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Book Review

Putting colonialism into the picture: Towards a reconstruction of modern social theory

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Abstract

This review essay presents and discusses revisionist approaches to the sociological canon with special emphasis on G. K. Bhambra and J. Holmwood's (2021) recent book *Colonialism and modern social theory*. Hereby, we draw attention to recent calls to open up the early sociological canon in order not only to open up for a more adequate account of modernity but also to address critically the concepts and categories that form mainstream sociology.

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Introduction

Since Gurinder Bhambra published her first book in 2007, she has become a most prolific and original contributor to the still ongoing debate about the Eurocentric nature of social theory, which has resulted in a lack of attention in the sociological canon to the role of colonialism in accounts of the formation of modernity. In this review essay, we focus on Bhambra's latest book *Colonialism and modern social theory*, which was written together with John Holmwood (Bhambra & Holmwood, 2021). In the book, the authors offer an insightful and most ambitious reading of the early

sociological canon in order not only to open up for a more adequate account of modernity but also to address critically the concepts and categories that form mainstream sociology. The second point, especially, makes this book important reading for readers outside the field of sociology as it prompts us to be more aware and critical of many of the concepts and categories derived from sociology that implicitly or explicitly underpin analytical approaches in the field of humanities. We begin the article with an introduction to Bhambra and Holmwood's book. After that we contextualize the book with reference to other revisionist approaches to the sociological canon and to Bhambra's ideas about 'connectedness' developed in her two previous books (Bhambra, 2007; 2014).

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Restoring the Context and Upsetting the Canon

In *Colonialism and modern social theory*, Bhambra and Holmwood discuss modern social theory in the context of the history of European colonialism through a presentation and critical discussion of the works of five key sociological figures of the 19th and early 20th century. Three of them — Karl Marx, Max Weber, Émile Durkheim — are iconographic representatives of early sociological thinking in the sociological canon. To this pantheon, Bhambra and Holmwood have added two other influential representatives of early sociological thinking who have had a more marginal position in relation to the sociological canon: Alexis de Tocqueville and W. E. B. Du Bois. Bhambra and Holmwood's reading highlights how Tocqueville, Marx, Weber and Durkheim in their analysis and characterization of modern society in various ways neglected or misrepresented the role of colonialism. By addressing this limitation, they intend to open up for a more adequate account of modernity and to address critically the concepts and categories that form mainstream sociology. Their inclusion of Du Bois is intended to open up for situating race relations with reference to the colour line traced by colonial modernity.

Chapter 1 places the writings of Tocqueville, Marx, Weber and Durkheim in a broader context of social and political thought. It is commonplace to link Hobbes and Locke's theories of government and private property with the rise of capitalism. In their revisionist reading, Bhambra and Holmwood point out that both Hobbes and Locke profited directly from colonial activities and that their ideas developed more with reference to colonial conquest than to the workings of a market society (28–29). Therefore, as Bhambra and Holmwood write: “liberalism operates through a foundational exclusion of indigenous peoples, enabling their dispossession and subjection to forced labour” (24). Neglecting this aspect of Hobbes and Locke's ideas has contributed to the formation of an understanding of modern society unrelated to its colonial context. In the same vein, Bhambra and Holmwood argue, that subsequent stadial theories formulated by writers in the mid to late 18th century — e.g., Montesquieu, David Hume and Adam Smith — represented colonial encounters as encounters between people at different stages of development. This representation did not only justify colonialism as a dynamic factor bringing progress to backward people. This stadial representation

of different societies also linked the coexistence of modernity in Europe and forced labour or chattel slavery outside Europe with prior conditions in the latter societies and not as “the reality produced under the ‘polish’ of commercial society” (46). In this manner, the formation of capitalist modernity is delinked from its colonial context and hereby “racialised division – the product of colonial encounters – are made to look like external impingements on modern social and political structures rather than features integral to them that derive from colonial domination” (25).

By addressing Tocqueville's classical studies *Democracy in America* and *The Ancien Régime and the Revolution*, Chapter 2 narrows down on the question of race in relation to the revolutions in America and France. Tocqueville discussed both revolutions as important for understanding political institutions of the modern world, and emphasized the importance of the “feudal constraints” in France. However, according to Bhambra and Holmwood, he passed over “the broader colonial conditions of the political institutions and processes he was analysing” (53). On one hand, Tocqueville was sympathetic towards increasing racial equality in America, but on the other hand, he was sympathetic towards colonial expansion.

