Postcolonial Reflections on Sociology

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Abstract:
This contribution addresses the impact of postcolonial critiques on sociology by drawing parallels with the emergence of feminism and queer theory within the academy. These critiques were facilitated by the expansion of public higher education over the last five decades and the article also addresses the implications of the privatisation and marketization of the university on the processes of knowledge production.

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The move to mass higher education in the UK in the late twentieth century opened up opportunities for increasing numbers of people who had not traditionally gone to university. There was a simultaneous proliferation of critical positions and a concerted, although by no means coordinated, challenge to the dominant positions within academic debates. This was a period that saw the rise of subaltern studies, histories from below, of women's studies, of queer theory and critical race theory. The demographic diversity of the university faculty and students was central, not to the emergence and development of these ideas – they had been circulating for much longer in other spaces – but to the legitimation and validation of such ideas within wider publics. The university, as the commonly recognised site of knowledge production, has a key role to play in this wider legitimation of ideas and the shift from a public to a privatized university system impacts also on this. In this article, I reflect on the development of my own work within sociology in this context. My work has been centrally concerned with issues in historical sociology, the emergence of modernity, and the disciplinary formation of sociology itself. Although, I address historical issues, I am very much interested also with the way in which the historical unfolding of social processes is crucial for understanding the present – especially in relation to debates on European cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism which have become ever more acute in recent years. This involves examining the self-defined racialized boundaries of communities of belonging, as well as broader European identities, and the longer-standing entanglements of both (see Hansen 2002, Jonsson 2016).

I

The analytical force of my argument draws much inspiration from the work of scholars within the fields of Postcolonial and Decolonial Studies – such as Homi Bhabha (1994), Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000), Stuart Hall (1992), Walter Mignolo (2007), Edward W. Said (1995 [1978]), and Gayatri Spivak (1988) – although it is not centrally engaged with debates in these fields. Rather, my interest is in the emergence of institutional orders organized around race and colonial difference and the ways in which these function in the present (see King and Smith 2005); including within sociology as a form

of knowledge. This differs, in turn, from mainstream work within the sociology of race and ethnicity. For the most part, race and ethnicity have been addressed in sociology as issues of *stratification* (that is, the differential distribution of rewards and resources according to ethnicity) or as issues of *identity* (that is, as expressed in cultural difference and hybridity). While both are, of course, of fundamental importance, they do not necessarily address the underlying processes by which race and ethnic differences are *produced*. Instead, they are usually understood as ascriptive identities which may modify or inflect the social orders and processes of modernity, but are not themselves regarded as central to, or constitutive of, those orders and processes.

In the standard Habermasian (1988) division between the *system* and *social*, for example, race and ethnicity are taken as social, and not as aspects of the system; that is, they are not seen as integral to the market, bureaucracy, and state, but are understood as located in the lifeworld of social meanings and values. It is this standard conceptualization that I have taken issue with, and seek to rethink in my work, and on which I will say more subsequently. In effect, I argue that to understand the inequalities associated with race and ethnicity, it is necessary also to address sociology's core ideas of modernity, where, the division of 'system' and 'social' is a generalization of the conceptual framework of classical sociology, with its emphasis on economy, polity and culture. So, in saying my work engages with historical sociology, it does so from the perspective of its current limitations and how they have become embedded and reproduced within conventional understandings of the discipline. I suggest that these conventional understandings can be criticized on three grounds: substantive, conceptual/methodological, and epistemological. These criticisms imply that sociology, as currently constituted is unable to engage with current global challenges, and, at worst, embeds a particular Euro-centred ideological response to those challenges. In this short article, I briefly address the first two before looking more in depth at the latter.

II

To start with the substantive issues, I argue that the historical record is different to that found within standard sociological understandings. What is missing in the latter is a systematic consideration of the world-historical processes of dispossession, appropriation, genocide, and enslavement as central to the emergence and development of modernity and its institutional forms (Fanon 1963, Gilroy 1993, Dunbar-Ortiz 2014). Sociology's orientation to history has generally been based around an implicit consensus on the emergence of modernity and the related 'rise of the West', as well as around a stadial idea of progressive development and the privileging of Eurocentred histories in the construction of such an account. Social, political, and economic changes associated, variously, with the Renaissance and the French and industrial revolutions are argued to have brought a new world into being, one that was marked by two forms of 'rupture'. The first is a temporal rupture dividing a traditional rural past from a modern industrial present. The second is a spatial disjuncture that located change in Europe (later to be widened to the category of the West more generally) from the rest of the world. Taken together, key events associated with modernity are framed within a particular narrative of European history understood in narrowly bounded terms.

