

European Colonial Entanglements: Questions of Historical Sociology and Progress

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In this contribution,¹ I bring a postcolonial lens to questions of methodology – specifically, in historical sociology – and related normative claims of progress that I argue are central to the constitution of our discipline. I do so, not simply to discuss these issues in their own terms, but to think about whether the limitations inherent to them have a negative impact on our ability to address the contentious politics that disfigure our contemporary landscapes – here in Europe, and globally. I will suggest that the problematic features I address are longstanding and that many apparently new initiatives – such as multiple modernities – often end up replicating them. This is, in part, as a consequence of their failure to take seriously aspects of critique presented by postcolonial and decolonial theorists. What I wish to highlight here, as I have tried to do in my work more generally, is what difference would be made to sociology if we took seriously pertinent arguments from the fields of postcolonial and decolonial critique (Bhambra 2007, 2014).

As such, I hope to persuade you of the centrality of colonial endeavours to our current social and political configurations and suggest that it is only by engaging with this past more directly that we can address the many challenges we face. In doing so, I shall also suggest that the sky will not fall in as a consequence of learning from others. The much vaunted need to protect critique from relativism, will in fact, be secured not undermined. Indeed, it is the failure to learn from postcolonial and decolonial critique that brings standard approaches to a problematic relativism. Let me begin with sociology's comprehensive elision of colonialism and empire as integral to modernity's development. While, in previous work, I have addressed these elisions in terms of the formation of the very concept of modernity, in this contribution, I'll illustrate this elision substantively in the treatment of the modern state.

Sociology and the Modern State

As I have argued at greater length elsewhere, the modern state is one of the key concepts of the social sciences and has been central to comparative historical sociology from at least the work of Weber onwards (see Bhambra 2016). Weber's definition of the modern state, as that entity which secures the legitimate exercise of coercive power within a given territory, is central to most sociological analyses of state formation. Since Weber, from the early collaborative projects associated with comparative politics and modernization theory to later iterations of cultural historical sociology, the focus has primarily

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been on the emergence, in Europe, of what are seen to be sovereign, territorial states organized along national lines. Yet, the majority of these nation-states were actually imperial states with more expansive boundaries and polities which impinged upon the formation of their 'domestic' institutions.

In all cases used for illustration, the modern national state in Europe was, in fact, a *colonial* and *imperial* state. That is, it did not simply lay claim to a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence within a given (national) territory, but extended that violence into other territories, over other populations, and in support of non-state actors such as trading companies and the activities of settlers. There was no claim for legitimacy from the subordinated population and, indeed, no such claim could be made in the context of colonial dispossession. But colonialism constituted part of the claim for legitimacy on behalf of its national population.

First, however, to extend the discussion of the modern state – from nations to empires. As I have suggested, the European project of modernity is usually associated with the development of nation-states (of citizenship bound to territoriality as Weber put it), but, as I will argue, it is better understood as founded through colonial endeavours, that is of empires rather than nations. In the case of Europe, processes of state formation are discussed in the context of internal developments from the 1600s onwards, while the incontrovertible fact is that the majority of these states – and their populations – were also involved in processes of colonization beyond their national boundaries. This is easily understood in the cases of Spain, Portugal, Britain, France, and even Germany, but it was also the case in terms of Scandinavian and Eastern European countries as a form of what nineteenth-century German advocates called “emigrationist colonialism” (Smith 1980).

Yet, there is rarely any consideration of how colonial relations of domination and subordination connected dispersed territories and populations within an imperial polity, nor of how a specific *nation-state* form of that polity only emerged as a consequence of decolonization. It did not exist prior to then. European nation-states are, for the most part, postcolonial states, yet European commentators refer only to decolonized states as postcolonial. In what follows, I take the example of the emergence of the German state to demonstrate the foundational nature of such elisions, however, it should be clear that the violence that is entailed is common to all European empires.

From Nations to Empires

The establishment of the German state in 1871, under the leadership of Bismarck and Prussia, was followed by the intensification of processes of 'de-Polonization' and 'Germanification' at the borderlands of the new state. The formerly Polish areas that had been annexed by Prussia and then settled by German colonists in the eighteenth century, Zimmerman argues (2006, p. 59), suffered further waves of “internal colonization” into the twentieth century. After German unification, these settlements were increasingly conceived of in explicitly anti-Polish terms (and, of course, anti-Semitic ones). The political project of the German state, then, was built through its conceptualization *as a nation*, that is, as an ethnically German state. Indeed, in his inaugural lecture in Freiburg in 1895, Weber outlined an economic policy that would prevent the displacement of German peasants by Polish labourers and thus would strengthen the power of the newly established German state. “Our state is a *national state*,” he asserted, “and it is this circumstance which makes us feel we have a right to make this demand” (1980 [1895], p. 436). Note how the claim for legitimacy is undertaken in terms of the incorporation of territory beyond that associated with the German *ethnie while at the same time asserting that ethnic identification over Poles (and Jews)*.

