

Charlotte Baumann: Is Kant's universalist foundation of science colonialist -and (therefore) untrue?

Can I be anti-colonialist and yet seek universal truths about nature? I will attempt an answer via Kant, more precisely his 1st Critique, and the notion of transcendental subjectivity. While there have been many very good discussions of Kant's racism and its systematic role within his philosophy, they are either discuss Kant's practical philosophy, his conception of history and/or his account of who has the capacity to judge. I will share worries about a slightly different question. I wonder whether Kant's universalist foundation of natural science is problematic, on anti-colonial/moral grounds, and/or on theoretical/scientific grounds, whether there is a systematic link between both kinds of worries and how we should respond to them. I will conclude by suggesting that the problem with a universalist science is not the aim of finding universal patterns we can attribute to nature, but the status of certainty we attribute to these patterns. If we stop regarding them as certainties and start to see them as hopeful approximations or one among several ways of making steps toward a goal, that is shared in different cultures, we can save universalism as shared aim or task, while freeing it from colonialist overtones. This argument may be applicable in the practical realm as well.