Yet, this framing is contested within historical studies. Developments here have drawn attention to two key deficiencies within the narratives still employed by sociology. First, that the endogenous

processes deemed significant in understanding the key events of modernity had broader conditions of emergence and development – that is, that the Renaissance, and the industrial and French revolutions were not constituted solely by endogenous European processes, but rather the significance and importance of global connections are increasingly recognized. Second, that other global processes usually not addressed by sociology, such as settler colonialism and the European trade in human beings, are also significant constitutive aspects of the shift to modernity, but are elided in sociology's conceptual framing of it. I have written extensively on the inadequacy of the historical record that constitutes the dominant sociological framework of modernity beginning with my book, *Rethinking Modernity: Postcolonialism and the Sociological Imagination*, and continuing into more recent work on cosmopolitanism and global sociology (see, Bhambra 2007a, 2011a, 2011b, 2014). In the following section, I discuss the conceptual issues that have been significant in my engagement with sociology.

III

Alongside a critique of the historical record used by sociology in its construction of the category of modernity, I have also taken issue with its conceptualization and the ways in which this has been understood methodologically. From earlier modernization theory to the more recent formulation of multiple modernities, most sociologists work with an ideal type of modernity that locates its emergence in Europe from where it then diffuses outwards. While modernization theory was predicated on the idea of there being one modernity to which all subsequent developments would converge; theorists of multiple modernities, as the name suggests, argue for the existence of a plurality of modernities which diverge from the originary form (see Eisenstadt 2000, Göle 2000,). They suggest that modernity ought to be understood as divided between its institutional expression (in terms of the state and market) and its cultural constellation (whereby different cultures engage with the common institutional form and give rise to multiple modernities) – multiplicity, then, refers to the diversity of cultures present in the world (see Adams et al 2005, Connell 2007).

This focus on multiplicity and divergence is believed to be sufficient to address the criticisms of Eurocentrism that they allow were merited in relation to modernization theory. However, what they do not address is the Eurocentred form of the originary version of modernity that they continue to put forward (see, Eisenstadt 2000). They remain committed to a belief that modernity was formed in Europe and that in its diffusion outwards, the institutional form was modified in its encounters with other cultures thereby maintaining the Eurocentred nature of their explanations. Even if one were to accept their particular formulation (and just to emphasize, I don't), there is a problem in that the use of the term 'diffusion', as the way in which the institutional forms of modernity spread around the world, is rather 'euphemistic'. This is especially so when you consider that this diffusion was actually carried out through processes of colonization and enslavement, which are otherwise not named or taken into consideration as significant to their analyses.

The conceptual understanding of modernity is directly linked to the utilization of 'ideal types' as the methodological basis for comparative sociological analysis. Ideal types, it is argued, necessarily abstract a set of particular connections from wider connections and this is a necessary feature of theoretical constructions. However, it has the effect of suggesting *sui generis* endogenous processes

as integral to the connections that are abstracted and presented within the construct. The other connections most frequently omitted are those 'connecting' Europe and the West to much of the rest of the world (that is, the connections of colonialism and enslavement). These connections are rendered external to the processes abstracted from them, at the same time as the abstracted processes are represented as having a significant degree of internal coherence, independent of these wider connections. In this way, a dominant Eurocentric focus to the analysis is established, and represented as 'methodologically neutral', while having the effect of relegating non-European contributions to specific and later cultural inflections of pre-existing structures that are held to be a product of European modernity. I argue, however, that the relationships of colonialism and enslavement, which have comprised a significant aspect of modernity from its inception, have been no less systematic than the interconnections that have otherwise been represented within those accounts. In contrast to the ideal type methodology associated with comparative historical sociology, I argue for a different, postcolonial-inspired, approach, that of 'connected sociologies' (Bhambra 2014).