While Weber elides the concept of the nation with imperial power, what enables the concept to gain traction in its own terms is the omission of German imperialism from what is presented as a 'national' history. Within thirteen years of unification, the German state had begun the process of acquiring, what Sebastian Conrad has called, "the fourth largest colonial empire at the time" (2013, p. 544). The 1885 Berlin Conference not only formalized the idea of the 'internal' colonization – or 'Germanification' – of the eastern provinces, but, according to Conrad (2013), also began the formal process of European, including German, colonization of Africa. At the same time as establishing itself in Europe, the incipient German state consolidated its hold over external territories through a variety of violent colonial expeditions, including in South-West Africa (where the Herero and Nama people were effectively exterminated).

Weber is critical of the inability of the contemporary political leadership to understand the importance of overseas expansion to Germany's national (economic) interests. If unification of the nation, rather than becoming a world power, was the end point of the political development of the state, then, Weber suggests, it should "have been avoided on grounds of excessive cost" (1980 [1895], p. 446). The implication is for Germany not to be 'left behind' in the European game for domination and to become a colonial or imperial power in its own right. In this way, we see that Weber's *economic nationalism* was to be executed through *imperial political ambitions* and, more precisely, expansion. The 'national interest' is not the construction of a 'national state', but an imperial one. As an aside, we see the shadow of this historically also in other empires, including the British Empire and also in Britain in our present moment where the economic nationalism underpinning Brexit is to be achieved through establishing what the Secretary of State for Trade initially called 'Empire 2.0'.

This focus on expansion and concomitant domination, however, is never explicitly theorized in the development of Weber's understanding of the sociology of the state, or in other sociologies of the state which quickly shift to capitalism rather than colonialism as modernity's real vehicle. The German colonial empire may have only lasted 30 years, from 1884 to 1915, but I would suggest that 'imperialism' was a constitutive aspect of the project of nation-state formation as identified by Weber himself. Nations, he argued, were not defined merely in terms of ethnic or cultural homogeneity, but through the welding into a group of a people defined by their shared political destinies and struggles for power. These struggles were not only against minorities 'at home' but also struggles to become a world power through overseas expansion. The failure to address the history of the German state directly and to theorize imperialism explicitly as an aspect of what is otherwise presented as the nation-state has formatively shaped contemporary comparative historical sociology and is responsible, I suggest, for many of its limitations.

The Colonial Modern

The 'colonial modern' better describes a situation where territoriality is organized around domination and the preferential inclusion of 'domestic' populations within a racialized political community that extends across borders. The elision of the imperial state to the national state matters because of its consequences for how we understand the normative definition of the state and the related concepts of legitimacy and domination with which it is strongly associated, and which are an integral part of our current discussions of belonging and rights. To the extent that state building and political formation are seen as aspects of *societal self-construction*, then questions regarding modes of legitimacy within modern states are strongly associated with the societies recognized by those states. Societies outside

of those associated with the state, upon whom the state acts in a mode of domination – such as those who are colonized – fall out of consideration when thinking about questions of legitimacy.

The Weberian definition – common across the social sciences – evades consideration of the use of force by the state’s apparatuses outside of its self-understood, core territory and for the purposes of including wider territories within its borders against the wishes of those inhabitants for such incorporation. Indeed, ‘incorporation’ is often the euphemism used by historical sociologists in their scant considerations of violent conquest and genocide as factors in the emergence of European and ‘new World’ polities. For example, when discussing the colonial heritage of Spanish America, Wolfgang Knöbl suggests that the differences in outcome rest in part on whether “the indigenous population was originally weak in numbers or quickly extinguished as a consequence of colonialism” (2014, p. 316). There is no comment on the euphemism of ‘quickly extinguished’ or how acknowledging such violence would change the ways in which we otherwise understand issues of ‘development’ and ‘progress’ and ‘legitimacy’.

