Refracting Eurocentrism, operationalizing complicity: The Swiss Sonderfall as a vantage point

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Abstract
Critiques of the parochialism of urban theory have resulted in appeals for more global urban studies. Yet, the fruitful responses to postcolonial work frequently remain sequestered, reflecting the persistence of Eurocentrism as a burden shouldered largely by the so-called “South”. This paper aims to shift the work implied by critiques of Eurocentrism – from the labor of translation to the chore of representation – to those whom Eurocentrism serves. We argue that recognizing the ways academics are always already complicit in Eurocentrism by working within the academy is an important starting point. Can the functions of complicity also serve to redistribute the burdens of redress and allow cultivating new possibilities to respond? To understand the functions of complicity, we take inspiration from the historical position of Switzerland on “the margins” of colonialism. Scrutinizing the history of a formally non-colonizing country reveals multiple forms of taking part in, benefitting from and assisting in colonial efforts. Applying these learnings to institutional and epistemological possibilities of working with complicity in the academy, we interrogate the potentials and limits of these functions to address the reproduction of Eurocentrism.

Keywords
Eurocentrism, complicity, urban theory, postcolonial theory, Switzerland

Introduction
If you can only be tall because somebody is on their knees, then you have a serious problem. And my feeling is, white people have a very, very serious problem, and they should start thinking about what they can do about it. – Toni Morrison (1993, our emphasis)
The last two decades of urban studies have arguably been defined by a reckoning with the parochialism of theory and the consequences for interpolating the experiences of a “world of cities” (Robinson, 2011). In the maelstrom of debates, the fixture of Eurocentrism has provoked varied responses, including manifestos that have called for provincializing urbanism (Sheppard et al., 2013), the dismissal of critiques about Eurocentrism as “obvious” (Storper and Scott, 2016) and suggestions that these dismissals reveal that scholars are simply “afraid” of the critiques wrought by postcolonial theory (Roy, 2016). Though a wellspring of fruitful debate, at times the incisive, field-defining critiques of the “Southern turn” have also become blunted instruments whereby corrective inclusion or citationary strategies uphold existing epistemological and institutional arrangements of power (Gilroy, 1993; McKittrick, 2021; Mott and Cockayne, 2017; Oswin, 2020; Roy, 2017, 2020). Moreover, it has become clear that the onus of redressing the epistemological and institutional effects of Eurocentrism have been sequestered, placing these responsibilities on a few shoulders.

Reflecting on these responsibilities, we take inspiration from the well-known Toni Morrison television interview in which she was questioned about whether she still experiences racism, given her many accolades. Morrison dismissed this as the wrong question and instead reframed the problem in terms of the function of race for people “who practice racism.” “What are you without racism? Are you any good? . . . Do you still like yourself?” she asked, making it clear in the simplest terms whom racism serves. The stress on they in the introductory quote highlights whose problem racism is, and, importantly, whose responsibility it is to address it. Similarly, in this paper, we suggest refracting the focus planes of Eurocentrism, in order to shift the responsibilities of addressing Eurocentrism towards those whom it serves. As Suhraiya Jivraj notes, recognizing the ways academics are always already complicit by working within the academy is an important starting point (Jivraj, 2020) and is key to our propositions in this intervention.

We understand complicity to be the participation in wrongdoing or the failure to resist it; being complicit can impl to reap benefits from ongoing structural injustices (Aragon and Jaggar, 2018). This complicity is not always intentional and cannot be easily be circumvented, if possible at all. Yet, perhaps the recognition of our complicity within the reproduction of Eurocentric hierarchies, can be used to assume responsibility if strategically redeployed to avert the reproduction of Eurocentrism in the academy: How can the functions of complicity redistribute the burdens of redress and allow cultivating new possibilities to respond?

An emerging yet long overdue and groundbreaking debate about Switzerland’s position on the margins of colonialism (Fischer-Tiné, 2015: 221, see also Eichenberger et al., 2017; Ogle, 2020, but see Ziegler, 1978, for a much earlier critique) enables us to put the notion of complicity into sharper focus. Scrutinizing the history of a formally non-colonizing country to learn about complicity bears critical challenges: We acknowledge that Switzerland is neither a homogeneous national container, nor can the multifold connections associated with Swiss colonial entanglements be plausibly attributed to Switzerland as a whole. But the ways in which Switzerland was marked, as Patricia Purschert and Harald Fischer-Tiné write, by “different ways of participating in, profiting from and supporting colonial endeavors” (2015a: 7) reveal various functions of complicity. To this end, we use the heuristic of the Swiss Sonderfall as a shorthand for understanding the versatile relations of complicity of multiple state and non-state agents, as well as structural relations that cannot be attributed to particular agents. In particular, we consider key interconnected tropes of imagining Switzerland as a historical Sonderfall in the context of European colonialism: the maxim of neutrality, the claim to colonial innocence and the practicing of colonial amnesia. These
tropes provide insights into the strategies that allowed the country to flexibly participate in and distance itself from colonial relations (Purtschert and Fischer-Tiné, 2015b: 8). On the one hand, the Sonderfall characterizes Switzerland as a regime of disengagement from the colonial power centers, which made the country a place of refuge, resistance and militant anti-colonialism (Fischer-Tiné, 2015). On the other hand, the Sonderfall is marked by Swiss participation, including in relations of trade and banking that flourished under the maxim of neutrality and by adopting “mythical norms” of racial difference that establishes Swiss whiteness as the norm and all others as deviations warranting response – both in terms of racial tolerance or racial profiling (Boulila, 2019; Wa Baile et al., 2019). These tropes pinpoint functions of complicity in colonial relations, characterized by ways of exploiting neutrality, covert conduct, opportunistic modes of playing multiple sides, as well as more insidious and subversive affirmations.

