Notes on Hypothetically Existing Anthropologies:
'Imperial', 'Subaltern', 'Comprador'

Chandana Mathur,
National University of Ireland, Maynooth

In this paper, I will not focus on the precise relationship between US and Indian anthropologies (which has already been masterfully addressed in the other India paper in this session), offering instead a set of broad stroke reflections on 'imperial' and other anthropologies. I will refer to imperial/hegemonic anthropologies, although I concur with the session abstract that "it is anthropology in the United States that is commonly perceived as the most powerful and influential force within this landscape".

In thinking about American anthropological imperialism, it may be useful to revisit David Nugent's account, in his book 'Locating Capitalism in Time and Space', of the establishment in the early 20th century of what he terms "infrastructures of knowledge and control" by US capitalist philanthropies, like the Carnegie and Rockefeller foundations. Nugent argues that these entities funded social research both at home and abroad, investing in the cultivation of the university and the laboratory in order to curb social unrest and to dampen any challenges to capitalist modernity. After World War One, this funding was used to create a 'cultural vanguard', and among other things, it played a role in training significant numbers of non-western anthropologists. Indeed it gave rise in many parts of the globe to the 'world anthropologies' we are now seeking to engage. I would like you to hold on to that thought regarding the at least partly conjoined historical development of anthropologies in contexts that ranged from the United States to China to Southern Africa -- we will return to it presently.

These disciplinary processes, coupled with the overarching historical trajectory of North Atlantic capitalism, have engendered deep-rooted hierarchies of scholarship. To go on to the familiar discussion of the politics of citation, the simple question of who cites whom -- we all recognise that there are key knowledge bearers whose names must be invoked to gain access to research funding or to be published in leading journals, and we also know that they are not -- except in extremely rare cases -- based in the Global South. In this context, I am thinking of a bitter anecdote I had heard recently from a highly regarded Indian intellectual who had submitted an article to a Western journal about the vibrant and ongoing theorisation of secularism in India. He said that he was castigated for not engaging with Habermas (although his reflections on secularism are arguably the least compelling portion of the famous philosopher's corpus), the assumption being that a focus on the Indian debates would be deemed provincial by the journal's readership. While there are innumerable examples of generous citational practices by Western scholars -- I had mentioned to him Fenella Cannell's 2010 Annual Reviews of Anthropology article on 'The Anthropology of Secularism' which covers the Indian debates in detail -- the Indian academic was not all that mollified, noting that Western publications seem to require that non-Western scholarship should first receive a stamp of clearance from credible Western scholars. Even though Indian scholarship fares better than many others, in that it has been known for high theory in the West for over three decades due to the activities of the Subaltern Studies collective, there is still the default assumption -- entertained by funders, publishers and even ambitious students -- that it must be provincial and limited. The very cadences of non-Euro-American names seem to signal writing that may not be worth one's while: a Sri Lankan anthropologist describes recommending Talal Asad's work to a visiting American student who immediately wished to verify if Asad's work was much used by anthropologists in the US!

In this incident, the point is that Asad had been mistaken for a South Asian scholar because of his name, and because his work was being recommended by a Sri Lankan anthropologist in Sri Lanka. But this misrecognition leads on to an
important matter. Slicing extremely close to the bone in the Indian context, this is the issue of scholarship in India as against the work of scholars with Indian names and complexions based in the Global North, such as myself. Having once started out in India or elsewhere in the Global South, but with our advanced training and careers now firmly rooted in Euro-America, we may be regarded by some as a class of comprador anthropologists. We remain in dialogue with and sometimes impersonate the subaltern anthropologies we came from whilst simultaneously maintaining our positions in the imperial centres of anthropology (although Ireland would hardly count as such by any measure, perhaps letting me off the hook?).

Is it truly useful to posit that there is such a thing as 'comprador anthropology', entirely separate from 'subaltern anthropology'? Fortunately (for the sake of my sanity), I think the answer is no. The fickleness of intellectual fashion ensures that there is a great deal of porosity between 'subaltern' and 'comprador' anthropologies. One day one might be sweeping up cinders in a small anthropology department in some far corner of the globe, and the next, one may suddenly be airlifted to the Hilton Grand Ballroom for a AAA plenary session. It is the anthropological equivalent of having one's music discovered by Peter Gabriel. Once this happens, it is often a speedy transition to the ranks of 'comprador' anthropology. The deemed status of 'subalternity' tends to be fleeting after "discovery", and may vary inversely with the name-recognition of the scholar within Western academia. Not long after, s/he may be regarded as comprador, and perhaps eventually even as part of the imperial establishment.

It is a mistake, I think, to chase the mirage of 'subaltern anthropology' in this manner, and rather reminiscent of the doomed anthropological quest for the "authentic other". Recalling Nugent's historical account of the creation by US philanthropies of imperial outposts of anthropological knowledge across continents in the first half of the 20th Century, and remembering the class belonging of many anthropologists from the Global South, it is important to realise that anthropologies around the world were formed and are still being fashioned by interlinked processes.

In conclusion, having proposed and then deflated the categories of 'imperial', 'subaltern' and 'comprador' anthropologies, what are we left with?

First of all, none of this discussion seeks to deny that there are privileged anthropologies centred in the Global North and disprivileged anthropologies mostly in the Global South. These material inequalities do exist and they accord with the unequal geographies of world capitalism. The discussion of the partly conjoined historical development of anthropologies in the core and in the periphery does not take away from this. It is a dimension of hegemonic domination that the forces that nudged anthropology in particular directions in the imperial centres have also exercised the power to shape anthropologies elsewhere.

Secondly, although they are systemically rooted, and therefore persistent and pervasive, it is not necessary to wait until the global order itself changes to redress the received intellectual hierarchies of our discipline. Initiatives like the WCAA cannot be brushed aside as liberal me-too-ism, doomed to fail for as long as the current political economic realities endure. With all their limitations, 'subaltern' and 'comprador' anthropologies bring new orientations and new criteria for relevance to the fore, and it is important that they must be heard from in our discipline. Deja Lu, the new journal being developed for the WCAA, which will reprint the "greatest hits" articles from anthropological journals around the world, is a hugely important step in this regard, and may finally begin to make a dent in the directionality of citation even as neoliberal audit culture tightens its grip on the institutions and anthropologies of the Global North.