IV

Moving on to look in more detail at epistemological issues, I want to start by suggesting that I see sociology both as a system of knowledge oriented to history and as *constituted by that history*. In this way, the displacement of racialized structures from the account of modernity contributes to the racialized structure of sociological thought itself – in much the same way that scholars have argued for the gendered character of knowledge production (see Hawkesworth 1989; Stanley and Wise 1993). The number of women entering higher education in the UK, for example, increased significantly in the post-war period. One of the first consequences of this, within the social sciences, was a growing realization that women's lives and experiences were rarely to be encountered within the knowledge claims emanating from the academy. The efforts of the early generation of feminist scholars was oriented to rectifying such omissions. Over time, however, there was a concern that the very methods of social science were implicated in the production of such significant omissions and questions were raised about whether the master's tools, in the words of Audre Lorde (1984), could be used to dismantle the master's house. Although, as an aside, one should also question the assertion that these tools are the 'master's'.

Arguments about the missing feminist revolution in sociology, made by Stacey and Thorne (1985), put forward the idea that despite the extent of empirical research undertaken by women and on issues of gender, the concepts of sociology remained immune to transformation in the light of such research. These arguments and concerns were mirrored in the article by Stein and Plummer (1994) on the missing queer revolution in sociology. So what is it about sociology that makes it so impervious to critique? And how might addressing the racialized structures of knowledge production provide a different way through? Part of the answer, as I have suggested in earlier work (2007b), lies in a consideration of the very structure of the social sciences. As Habermas (1988), among others, set out, the social sciences are divided, with politics and economics on one side – which are seen to address the individual and system aspects of state and market – and sociology on the other, which takes up the residue of problems not addressed by politics and economics – that is, issues of the inter-subjective and social aspects of the lifeworld. In taking up the social, however, and

distinguishing it from the system, sociology also sets up the structure of system and social as an internal division and an over-arching structure that incorporates both. What few scholars have addressed, however, is that the idea of the 'modern' further separates the social and the system from the 'non-modern', that is, the traditional that is seen to be the realm of anthropology.

When feminists and queer scholars make arguments about the lack of research on women and gay people, there is an acknowledgement that these people had existed historically in the modern world and that there is a problem with the social science disciplines that neglected to take into account their experiences. This historical absence within social research is remedied, in part, by now taking women and gay people into account in understandings of the social. To the extent that the system and the social are understood as separate, however, research on women and gay people remains bound to the realm of the social and rarely has an impact in transforming ideas of the system – or structure – which theorists often believe can continue to be understood without reference to the diverse particularities that constitute the social (for discussion, see Holmwood 2001). Insofar as race is constructed as simply another diverse particularity – as ethnic difference – it also suffers a similar fate. But, as mentioned above, there is another division at play which separates out race as a category different from that of gender or sexuality – this is the idea of the 'modern' and the way in which an understanding of modernity itself (racially) structures or disciplines what and how we know.

While there may not have been research on women or gay people within the social sciences previously, there is a common sense understanding that they had historically been present within the modern social. With race, however, the deeper divide of the modern separates out the historical existence of those perceived as non-modern – usually those who were colonized and were not white – and makes them the domain of anthropology or history. The division between anthropology and sociology – the non-modern and the modern – is structured on a racial division that it is harder to overcome through simple inclusion. To include the non-modern requires the reconstitution of the very idea of what we had understood the modern to be. It requires a reconfiguring of our understanding of the modern to understand it instead in terms of the *'connected sociologies' of the colonial modern*. It is this double status, I suggest, that enables postcolonial critique to be more effective in addressing the highlighted inadequacies within standard sociological paradigms. It provides the basis, historically, of contesting the substance of the core conceptual categories of sociology (for example, modernity) and provides the basis for their reconstruction.

V

Much of the critical work highlighted in this article came about as a consequence of the academy being opened up to diverse demographics, specifically to scholars from social locations not typical of those previously entering higher education. This followed the move to mass public higher education and the general processes of democratization that accompanied it. John Holmwood (2011) has used the work of Dewey to argue for the public university to be seen as a repository of the common learning of communities and directed toward a deepening of democracy. The emergence of new epistemological communities within the institutional forms of validating learning in the late twentieth century, led to changing understandings of what constitutes knowledge and its purposes.

This is now at risk. The current marketization of the public university entails an attack on precisely this diversity within the university and constrains universities toward narrow utilitarian purposes (see Holmwood and Bhambra 2012). The possibilities of meaningful social critique and resistance – and thus democratization – is also made much more difficult. It is in times such as ours that social critique is needed more than ever and we need to fortify our discipline for that task. It is a task that requires us to remove the 'mental fences' that enclose knowledge and, instead, to extend our engagements in the world, connect with others globally and put the sociological imagination to work on new worlds of possibility.

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