In this paper, the Sonderfall serves as a heuristic through which to learn about the functions of complicity. We use these insights about complicity to discuss conditions and possibilities of operationalizing these functions in academia. These possibilities are delimited by a context rife with incentives to uphold existing epistemological-institutional arrangements. Moreover, those working with complicity to redress Eurocentrism may find themselves situated in the liminal spaces of precarious employment or as an “outsider within” (Collins, 1986). Yet, we suggest that the awareness of this complicity serves as a reminder that there is no neutral outsider. This conclusion helps to collapse assumptions about who is responsible for addressing Eurocentrism, and to think through possible ways of tackling this “hydra-headed monster” (Wallerstein, 1997: 22) by repurposing the functions of complicity. Concretely, it can provoke us to reconsider how researchers climb the ladder of authority; what teaching staff assign to students as urban theory; what researchers of cities far and near read as theoretical; and what languages English-educated scholars use to do so. Perhaps this heuristic can offer new ways of forging collaboration, exchange and dialogue that are not predicated on the labor being done by “Others” or the value of “Other theory” measured in terms of their usefulness for predetermined research agendas (Mavhunga, 2018).

Given that we take inspiration from Swiss history, and given our own positions within Swiss academia, it is important to offer a further clarification of our analytical approach. Though this paper derives from a discussion of our own positionality, connected to an institutional context (Switzerland) that continues to be well resourced, it is not tied to ideas about identitarian modes of positionality as we are neither Swiss, nor have we enjoyed stable positions in our Swiss institutional homes (or elsewhere in our academic lives) from which to claim a representative position. Rather, our discussion emerges from a frustration with the durability of Eurocentrism notwithstanding its critiques, and especially with responses that reinscribe its epistemological and academic structures. We critique these solutions as a way to shift the disposition to academic work, providing a set of provocative propositions about possibilities to act. While these propositions are inspired by the functions of complicity we derive from our analysis of the Swiss Sonderfall, they are not particular to the Swiss institutional context of academia. Indeed, as we explain below, the problem of Eurocentrism is not limited to Europe and we aim to address our field of urban studies across a variety of institutional contexts. Acknowledging the pressures of the neoliberal university and the constraints it places on researchers, we nonetheless hope to offer some tools that open up ways of taking responsibility.

To develop these propositions, we proceed in three steps. First, we review the problem of Eurocentrism and the responses it has provoked within urban studies to highlight the distribution of burdens in addressing Eurocentrism. We take Eurocentrism as an
epistemological failing, which can also thrive at institutions of the so-called “Global South”, and is entangled with the illogics of race, the project of modernity and its attendant fallacies of developmentalism. In the review, we consider the nature of this epistemological failing in urban studies and the institutional arrangements that reinforce these epistemological divides through the embodied division of labor. Second, learning from the Swiss Sonderfall, we offer a set of provocations about the functions of complicity drawing an analytical bridge between the Sonderfall and the academy. Focusing on practices of depoliticization, forgetting, disengagement and the politics of granting asylum, we investigate the tactics of complicity through which Swiss colonial entanglements helped to sustain the machinations of empire. Finally, we discuss the labor of redressing Eurocentrism with a new lens and consider the broader implications of operationalizing complicity for disrupting the reproduction of burdens as well as the limits of this work.

**The focus planes of Eurocentrism**

Epistemological pluralism too often amounts to epistemological unaccountability. “Others” are set artificially apart, rendered isolated objects of study rather than knowledge co-producers, at best case material rather than scholarly interlocutors. The mainstream (within Anglo-American geography and the academy at large) demands that those on the outskirts spend our time and energy making our case over and over and over again. – Natalie Oswin (2020: 13)

Eurocentrism is expressed in a number of ways, including through historiography, the parochiality of its universalism, assumptions about (Western) civilization, Orientalism and the illogics of race. Eurocentrism becomes visible in attempts to impose the theories of progress or projects of modernity through attendant fallacies of developmentalism (Hall, 2018; Said, 1978; Stoler, 2010; Wallerstein, 1997). It underscores the stories told to justify war (Gregory, 2004), and it is driven by the regulating fiction depicting the models all cities are intended to strive towards (Robinson, 2002). We consider the ways in which Eurocentrism pervades the social sciences, both in their epistemological and institutional dimensions, to better understand responses to Eurocentrism and their shortcomings. Focusing on urban studies, we discuss an interdisciplinary area of scholarship encumbered by the Eurocentric legacies of disciplines like geography to which it is attached (Blaut, 1993; McEwan, 1998; Said, 1993), though geography is hardly the only discipline to grapple with this lineage. As urban scholarship trespasses neat academic boundaries, our review similarly draws on relevant insights from a variety of sources. In refracting the focus planes of Eurocentrism, we seek a clearer view of the ways it is inscribed and fought in the academy. This helps to identify the way that various responses, as Natalie Oswin notes above, can imply asymmetrical burdens for those on the “outskirts”. Though Oswin’s paper is about queer geographies, we are drawn to her analysis of how mainstream Anglo-American geography upholds existing epistemological structures and fosters epistemological unaccountability as well as the uneven distribution of academic labor.