Rather than consider the systematic (and, usually, genocidal) violence necessary in the establishment of settler societies, many historical sociologists simply gloss over such facts. They are presented as societies with a *de novo* history, seemingly constructed in the act of settlement which includes its own amnesia (that is, failure of self-interpretation) which is absorbed by the interpretive sociologist themselves. An example is the celebratory and exceptionalist rhetoric associated with the founding of the United States which is often traced to Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*. The fact that the US is a ‘new nation’ means that it is able to forge its own destiny free of the encumbrances of history and tradition that continue to inflect European political forms. As such, it is seen to embody a particular form of modernity; one that is purified from the residues of Europe’s feudal past. It is seen not only to demonstrate the *promise* of emancipation regarded as inherent to modernity, but also to be the first *lived expression* of this modern form of politics.

While many scholars have been keen to take up this aspect of Tocqueville’s work, few have gone on to address his other significant claim. Namely that the land of the United States was occupied by *three* races and that his account of democracy is primarily about only one of them because the history of the other two is of their subjugation by the very institutions and practices that are otherwise being praised; institutions and practices that those other two races necessarily experience as tyranny. It is in this way that silencing operates most effectively when even otherwise canonical figures are silenced when they say something that does not fit the standard narratives (see Margree and Bhambra 2011). This calls into question the very modernity attributed to the United States (and other ‘new societies’) and requires us to reconsider the social scientific claims that are otherwise made on the basis of it being regarded as the first modern nation. This is particularly so in terms of how native peoples are treated within and by our discipline and its elision of dispossession and settlement as central to the very possibility of the emergence of the modern.

Rethinking Modernity and Multiple Modernities

As will be commonly recognized, sociology takes as its remit the study of ‘us’, understood as modern, as opposed to the study of a traditional ‘them’ assigned to anthropology. The differentiation of ‘us’ and ‘them’ on the basis of separate, civilizational, histories justifies attempts at understanding these differences within their *endogenous* dynamics rather than locating those dynamics within the entangled histories that produced them. As I argued at length in my book, *Rethinking Modernity*, notions of rupture and difference are foundational to our discipline but erroneously so (Bhambra 2007). The events

that are commonly cited as bringing into being the modern world – namely, the industrial and French revolutions – have been demonstrated to have broader connections. Further, there are also other events and processes that could be considered as world historical that have been ignored by our discipline to its detriment. Namely, the processes associated with colonialism and imperialism that demonstrate the very interconnectedness of the world.

The focus on endogenous dynamics, however, obscures these connections and the relations between places and peoples. It also naturalizes, and reads back through history, a separation which is more a conceit of emerging sociological theory rather than an adequately supported historical claim. The consolidation of this conceit, of historically separate entities, and the institutional effacement of the connected histories of colonialism occurs, in large part, through the disciplinary organization of knowledge itself. It occurs through the presentation of modernity as the core conceptual category of sociology without recognizing the coloniality of its constitution. This error is compounded by the move to multiple modernities despite rigorous critiques by postcolonial and decolonial theorists.

Theorists of multiple modernities associate all positive normative substance to the European idea of modernity where the multiple other possibilities of (mostly non-European) modernity are seen to be largely authoritarian in nature and, unlike the European idea, not universalizable. The latter is universalizable but need not be (which is seen to be the error of earlier modernization theory). However, with multiple modernities, the authoritarian nature of ‘European modernity’ itself, deriving from its colonial origins, is once again displaced. In this way, theorists of multiple modernities sidestep the issue of historical interconnections in the context of the emergence of European modernity – those connections argued for by postcolonial and decolonial theorists – and only regard as significant those connections that brought European modernity to other societies. Of course, they do not address the actual historical processes of colonialism, enslavement, and dispossession; rather these are euphemized under terms such as European contact or mere diffusion.

Critiques by theorists of decolonization and postcolonialism are dismissed as having no real purchase on contemporary issues in light of the new sociological reformulations. To the extent that any significance is attributed to them, it is in terms of acknowledging the limitations of previous sociological understandings, but without allowing those critiques to contribute in any way to the substance of required reformulations. Multiple modernities enable sociology to be endogenously reformed without having to engage with critiques which are presented as ‘external’ and not arising in relation to engagements in common. In arguing for the continued significance of postcolonial histories and critique, both in their own terms and in terms of how these histories continue to structure the present, I am not posing an alternative, or multiple, modernity outside a trajectory common to the West; rather, I am arguing for a reconstructed understanding of modernity, one that is *inclusive of its colonial histories and is reflective of the consequences of taking the ‘colonial modern’ as the central concept of our discipline*. A perspective that I have called “connected sociologies” (Bhambra 2014).

I will conclude this contribution by looking at how these issues relate to the urgent social and political challenges that currently face us.

Illiberal Europe and European Values?