While many scholars have struggled with this apparent inconsistency in Tocqueville's writings, Bhambra and Holmwood argue that Tocqueville was quite simply “willing to restrict the functioning of democracy [...] in service of French colonial interests, just as he recognized similar interests at play in other European powers and endorsed them as reflecting European superiority” (80). Accordingly, the chapter's main argument is (with reference to Uday Singh Mehta) that Tocqueville's writings reveal that liberalism and imperialism are mutually constituted (81). As the authors conclude, “For all of Tocqueville's anguish at the violence meted out to indigenous peoples and enslaved Africans, he made no concomitant critique of the colonial processes of expansion and conquest by European nations” (81).

In Chapter 3, Bhambra and Holmwood challenge Marx's understanding of colonialism and class. Their point is, that Marx primarily understands colonialism as one form of primitive accumulation. Accordingly, in Marx's analytical framework, colonialism represents a part of the prehistory of capitalism that eventually would pave the way for the formation of capitalist relations outside Europe. In doing so, Marx placed colonialism as a social and economic phenomenon within a universal history of capitalism linked with a stadial and

Eurocentric theory of historical change. According to Bhambra and Holmwood, this understanding barred Marx from carrying out a systematic analysis of colonialism as a social and economic phenomenon. Therefore, he failed to understand that the dispossession of indigenous populations under colonialism did not result in the formation of free labour (92). In not accounting for the continued existence of different forms of unfree labour under colonialism, Marx failed to account for the development of a racialised division of labour (101). Therefore, Bhambra and Holmwood suggest that Marx's concept of class is "difficult to reconcile with the requirements of a postcolonial sociology" (84).

In the following Chapter 4, Bhambra and Holmwood take issue with the perception of Weber's influential work as value-free social science. In contrast to dominating images of Weber as a dispassionate analyst of social issues the authors contextualizes Weber's thinking in the political realities of his time. In line with the overall argument of the book, Chapter 4's main point is that scholars have missed the presence and significance of internal and external colonialism in Weber's work. For example, Bhambra and Holmwood argue that Weber's canonical study of the link between the protestant ethic and capitalism entails an occlusion of the internal ("reinforcement of Germany's eastern border through settlement and reinforcement of German identity against ethnic Poles and Jews," 125) as well as external colonialism ("German expansion into Africa and the Pacific," 125). Moreover, Bhambra and Holmwood argue that Weberian scholarship has shown little interest in examining the relationship "between Germany's colonial activities and Weber's conceptualisation of the modern state" (127).

This leads to broader conclusions about Weber's account of modernity: "The ideal type of European modernity, for example, was established on the basis of a selection of historical narratives that simultaneously presented a normative argument about European progress and superiority." (136). Following from this more recent social thinking based on the Weberian methodological toolbox (such as Eisenstadt's work on "multiple modernities") reproduces the original understanding of "(European) modernity, although that understanding had a one-sided emphasis that neglected colonialism (137).

Not surprisingly, Bhambra and Holmwood also identify an absence of colonialism and empire in Durkheim's sociology in Chapter 5. Still, they find that his classic formulations on forms of solidarity, anomie,

secularism and religion are relevant to understanding current issues of race and religion in Europe. They argue that we should not associate Durkheim's concepts of mechanical and organic solidarity with a stadial theory or a typology of societies. Rather, they represent two forms of solidarity found in a variety of combinations in different societies (160). According to Bhambra and Holmwood, Durkheim did not regard religion as a "pathology" of modern society but expressive of positive forms of solidarity or belonging within a secular state. From this position, Durkheim did not link secularism with the end of religion but "postulated a pluralism of religious solidarities – between Catholics and Protestants, Christian and Jews – within a secular republic ruled by the norms of a religion of humanity, which encompassed all the plurality" (173). In doing so, Durkheim formulated a solution to the so-called "Jewish question" in France that found a powerful expression in the Dreyfus affair. It is from this perspective, Bhambra and Holmwood find, that central parts of Durkheim's sociology and conceptual universe are relevant for understanding multicultural difference after decolonization. Still, as they note in their concluding remark, "Durkheim answered the Jewish question only to fail before the Muslim question" and therefore he did not recognize the global colour line traced by colonial modernity (176).