Immanuel Wallerstein has long argued that “Social Science has been Eurocentric throughout its institutional history, which means since departments have been teaching social science within university systems” (1997: 21, see also Grosfoguel, 2013). Wallerstein also helps to specify “Europe” as a cultural expression rather than a continent, one that includes Western Europe and North America. Indeed, understanding the nature of Eurocentrism through this dimension is important in order to not misread an epistemological question as an “obvious” problem, or confuse it for an empirical one (Roy, 2016; Storper and Scott, 2016). He argues that until 1945, social science was primarily based
in France, Great Britain, Germany, Italy and the US; this lineage resulted in the choice of subject matter, theorizing, methods, and epistemology, thus “reflect(ing) the constraints of the crucible within which it was born” (Wallerstein, 1997: 21). Subsequently, the study of the English factory worker became a definitive study of social class, and the qualitative investigation of the Jewish ghetto in Chicago a model of urban ethnography. Therefore, at the heart of this epistemological failing (Mignolo, 2007; Quijano, 2007) is not the continent of Europe, but rather the privilege of thinking and speaking the language of theory (Zeiderman, 2018) and defining what counts as theory itself. Understood in this sense, Eurocentrism can also thrive at institutions of the “Global South” where the epistemic violence of Western dominance in curricula remains intact in spite of, at times, political transformations (Heleta, 2016).

The problem of Eurocentrism in terms of urban theory can be characterized by the ways it is in turn exclusive, reductive and dominating (Narayanan, 2021; Tuvikene et al., 2016). Epistemological exclusion can perhaps best be captured in the bifurcation of theory and empiricism, the “regulating fiction” (Robinson, 2002: 545) that narrates, as Jennifer Robinson has forcefully argued, the global “Western” city as the source of models and theories whereas “Other” cities are relegated to the “shadows” (McFarlane, 2008), “considered exemplar or exception rather than a source of urban geographical theory” (Lawhon and Roux, 2019: 1261). This exclusionary gesture is connected to the reductive ways these shadow cities are “read, described and understood largely in terms of theory built elsewhere” (Bhan, 2019: 641). As Julie Ren writes, the theoretical significance of these “Other” cities is reduced to “validating, expanding, reinforcing or otherwise responding to prevailing canons of urban thought” (Ren, 2015: 330). Thus, one key aim in addressing Eurocentrism is to dismantle “the imperial hubris of Northern and Western “schools” of urbanism” (Peck, 2015: 161). Beyond the epistemological dominance of these “schools” of thought, Eurocentrism is structurally embedded and reinforced through institutional arrangements. For instance, Kong and Qian verify and specify the quantitative impact of Anglophone institutions, scholarship and scholars in urban studies; their review of publication and citation patterns finds that “Eurocentrism in geography is mainly in the form of Anglo-American hegemony” (Kong and Qian, 2019: 46). These findings recognize the challenges for non-English theoretical contributions (Korf, 2021) and underline the epistemological impact of Anglophone institutions (Müller, 2021).

**Responding to Eurocentrism**

This impasse, also described as a “Southern urban critique,” has inspired a well-spring of debate and reinvigorated research that expands our awareness of forms of knowledge, intellectual traditions and entrenched research practices (Hilbrandt et al., 2017; Lawhon and Truelove, 2020). In the past decade, a growing body of work has interrogated the language of theorization and the sites of theory-making, insisting on a more equitable inclusion of research sites, scholars and institutions. For instance, studies of Anglophone dominance have led to a call for more plural linguistic origins, to diversify the speakers in order to dismantle “linguistic privilege,” especially in gatekeeping positions on journal mastheads (Husseini de Araújo and Germes, 2016; Müller, 2021). This reflects a broader call in the academy for structural reforms and the fraught attempts to facilitate a more equitable inclusion of scholars (Ahmed, 2012). The limitation of sites and institutions of theory-making prescribing its provincialism implies a need to compensate for gaps or deficiencies in knowledge. Consider, for instance, the call to “provincialize Europe” in order to question the singular determinism of urban modernity (Chakrabarty, 2008; Roy, 2009;
Zeiderman, 2008) or to “provincialize global urbanism” in order to identify and empower “new loci of enunciation” (Sheppard et al., 2013: 895). These focal shifts towards “Southern Urbanism” or “subaltern urbanism” (Roy, 2011; Schindler, 2017) engender a variety of enriching scholarship: explorations of indigenous urbanism, which avoid the overemphasis on the colonizer in postcolonial contexts (Monteith, 2019); scholarship examining what exactly characterizes “Southern urban practice” in order to expand a theoretical vocabulary (Bhan, 2019; Hilbrandt, 2021); comparative work that explores everyday urban narratives of the street to develop Southern theory without a North (Narayanan, 2021). This work has at least begun to ensure the “21st-century relevance” of urban studies given the dominion of majority world cities (Parnell and Robinson, 2012: 593).

