwilling to be limited by the boundaries of academic disciplines. [Emphasis added] (*From* 201)

He concludes that, despite their limitations, these theories are representative; they do reflect the reality of their times. He states that they are Eurocentric, they focus on western societies; "they have drawn attention both to the global character of these

alleged developments and to the centrality of the west in their direction and diffusion"

(*From* 200). But despite this awareness, Kumar himself gives a very Eurocentric account

of these theories. He does not raise the extremely pertinent question: whose condition

does post-modernity describe?

To conclude, one could state that in 1978, Kumar critiques Western sociologists

for being Eurocentric, for considering the West as representative, for imposing the

reality of the West on all others. In 1995, he himself, self-consciously speaks from a

Eurocentric perspective. He admits the centrality of the West in his analysis.

Throughout the book, his analysis is supported by examples[v] from the West – from the

United States, Germany, Japan, and Italy and so on. Despite his awareness, he

concludes that the theories of post-industrial society speak to "our" times and reflect

the reality of "our" times. The usage of such pronouns like "we" and "our" to refer to

postmodern reality by Kumar is extremely unselfconscious and indicates the extent of

his co-option within the paradigm of 'western' discourses. Second, in 1978, Kumar

critiques the generalizing, universalizing, decontextualizing tendencies of theories of

post-industrial societies and advocates context-sensitive analysis. In 1995, he does

exactly what he critiqued in 1978: he generalizes, universalizes, decontextualizes, and

emphasizes "the global character of these alleged developments" (*From* 200).

Kumar approaches these theories from a sociological, descriptive position and

not from a critical, postcolonial perspective. He seems to buy the theory of the global

village when he proclaims that the theories of post-industrial societies speak to "our"

times and help us to understand "our" times (*From* 201) rather than critiquing the notion of 'one' world and highlighting that the world of the privileged and the under-privileged are extremely different, their realities, their truths, their problems and challenges are essentially different. The discursive power of postmodernism as well as the reality it represents needs to be resisted by the non-West in order to survive. The pluralism of the global village is not predicated on equality but is an illusion that hides fundamental inequalities. He does not raise important questions like: Who constitutes this postmodern "we"? Who is included/ excluded from the reality as well as the discourse on postmodernism?

So Kumar objectively reports sociological facts from the point of view of a western intellectual whose reality is constituted and defined by the theories of post-industrial societies (information society, post-Fordism, and postmodernism), rather than critically engaging with the 'facts' these theories represent, making the point that 'facts' can be different for different people, that discourses and theories are constructs, that the politics behind these constructs need to be exposed and that those who are at the receiving end of these theories and 'facts' need to interrogate the same using their own tools of analysis and understanding of the world.

In the final analysis, although a sociologist, claiming objective representation of reality, Krishan Kumar presents a colored picture of the postmodern society. Although a South Asian Diasporic, Kumar analyzes the postmodern society from a 'western' perspective, basing his arguments on extremely Eurocentric assumptions. He studies

only western societies, draws his examples exclusively from the West, and concludes that these theories do reflect the reality of western societies. Kumar's "our" is actually only that of the West. He tends to generalize, universalize, and decontextualize. Despite his South-Asian origin, Kumar seems completely westernized, co-opted, indoctrinated and seduced by the homogenizing rhetoric of 'western' discourses. He ends up using a similar rhetoric and terminology that erases contexts, the 'real' differences between the reality of the privileged and the not so privileged.

NOTES AND REFERENCES:

[i] In the chapter "The Information Society" in *From Post-Industrial to Postmodern Society: New Theories of the Contemporary World*, Kumar states that for Tom Stonier, "the post-industrial information society is not only peaceful and democratic, it is also an era of plenty. It is an era in which everyone will live a life of learning and leisure" (*From* 14). For further exploration of the same, see Stonier, Tom. *The Wealth of Information: A Profile of the Post-Industrial Economy*. London: Thames Methuen, 1983.

[ii] In the chapter "The Information Society" in *From Post-Industrial to Postmodern Society: New Theories of the Contemporary World*, Kumar adds that for Yoneji Masuda, the information society will be a universal society of plenty, a computopia, a classless society, a democratic and happy society where individuals will have a symbiotic relationship with nature. For further research

on the same, see Masuda, Yoneji. *The Information Society as Post-Industrial Society*. Bethesda, MD: World Futures Society, 1981.

iii According to Kumar: "During the 1970s and 1980s, Italian and other observers began to document and discuss a phenomenon that they came to call *la Terza Italia*, the Third Italy. The Third Italy was distinguished from, on the one hand, the First Italy of large-scale mass production, concentrated in the industrial triangle of Turin, Milan and Genoa; and, on the other hand, the Second Italy of the mezzogiorno, the economically undeveloped South. The Third Italy was, by contrast, a dynamic area of small firms and workshops in the central and north-eastern regions of the country" (*From* 37-8). So, small workshops, specialized production, use of high technology, skilled workers, good working conditions, design-conscious production, flexible division of labour, flatter hierarchies, innovation and enhance adaptability, support of political and financial institutions, sense of stability etc. were dominant characteristics of the Third Italy, according to Kumar.

iv Flexible specialization, a central feature of post-Fordist production, enables economic production of small batches of goods directed to specialized sections of the market. It depends on new information technology's numerically controlled machine tools.

v Kumar quotes examples from the West throughout his book, *From Post-Industrial to Postmodern Society: New Theories of the Contemporary World* (1995), including the following pages: 7-8 (US), 11-12 (US, Britain), 17 (Japan), 21 (England), 23 (Britain), 26-30 (Germany, Japan, US, Britain, France), 37-45 (Italy), 45-46 (US), 47 (Germany, Japan) and so on.

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