In the final chapter before the conclusion, the authors present the work of W.E.B. Du Bois, who has only recently been gaining recognition in the sociological canon. However, their ambitions are not limited to make up for the unjust lack of attention given to Du Bois. Rather, the point is to see how "his work bears directly upon" the book's themes (177). Here they focus his "deep and embodied engagement with a specific society organised around racialised differences" (178) and the way in which he linked this to "the construction of a global 'colour line' in colonialism" (178). Accordingly, the authors conclude that the failure to incorporate Du Bois has had a global cost, because "Du Bois understood that the local constitution of the colour line in the United States was the consequence of a global colour line, which derived from colonialism" (206).

Throughout the book, Bhambra and Holmwood have identified what they perceive as limitations in early sociological thinking by restoring the context of sociology's concepts and categories. In the final chapter they argue that the limitations they have identified not only characterize the group of authors they have dealt with but are manifest in classic sociology and social theory in the form of "five fictions": (1) The idea of

stages of society; (2) The idea of liberty as linked with individual capacity to own property; (3) Methodological nationalism which focus on the nation-state leaving out its colonial and imperial origins; (4) The idea of class in capitalist modernity associated with formally free labour leaving out the central role played by unfree labour; (5) The idea of sociology as a critical project producing objective and universalistic knowledge without self-criticism and acknowledgement of the historical contextuality of sociology's concepts and categories. According to Bhambra and Holmwood, the aim of their analysis is not a call for the rejection of sociology and social theory. Rather, they hope that their contextualisation of the sociological thinkers will offer a point-of-departure for critical self-reflection and an openness to transform and reconstruct concepts and categories.

Putting Colonialism into the Picture

Colonialism and modern social theory can be seen as a sequel to Bhambra's previous work. Thus, in *Rethinking modernity* and *Connected sociologies* she was also concerned with the consequences of the Eurocentric nature of the sociological canon (Bhambra, 2007; 2014). Bhambra's earlier work was in many ways related to a revisionist stand, which since early 1980s has sought to reform the social sciences by addressing its eurocentrism by insisting on the need to understand the connectedness and structural integration of global economic and political processes. Influential examples of this stand are dependency-theory and world-system theory as formulated by scholars such as Samir Amin, Immanuel Wallerstein and Andre Gunder Frank.

For example, in the book *Eurocentrism*, Samir Amin (1989) analysed how the capitalist system has been able to reproduce itself. Here he argued that eurocentrism is an ideological product of the very same capitalism that it worked to legitimize. Relatedly, Immanuel Wallerstein (1996) headed a workgroup that aimed to "open up the social sciences" by critically examining social scientific knowledge and its core assumptions. The workgroup delivered a critique of western universalism and the positivistic method, which, they argued, the disciplines had inherited from their origin in the 19th century. Finally, in *Reorient* Gunder Frank (1998) aimed to turn Eurocentric historiography and social theory upside-down by seeing early modern economic history from a global perspective.

More recently, scholars have sought to address this problem of the Eurocentric nature of the sociological canon by drawing attention to and incorporating alternative discourses from outside Europe. Raewyn Connell is a notable example of this approach. She writes that she (in the 1980s) "argued that what sociologists call 'classical theory' is a myth, created much later than the lives of Marx, Weber & Durkheim, and that the real origins of European sociology were deeply bound up with empire and the problems of colonialism" (Connell, 2022). In 2007, Connell published her pioneering work *Southern theory*, which criticized classical theory for being constructed from global-North points of view (Connell, 2007). Connell presented social thinkers from sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, Iran, India, and Australia, and presented ideas for a new more "inclusive and democratic social science" (Connell, 2022). Likewise, Alatas and Sinha's *Sociological theory beyond the canon* offers another example of how to rethink social theory by showing the biases of Eurocentrism and Androcentrism and offering a corrective by including non-Western and female social thinkers (Alatas & Sinha, 2017).

For Bhambra – both in her earlier works and in *Colonialism and modern social theory* – the key strategy to counter the problem of Eurocentrism and to renew the sociological canon is "connectedness". In *Rethinking modernity*, thus, Bhambra contended that the dominating narrative of European modernity builds on and reproduces a Eurocentric logic, which she defined as "the belief, implicit or otherwise, in the world historical significance of events believed to have developed endogenously within the cultural-geographic sphere of Europe" (Bhambra, 2007, p. 5). Core-developments underpinning mainstream understanding of modernity as a historical phenomenon has, according to Bhambra, been mythologized to appear as resulting from an endogenous European development. However, in Bhambra's eyes, these developments are resulting from complex historical dynamics involving connections, processes, networks, actors in spaces stretching far beyond Europe. In this narrative colonialism and imperialism plays a far more central role than they do within traditional social science.