Going back to Wallerstein’s historical perspective also cautions of the difficulties of responding to Eurocentrism. To overcome the Eurocentric heritage of the social science, which has distorted its analyses and abilities to deal with the contemporary world, Wallerstein urges us to

(…) take a careful look at what constitutes Eurocentrism, for, as we shall see, it is a hydra-headed monster and has many avatars. (…) Indeed, if we are not careful, in the guise of trying to fight it, we may in fact criticize Eurocentrism using Eurocentric premises and thereby reinforce its hold on the community of scholars. (1997: 22)

Despite the well-intentioned desire to slay the monster, the approaches taken to address Eurocentrism might rely on premises that only further serve to reinforce its durability. As Jane Jacobs notes, the problem with some counter-Eurocentric gestures is that a “sensitivity to difference is simply another form of Eurocentric expansionism in which the experiences and cultural productions of the marginalized now become a means by which the core understands/deconstructs itself” (Jacobs, 1996: 30). Responses to Eurocentrism then become another way of self-narration. They become, as Derek Gregory puts it so appositely, yet another set of “stories the West most often tells itself about itself” (2004: 4). For instance, there is a tension between, on the one hand, the claims that the “Global South” is empirically different with varying intellectual and vernacular traditions, and, on the other, the need to re-examine knowledge production in the context of postcolonial relations in general (Lawhon and Truelove, 2020). This tension reflects the legacies of knowledge production through which “First World” geographers discover the “Third World” (Sidaway, 1992) and reify uneven relations of knowing. Clapperton Mavhunga has pointed out the need to think about people of Africa as more than just “informants” to plug into Euro-American debates (Mavhunga, 2018). Relying on these structures of generating research, theory generated in the “Global South” must offer a lens on the “North,” in a fruitful way challenging the deterministic or developmentalist assumptions often ensnared in theory (cf. Santos, 2016; Narayanan, 2021), but also having to prove its worth in terms of its utility to the North. Ultimately, this results in a devaluation of local or regional knowledge, whereas area expertise, as Tariq Jazeel (2016: 651) suggests “can be enough to consign oneself to the discipline’s margins” (Sidaway, 2013). Even area studies which builds its raison d’être on the need for regional, area-based knowledge, has moved towards pursuing more transnational, comparative theorizations in a crucial self-critique of its imperialist tradition and “enduring orientalism” (Sidaway et al., 2016).

Eurocentrism is also reproduced in the way that apposite critiques from postcolonial scholars become blunted instruments of corrective inclusion (Gilroy, 1993; Roy, 2017) or citationary strategies that uphold existing epistemological and institutional arrangements. The “subaltern speaker” or Southern scholar has at times been appropriated as citationary
alibis (Roy, 2020), serving to legitimize rather than partnering in theory building. The potential for citation to function as a form of domination rather than as a form of engagement points to the complexity of this epistemological problem (McKittrick, 2021). Differently put, tasking the “Other” with the responsibility of redressing Eurocentrism results in insipid forms of tokenism (Mignolo, 2009) that might address visibility, but fails to instigate structural change. These hierarchies can result in exploitative relationships where, for instance, race functions as a resource that can be “tapped into” for the labor of generating data (Marchais et al., 2020: 374). Thereby efforts to decenter Eurocentrism by learning from the “Other” seem to delegate the work away, keeping Eurocentrism intact.

Furthermore, postcolonial critiques of Eurocentrism remain sequestered, reflecting the persistence of remediating Eurocentrism as a burden shouldered largely by the “Global South”. Once relegated to the niches of urban studies, the debate has grown into a stronger strand of critical inquiry. Yet, these postcolonial theorizations continue to take place at the sidelines of urban studies debates, as a framework that is relevant predominantly for the South. Taking into account the institutionalized practice of knowledge production within the academy highlights that the other side of “learning” (Jazeel and McFarlane, 2010) implies perhaps also the role of someone “teaching.” The labor demanded of scholars outside the canon to translate their findings is exhausting (Oswin, 2018), and rebranches the uneven hierarchies of knowledge production. Oswin articulates this epistemological position as one that is “tired of translating insights” for the “broader urban studies audience” (2018: 544). This epistemological position of an “Other” geography (Oswin, 2020) is thus connected to this academic burden. In a related literal sense, “linguistic translation is a problem for others” (Korf et al., 2013: 3, quoting the International Benchmarking Review of UK Human Geography). The reception of “Other” geographies reflects Spivak’s critique of a “mute audience,” a vessel for learning for which the subaltern speaker is responsible (Spivak, 1999). This burdening shows how “translation work is laden with uneven relationships, often distributing the labor of understanding unevenly” (Ren, 2021: 6).