The failure to address the histories of colonialism is also what makes it so difficult to account for contemporary illiberal practices within and beyond the continent. It is the colonial histories of Europe that have produced its multicultural present – a multiculturalism that over the last five years political leaders from Cameron to Merkel to Sarkozy have declared to have failed. What does it mean to say that

multiculturalism has failed when it is colonialism that created multicultural Empires and multicultural European societies? What does it mean to say that multiculturalism has failed when postcolonial European societies continue to be empirically multicultural? What sort of politics does it legitimate? Perhaps the sort of politics that requires many of us, to yet again, have to assert our humanity, the value of our being, beyond racialized hierarchies and structures.

How could a postcolonial sociology better help us to understand this present? How could the arguments I have made thus far about needing to recognize the colonial constitution of modern nation-states shed some light on what is going on?

The boundaries of the political community, and the associated rights of citizenship and the right to have rights, are usually imagined to be congruent with the territorial boundaries of the state as understood in national terms. This idea of the political community as a *national* political order has been central to European self-understanding and to standard social scientific accounts. Yet, as I have set out above, most European states were imperial states and even those that did not explicitly have empires were involved through the migration of their populations in the emigrationist European colonial project. Across the nineteenth century, fifty or so million Europeans left their countries of origin to make new lives and livelihoods for themselves on the lands inhabited by others (Zahra 2016) – not on “free soil” as Weber thought, but on the soil appropriated from others.

If we were to take this context seriously, it would be quite straightforward to understand that the majority of people within Europe who don't look like ‘us’ – or rather, who look like me, but not like most of you – come from countries that had previously been colonized by Europe. As such, they /we are not treading new paths in our movement here, just making our way back along those very paths that had brought Europeans into our places of habitation. However, to the extent that many white European scholars engage with the idea of the postcolonial they do so in a way that only recognizes this return movement as constituting the postcolonial. Not the earlier movements of Europeans that established the colonial as the condition now for the postcolonial. It is this scholarly failure that amplifies the misrecognition that is more widespread across the media and public opinion that sees many Europeans not recognizing darker Europeans as also European. The increasing turn to the far-right across Europe is not a new phenomenon, but can be seen to be an intensified one. The intensification is due, in part at least, to the hysteria generated in response to the crisis for refugees. Yet what exactly constitutes this crisis?

In the year in which Europe saw the most asylum applications – the worst year in the Syrian conflict that produced fatalities in the hundreds of thousands – in that year, the number of asylum *applications* constituted 0.25% of the population of Europe. If we add the numbers of asylum applications that have been granted since 2015 we see that the increase in the total estimated population of the European Union is around 0.31%. Could there be an empirical crisis of the magnitude claimed on the basis of such a marginal increase in the population of Europe? If so, then things are even worse for Europe than the most pessimistic naysayer has ever imagined (see Bhambra 2017).

Colonial Europe and its sociologies failed to recognize the populations of its wider political constituencies as equals. Following decolonization and the formal end of empires, European states have purified their histories as national histories and imagined their political communities as composed of ‘kith and kin’. In this context, there is a refusal to share obligations to those who were previously dominated within their broader imperial political communities. This is the politics of selective memory that is currently playing out in Europe. Failing to recognize these imperial histories as the basis for the national states that now exist is precisely what enables some to argue for the rights of Europeans – of citizens – over the rights of others. But those others have histories that entitle them to be here. Not to

recognize those histories and the associated rights is to play into the dangerous politics that is currently disfiguring our present.

The claim that it is only Europeans who are entitled to rights is being made across the political spectrum. It's easily recognizable on the far-right, but what do we have to say about initiatives when they come from the left? When they talk about the need to protect 'our' workers from the consequences of immigration? When they suggest that we need to respond to the legitimate concerns of those who want to see the borders closed to refugees? Asserting the legitimacy of the national state against globalization is an inadequate response to a history in which the nation-state has been created through globalization – globalization, or as it was formerly known, colonialism. In a situation of the general advantages of Europe, such advantages no longer deserve to be called rights; rights that are not extended to others are privileges. And in this way, imperial inclusion based on hierarchical and racialized domination is reproduced as national – joint European – exclusion, reflecting earlier forms of domination and similarly racialized.

It is interesting that it is at this moment, that Europe postulates the thought that rights are bounded and that its values are not universal. This is a relativism of privilege underpinned by a sociology that fails to acknowledge its constitution in our shared colonial past. The question for us, as sociologists, as we seek to work within our discipline, and as citizens, as we navigate the politics of our time, is ... whose side are we on? That is not a partisan question, even though the taking of sides is inevitable; this is a question about our adherence to a universal now properly understood.

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