Thus, Bhambra presented sharp criticism of core-assumptions in the "sociological imagination": the myth of modernity as a specific European phenomenon, the insufficient acknowledgement of colonial processes, and the conceptual universalism. She took inspiration from postcolonial studies as well as from the Indian historian Sanjay Subrahmanyam's concept of connected

histories (Subrahmanyam, 1997). According to Bhambra, the idea of connectedness can open for a more complex and nuanced understanding of the historical processes. Moreover, knowledge of these historical processes has the potential to destabilize social theory by breaking down the dominating explanatory models and concepts. Therefore, connected histories should not simply produce new narratives and insights about historical processes to be added to dominant narratives without questioning these. For Bhambra, the methodology of connected histories would be central for questioning and moving beyond a comparative sociology based on “ideal typical abstraction” designed to “render certain interconnections ‘visible’” while reinforcing “the ‘invisibility’ of other connections” (Bhambra, 2007, p. 151). In doing so, Bhambra opened up a space for a rethinking of the place of colonialism in the sociological imagination with reference to a deconstruction of historical narratives about the formation of European modernity and to connected histories as methodological tool.

In her next book, *Connected sociologies*, Bhambra (2014) continued her project to reconfigure sociology and offers a critical reading of understandings of the global embedded in different sociological traditions. Her point is that although many approaches claim to be overcoming Eurocentrism, this way of thinking still colours their representation of the global as they fail to acknowledge the perspective of connectedness generated by colonialism, enslavement and dispossession or uphold ideal type abstractions – e.g., underdevelopment theory, models of multiple modernities or Ulrich Beck’s call for a cosmopolitan social science. At the same time, Bhambra engages with the calls to refigure sociology to allow new voices and events to surface – e.g., Connell’s opening up of the canon by including southern voices. While Bhambra is highly sympathetic of Connell’s alternative, she also criticizes the book for being ‘more concerned with opening up the canon than with connecting the forms of knowledge it introduces’ (Bhambra, 2014, p. 101). That is, including new voices only serves an additive function without being transformative. For Bhambra a connected sociology is key to a reconstruction of sociology. This is a sociology which replaces comparison of ideal types with a focus on connections: “Connected sociologies, [...], seek to reconstruct theoretical categories — their relations and objects — to create new understandings that incorporate and transform previous ones” (Bhambra, 2014, p. 4). She suggests that such a connected sociology can take departure in positions formulated by postcolonial and

decolonial scholars – e.g., Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak and Walter Dignolo. Her point is that they all offer theoretical critiques of processes of knowledge production under the influence of colonial projects that not only offer resistance to epistemological dominance but also offer the possibility of a new geopolitics of knowledge (Bhambra, 2014, p. 139).

Decolonizing the University

With her two first books, Bhambra opened up a space for rethinking the place of colonialism in the sociological imagination with reference to a deconstruction of historical narratives about the formation of European modernity, to connected histories as a methodological tool, and to the potential of a connected sociologies to transform concepts and theoretical categories. With *Colonialism and modern social theory*, Bhambra and Holmwood take the first step in this ambitious project to transform critically concepts and categories in mainstream sociology. With their careful reading of the early sociological canon, they provide a starting point for reflecting critically on social science. By pointing to Du Bois’ work, and his identification of a global colour line, they provide a stimulating attack on many central concepts and lines of development that is still key to contemporary conceptions of global social order.

One can read *Colonialism and modern social theory* as a battle cry for decolonising not only the social science departments but the university in general. The book adds constructively to this endeavour by rereading and reanalysing core works within the sociological canon with an eye for the ways in which colonialism is at play yet silenced or hidden in the classical texts. By excavating the buried and hidden colonialism in the sociological canon and adding the overlooked work of Du Bois, the book contributes with disciplinary renewal relevant for not only sociologists and social scientists but also neighbouring disciplines. The book is a welcome and constructive contribution to the project of decolonizing the university.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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