Our review of the focus planes of Eurocentrism shows the range of responses the hydra-headed monster of Eurocentrism evokes. Examining these responses highlights the difficulty of effectively addressing Eurocentrism, in particular given the complicity of some recurring responses in its reproduction. Ulla Vuorela, writing about the academic paradoxes of scholarly work from positions of privilege, warns of the “tacit acceptance” of hegemonic, universal, Western forms of thinking in order to win acceptance, which makes complicity particularly important for those “not quite situated at the centre” (2009: 20). Recent activism aiming to “de-colonize academia” has brought the challenges of complicity further to the fore. As Suhraiya Jivraj writes, academics “are effectively rendered complicit through their wage relation with universities reproducing knowledge systems, that emerged from and continued to be marked by coloniality and racialization” (2020: 552–553). The complexity of this position reveals, what Mary Lawhon calls, “the unease of being in between” (2020: 2), a situation many scholars interested in the task of decentering Eurocentrism find themselves in.

Refracting Eurocentrism then implies recognizing one’s positioning in structural relations of complicity that render it impossible to step outside. This resonates with Tariq Jazeel’s analysis that “Eurocentrism is not just a problem for Orientalists. It is a problem for all of us” (2019: 182). This recognition forces us to reconsider the responsibilities posed by critiques of Eurocentrism – from the labor of translation to the chore of representation. Refracting Eurocentrism brings into focus how these responsibilities cannot simply be outsourced. This recognition of responsibility reconfigures the challenge: rather than a guilty
sentence, we consider what complicity can do. In order to assume responsibility, we next scrutinize the functions of complicity.

**The functions of complicity**

To begin to unfold the functions of complicity we examine the colonial entanglements of Switzerland. Switzerland is often portrayed as the “non-colonizing European country *par excellence*” (Fischer-Tiné, 2015: 221) and analyses of the *Sonderfall Schweiz*, “the self-representation and self-understanding of Switzerland as a special case” (Eichenberger et al., 2017: 143), reveal multiple relations of complicity in colonial endeavors. These relations range from intentional participation in wrongdoing, to the collection of benefits from the wrongdoing of others, to the participation in unjust structures (Aragon and Jaggar, 2018). Our exploration focuses on the ways that complicity operates: its mechanisms rather than its purposes. Differently put, the *Sonderfall* serves as a heuristic to analyze how these relations of complicity function, often to different ends; it highlights the paradoxical versatility of complicity, which capacitates both domination and resistance. We interrogate the modalities and possibilities to act that emerge in and through these relational connections. Relations of complicity allowed, for instance, the safeguarding of anti-colonial activism as well as the exploitation of colonial harvests. These functions inspire a repertoire of acts that also appears to hold potential for working in the academy, including by exploiting neutrality, covert conduct, playing multiple sides and subversive affirmations.

**Exploiting neutrality**

In many ways, the maxim of neutrality made Switzerland central to European colonialism; the country’s presumed outsider position as a neutral mediator opened up multiple forms of participation and reaped attendant economic benefits. The guise of neutrality allowed Swiss trading houses to profit from transit trade (Haller, 2019), including the slave trade (Fässler, 2006), for instance in the raw materials used in Zurich’s textile industry (Brengard et al., 2020); it facilitated the participation in academic (Schär, 2015) and religious missions (see Eichenberger et al., 2017 for a more complete review). Furthermore, the neutrality of Switzerland entangled the country in processes of exploitation that accompanied decolonization, when the depositing of colonial wealth in Swiss banks became a cornerstone of the country’s continuing global importance in international banking (Ogle, 2020: 225).2

Understanding the functions of complicity in the context of Swiss neutrality politics can begin by considering how complicity can function by *exploiting neutrality*, when it “neutralizes” or depoliticizes profound political questions like national identity. With the country’s positioning between different European cultures, its linguistic and cultural variety, as well as its multifaceted international connections in trade, tourism, migration and investment, neutrality emerged as a political principle for Switzerland at the Congress of Vienna in 1815. Since Switzerland’s national framing is not imagined around an ethnic argument (Boulila, 2019: 1402) or a “shared myth of common origin” (Yuval-Davis, 1993: 623), neutrality ensured internal cohesion as it underwrote, what Stefanie Boulila calls, “the idea of a nation by will” (2019: 1402).

Beyond its use in the construction of a cohesive national identity, neutrality has served as a “regime of disengagement” (Gidwani and Reddy 2011: 1648), whereby political participation in global affairs has taken more covert forms. In contrast to the vivid tradition of participation in domestic affairs through democratic practices, neutrality builds on the imagination of Swiss international involvement as a technical, expert-based administrative
practice, thus dissociating this involvement from the sphere of political debate (Speich Chassé, 2012: 228). In this way, neutrality has also facilitated, as Daniel Speich Chassé argues, the depoliticization of Swiss foreign affairs in domestic politics, so that decisions about the global involvement of Switzerland could be seen through without debate (2012: 230).

As Fischer-Tiné writes, the maxim of neutrality has also aimed “to safeguard the territorial integrity of the country in relation to its neighbors” (2015: 223), serving as a political principle of foreign relations. In trade, it brought key economic advantages and political openings, as it supported Switzerland’s growing economy to access foreign markets, underwriting, for instance, colonial trade relations (Fischer-Tiné, 2015: 223). In international affairs, the maxim played out in the production of fundamental differences between the West and the rest of the world (Speich Chassé, 2013). As Speich Chassé (2012: 227) notes, “this formation gave rise to the hope of solving global problems of inequality by means of supposedly ‘neutral’ interventions of development cooperation. However, precisely this depoliticization reinforced and furthered the inequality of power relations.” Neutrality thus ensured the continuation of colonial relations far beyond the end of the colonial era under the name of development cooperation (Speich Chassé 2012: 228).

A set of assumptions emerge from these empirical examples about possibilities of intervening in the academy where being complicit can imply claiming neutrality when actually working towards political ends. By depoliticizing interventions, claiming neutrality allows working under the radar. What is more, neutrality permits assuming an official/influential role as a mediator that stands outside and using this position to act. This function of complicity can enable academics to act politically, under the guise of neutral expertise. It can enable taking a stance in university politics through committee meetings, a locus of review work and gatekeeping. But it can also allow one to leverage the authority of the neutral expert in policy issues beyond the university in transdisciplinary research projects or consultancies.

Playing multiple sides

We need to consider the opportunistic possibilities of playing multiple sides – of switching allies according to one’s needs – as part of this inventory of the workings of complicity. A discussion of Switzerland as a place of refuge allows learning about this flexibility, when considering the country’s support of anti-colonial activists and colonial empire, subsequently or at the same time. When used as a political instrument, neutrality ensured and served a variety of interests and relationships that could be flexibly played out.

For instance, neutrality rendered the country a place of refuge, a site from which political dissidents to colonial powers could practice resistance as seen in Switzerland’s role in anti-colonial struggles between 1860 and 1918. During this period, Indian revolutionaries, no longer safe in Paris and London, turned Geneva into a hub of anti-colonial struggle. As Fischer-Tiné (2015: 243) explains, Swiss politics at the time were marked by a confluence of the country’s free press, its education system, asylum regulations and humanitarianism, which supported the political struggle of the African and Asian diaspora.

However, the advent of the First World War and the importance of maintaining good relations with colonial powers led the Swiss to alter their refuge regime. As the Indian Revolutionarily Shyamji Krishnavarma writes, Switzerland sought to

“positively discourage” any “expression of opinion likely to wound the feelings and susceptibilities of any of the countries involved in the war… for the simple reason that the Swiss
Eventually, Swiss authorities proceeded to take legal actions, which restricted the work of activists and led to waves of expulsions (Laursen, 2017). Swiss neutrality implied a lack of commitment to one side. Differently put, practicing the outsider position allowed switching sides in the opportune moment, at times supporting the work of anti-colonial activists and, at other times, nurturing relations with colonial power.

Working with complicity in the academy can perhaps facilitate productive change by playing multiple sides. This work can include leveraging institutional access to redirect research funding from financing data harvesters (Marchais et al., 2020), towards funding these collaborators as theorists and authors. This flexibility might inspire coalitions with students, colleagues and complicit actors beyond the academy. Taking a page from Swiss history, it might imply acknowledging the dangers faced by scholars elsewhere wherein the possibility of academic life is increasingly curtailed by political uncertainty and censorship and offering refuge as a means to extend the Eurocentric privileges of state-funded security. Working with these scholars might also imply the need to work with the authoritarian institutions to build these partnerships. Moreover, scholars working in the corporate university (Spivak, 2012) are increasingly touched by precarious work conditions, regimes of competition for clout and resources (Busso and Rivetti, 2014; Leišyte, 2016; Lopes and Dewan, 2014). These conditions imply that granting refuge or redirecting funding is not a charitable gesture, but a political one; this gesture reflects a willingness to resist the submission to what might be expected and to reject the measures of academic authority and success that reflect institutional access more than academic merit. Complicity can then function to do the costly work of responsiveness, resisting these systems wherein some benefit at the cost of Others.

Subversive affirmations

There is something empowering about the possibilities of complicity that lies in the tactical shift to play by a different standard or a different game. These strategies can be called subversive affirmations. Following Inke Arns and Sylvia Sasse, subversive affirmation is a “tactic that allows (…) to take part in certain social, political or economic discourses and to affirm, appropriate, or consume them while simultaneously undermining them” (Arns and Sasse, 2020: 445). There is much to learn about subversive affirmations from the Swiss use of and distanciation from hegemonic colonial culture.

Despite the claim of “colonial innocence” (Purtschert et al., 2016), the public assertion of a presumed outsider position to European colonial empires, Switzerland made, as Purtschert and Fischer-Tiné (2015b: 2) claim, “full use of white supremacy” in its relations with colonial power. This form of participation entailed, as Barbara Lüthi et al. (2016: 2) write, “the replication of a racist and dehumanizing worldview, thereby complying with one of the most effective means of colonial power.” Colonial cultures and related national identity politics entered and then pervaded Swiss identity politics through a variety of means. The Swiss national exhibition of Geneva in 1896 juxtaposed the “Negro village” against a “Swiss village” establishing through this framing of an “exotic other” the alignment of Switzerland with “white Europeanness” (Michel, 2015: 413). In analyzing advertisements of the time, Purtschert’s (2019) work on Warenkolonialismus similarly demonstrates the ways narratives of colonial difference were brought into Swiss households in the decades before and after the Second World War. For Noémi Michel (2015: 413–414) these discourses
of difference “drew upon images of “blackness” or “Africanness” onto which the Swiss could project attributes they did not wish to be identified with.” She concludes that they “stabilized the outside of an imagined community formed by modern, proper, sophisticated, and economically advanced subjects” (Noémi Michel, 2015: 413–414). Being an outsider at the (colonial) margins does not minimize Swiss complicity in adopting discourses of white European colonial dominance; it reveals the ways hegemonic thinking can be “highly seductive,” particularly for those standing outside (Vuorela, 2009: 20).

Yet, the seduction was not complete. Rather, Purtschert’s analysis of the Swiss Mount Everest expeditions during the Cold War highlights a “specific Swiss form of Othering” (2015: 180). Like their rivals, the British, the Swiss drew clear distinctions between themselves and Nepalese “pre-modern” life. Yet, the Swiss mountaineers also relied on a connectedness between the regions based on “the supposed (topological) similarity” (Purtschert, 2015: 194). Thus, while Swiss complicity in colonial endeavors built on “hegemonic western discourses and their universalistic modes of thought and practices of domination” (Lüthi et al., 2016: 4), the position of Switzerland on “the margins” of colonialism also allowed for a certain distanciation from these practices and discourses.

Learning from the Swiss relationship to white supremacy, complicity enables some nuance and a certain distance in hegemonic culture. Can this distance be used to operate within the academic system towards addressing Eurocentrism? Rather than abandon all forms of authority in order to do one’s work, this function of complicity allows one to engage in more subversive relations towards authority. This could help to avoid the citationary practices that evince modes of exploitation or domination (McKittrick, 2021). Following Gayatri Spivak (2012), affirmative sabotage turns a destructive gesture into a creative one. As Debolina Dutta explains, affirmative sabotage designates a practice in which those who were not intended to be the beneficiaries of a system do not merely resist its working to render it useless by shutting it down; instead, they work at putting such machinery to a different usage that proves to be more politically beneficial. (2018: 234)

In grappling with the legacy of Eurocentrism, working with complicity avoids the need to stand completely outside the academy or establish a new, alternative canon (nor is this even possible). Rather, these subversions can be embedded in the everyday practices of how to read authority or to teach “canon” in more subversive ways. This changes the frames from within rather than relying on elsewhere and Others to fix it.

**Covert conduct**

Finally, we suggest, the functions of complicity point to forms of covert conduct, i.e., means to act while staying under the radar. These forms of covert behavior offer possibilities to get away with producing a mess without cleaning up. The disremembering of Swiss colonial entanglements offers one way to understand this function (Purtschert, 2019). In spite of the aforementioned entanglements, “Swiss public discourse refuses”, as Boulila writes, “to break with the conceptualization of Switzerland as removed from this history” (2019: 1413). In contrast to nations that have, with limitations, formally admitted to their colonial pasts, the Swiss self-perception as a non-colonial country with an “accompanying moral condemnation of colonialism” (Michel, 2015: 422) has hindered a process of decolonization, which has been compounded by critical shortcomings in historical knowledge
The disremembering of colonial entanglements works jointly with the perception of neutrality in ways that are mutually reinforcing. For instance, financial capital “lured into the imperial world”, found its way to neutral Switzerland during decolonization, as Vanessa Ogle has shown in her important research on the economic processes accompanying decolonization (Ogle, 2020: 213). Despite this emerging scholarship with its accompanying empirical corroboration, an amnesia about the heritage of this capital and the Swiss role in facilitating its circulation widely pertains in Swiss public debate.

This “postcolonial amnesia” (Boulila, 2019: 113–114) implies “a conviction that the history of race has been—and still is—extraneous to Switzerland” (Michel, 2015: 422; see also Lüthi et al., 2016: 3), resulting also in the accompanying “inability to productively name and contest racism” (Boulila, 2019). Whilst fortifying the continuation of colonial practices, Noémi Michel notes colonial amnesia in the belated “adoption of anti-racist legislation” and a limited understanding of racism “in which racism is reduced to individual intentions (...) disconnected from broader structures and histories” (2015: 422). Moreover, as Michel writes in relation to a 2007 election campaign of the SVP, a major right-wing Swiss political party, the framing of “those who are marked by racial difference (as) absent from the Swiss territory and body” situates “‘Swiss-ness’ as external to (post-)colonial history and racism” (Michel, 2015: 422, 410). That “(i)n Western Europe, and especially in Switzerland, (…) the idea is widespread that ‘race’ was abolished with the end of the Second World War” (2019: 14, our translation) implies a dangerous kind of erasure, as Mohamed Wa Baile et al. point out. In externalizing racism, whilst insisting on colonial innocence, postcolonial amnesia upholds arrangements of colonial power.

Translating these modalities of covert conduct to use in the academy offers possibilities to act through the institutional intransparency of gatekeeping. The anonymous work of peer review and committee memberships highlights that the academy is rife with covert forms of gatekeeping where the functions of complicity can be instrumental. Perhaps, these decision-making forums can be a space to covertly seek out or center outsider points of view, thus avoiding the hierarchies of corrective inclusion or tokenizing strategies of diversification. These forms of gatekeeping can also be turned into spaces of incubation, for instance by developing the potential of theoretical contributions, rather than rejecting the potential of this work by reading it as “only” empirical (see, for instance, the 2021 RC21 Panel “Presencing and publishing Urban Studies from Africa”, Aderinto et al., 2021).

**Limits and possibilities of operationalizing complicity**

Clearly, complicity can be employed by different interests towards different ends – for both the interests of colonial power and the anti-colonial activist. Hence, deciphering the work of complicity as exploitative, flexible, subversive and covert, requires further concretization: Who exactly does this work? How to begin to do it? What are some of its limits? And what can the recognition of complicity do for redressing the biases of Eurocentrism?

Acknowledging the ways that participating in the academy implicates us in writing canon, in teaching authority and in recognizing theoretical relevance shifts the responsibilities of addressing Eurocentrism, towards those whom it serves. Who benefits from Eurocentrism (echoing Morrison’s question about the beneficiaries of racism)? Working in the academy is driven by the need to seek authority in order to climb the ladder of academic recognition; hence, it is tempting those who speak the language of theory (Zeiderman, 2018) to participate in universal discourses as a way to “gain a voice” (Vuorela, 2009: 20). Our propositions are thus not addressing the “minority” but the many.
To begin to do this work requires, first, to acknowledge the need to adopt a responsible position, i.e., to move beyond the passive acceptance of citationary strategies, cultivate responsiveness, reclaim agency and develop strategies to respond. Following Jade Larissa Schiff, “[c]ultivating responsiveness means acknowledging and experiencing our political responsibilities so that we can assume them meaningfully” (2014: 27). Crucially, in Schiff’s view, responsiveness is not a given buy rather an ethical disposition necessary for us to “chose” to act (Schiff, 2014). Responsiveness comes neither from a boogeyman that scolds us into good behavior, nor is it about volunteering to be an ally. Rather, it emerges from understanding the collective reproduction of Eurocentric biases, and our implication in upholding Eurocentric institutions. Developing responsiveness implies deploying this knowledge in such a way that it forces us to consider to act.

But the functions of complicity face critical limits. Consider, for instance, the ways in which complicity was used to harbor anti-colonial activism from a Swiss place of refuge. Political dissidents could practice resistance, but they did so only for a brief period of time, remaining isolated incidents in the face of the state’s more overt strategies of power that eventually cracked down on them. Similarly, in the academy, the function of the strategies we propose faces limitations. To begin, they rely solely on the individual scholar. Even if complicity can work in allyship, it remains vulnerable to the responsibilization of the individual and a dependency on individuals to “do the right thing”. As such, it might ultimately serve to undermine mutual support and uphold institutional structures. Our propositions might speak to those in positions of precarious employment, those most restrained to act. Particularly amongst these scholars, covert behavior might produce situations of conflicting commitments. Moreover, complicity faces the dangers of being used to different ends. Shifting sides comes at the cost of being unaccountable, intransparent and uncommitted to a particular cause. Perhaps it can risk hindering the work of allies engaged in systemic reform. For these reasons and others, working in complicit ways suggests an unethical practice, easily associated with cowardice and immoral behavior. Disentangling the functions of complicity captures both the creative utility and vulnerabilities that a complicit figure is faced with. Thus, our propositions must be understood in the context of these caveats and as a repertoire of strategies to be pursued alongside other more overt political positions.

Nevertheless, we argue that the recognition of complicity provides important political resources for addressing the biases of Eurocentrism: to disrupt the tacit acceptance of “default” languages and the persistent marginalization of “Other” geographies. Most crucially, it is a modest attempt to reallocate the burdens of redress; a call for doing the work of dismantling/decentering Eurocentrism from its centers. “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” wrote Audre Lorde in an essay about the burdens of fixing the patriarchal academy, a sentiment echoed by both Morrison and Oswin above. Lorde argued that the structures in place facilitate having to cater to master narratives, to explain to the mainstream, to address the needs of the “mute audience” (Spivak, 1999). She bemoaned that “black and third world women” were being placed in a “tragic repetition of racist patriarchal thought” to educate the white feminists (Lorde, 2003: 27). She thus urged women not to “define the master’s house as the… only source of support” (Lorde, 2003: 27). Yet, as the epistemologies and institutional structures of Eurocentrism are difficult to leave behind, some might have to recognize this house as their home, and deal with their complicity in Eurocentrism. Discomforted by nesting in this house and left with the master’s tools only, this paper offers a proposition to operationalize complicity and to use its tools to alter the function of the house.
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Notes
1. Roy contends in her rebuttal to Storper and Scott that they misread historical difference for empirical variation. The problem with Eurocentrism is not a matter of producing more research or empirical attention to under-researched sites, but a question of theorization itself.
2. Though we focus on Swiss neutrality in relation to colonialism, an analysis of Swiss military neutrality, particularly in its role with the Third Reich or in the Cold War, would likely offer a fruitful contribution for the function of neutrality in a context of war or global crises, a timely issue.
3. New manifestations of such Swiss modalities of Othering are also salient in contemporary populist party politics. Driven by xenophobic agendas, these politics conflate the foreigner and the site of the urban as the problem, which is contrasted against a right-wing ruralist, green agenda. White supremacy is thus shrouded in climate-friendly platforms, what Ander Audikana and Vincent Kaufmann (2022) describe as “green populism.”

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