

Weber: Religion, nation and empire

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journals.sagepub.com/home/jcs**Sara R. Farris** 

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Abstract

Colonialism figures in the work of Max Weber in multiple forms. While in his professorial address he supported internal colonialism as the antidote against the threat represented by the immigration of foreigners, in the writings on world religions colonialism appears as displacement, amnesia and Freudian slip. Colonial subjects in particular are portrayed as personalities unable to develop the mentality that would help them to free themselves from what Weber regarded as the chains of a communitarian, gregarious and subaltern life. In the end, I argue that Weber's work contributed, albeit contradictorily and not always explicitly, to spread an idea of colonial violence as a force of progress and a racist idea of colonial others as backward.

Keywords

Colonialism, empire, Max Weber, nationalism, Orientalism, social theory

In *Colonialism and Modern Social Theory* (2021), Gurminder K. Bhambra and John Holmwood aim to reconstruct, from a postcolonial standpoint, the categories and concepts through which some prominent classical sociologists have built an idea of modernity devoid of any reference to colonialism. Their intent, thus, is not to bring into the conversation unappreciated figures of the past who did acknowledge colonialism and thus 'expand' the sociological canon, but to revisit and challenge that canon by looking at colonialism as the elephant in the room.

When we look at classical sociology from this perspective, Bhambra and Holmwood maintain, not only are we able to see that colonialism was mostly neglected as a theme and background of sociological theorising, but also that such a neglect manifested itself in two interrelated operations: displacement and amnesia.

Displacement worked through the identification of sociology as a discipline that investigates 'modernity'. But how was modernity conceived? When colonialism was

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understood as a pre-modern phenomenon that accompanied the early stages of capitalism, it was separated from modernity and thus, from sociological inquiry altogether. Hence sociological categories in the work of most classical sociologists were constructed as if colonialism did not exist, as if it could not be their concern. As we will see, Max Weber's concepts of nation, Protestant ethic and modern capitalism were some of the central sociological categories that operated this fundamental displacement.

Sociological amnesia, on the other hand, describes not merely the fact that colonialism does not figure prominently in the classical sociological canon as the context at large in which sociologists developed their theories. Above all it describes the ways in which the construction of the sociological canon itself was made in such a way as to 'sanitise' social theory and its own history from the mud of imperialist colonial projects.

For the authors, historically it is after WWII that the sociologists who composed the canon and reconstructed the sociological genealogy of 'founding fathers' deployed displacement and amnesia to delete any traces of European colonial crimes. The 1950s and 1960s were the decades during which sociology began to be established within Western academia as a discipline in its own right, thereby calling for the development of the sociological mainstream. It is at this junction that sociology's main object of inquiry was made to coincide with modernity, understood as the temporal and conceptual *Zeitraum* brought about by two far-reaching events – the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution. Narrated as purely European political acts, the two-revolutions narrative became foundational to social modernity. According to Bhambra and Holmwood, this narrative contributed to turn the focus of sociology 'inwards' (p. 17). Sociology, that is, had to concern itself with the development of the nation state, not so much as a political entity, but as a cultural and social unity. The sociological canon here – particularly for a new generation of students enrolling in newly formed sociology faculties – was then meant to speak to national issues: conflict and social inequalities, but also cultural and social change. It is this canonical narrative that the authors want to retell through the lenses of post-colonialism.

As one of the so called 'founding fathers' of sociology, Max Weber is an obligatory reference point. This occurs not only because his concepts and methodological approach have been perhaps the most influential within the academic mainstream, but especially because the way his sociology was presented to generations of readers is a testament to the attempts at removing colonialism from the history of the discipline.

Max Weber's career, importantly, spans the years during which Germany itself tried to enter the club of European colonial powers between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. Weber was a member of the Pan-Germanic League in the 1890s, an organisation devoted to supporting German imperialist expansion abroad. However, colonialism does not seem to figure as a significant concern or an issue within Weber's writings, at least explicitly. Weber, Bhambra and Holmwood maintain, thus also displayed those signs of displacement and amnesia that plagued other classical sociologists. Bhambra and Holmwood detect them particularly in two places: firstly, within Weber's comments on national interests and the issue of borders in *The Freiburg Address*, and secondly, through his appreciation for European settler colonialism in the USA in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

The Freiburg Address is the academic paper Weber delivered upon taking up his full professorship in the Faculty of Political Economy and Financial Sciences at the University

of Freiburg in 1895. This text is entirely devoted to the issue of German greatness and national interests, which Weber advocated through the resort to ‘internal colonisation’. Weber here was critically commenting upon recent policies put forward by Bismark’s successor, which according to him had led to an exponential growth of Polish immigration into Eastern Prussia. Weber believed that mass Polish immigration had resulted from the privileging of agrarian capitalism and the introduction of intensive agriculture in the place of traditional cereal cultivation, in the interests of opening up German production to the international market. Weber reacted strongly against the Polish ‘flood’ which he regarded as a cultural and economic threat to *Germanness* [*das Deutschtum*] and German national interests. He thus explicitly demanded both ‘the closing of the Eastern frontier’ and the ‘systematic colonisation by German peasants on suitable land, particularly on suitable crown land’ to prevent ‘unviable Slav hunger colonies to arise’ and thus to stop the ‘Slav flood’ (Weber and Fowkes, 1895 [1980]: 435).

The issue of colonialism, for Bhambra and Holmwood, re-appears implicitly in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber’s most well-known study in which he connects the rise of capitalism to the development in Northern Europe of a peculiar economic ethos deriving from the Puritan version of Protestantism in particular. The authors here consider Weber’s choice of Benjamin Franklin as the ideal typical personification of the Puritan capitalist *Beruf* (vocation) as a testament to his embracement of settler colonialism in the US. Rather than a study devoid of political connotations – as Talcott Parsons’s export operation of Weber’s work into the English-speaking academia had maintained – *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* was a conscious political intervention into the topical events of his time, and one in which the ‘modern capitalism that Weber addressed was strongly associated with colonialism’ (Bhambra and Holmwood, 2021: 124–125).

While these texts by no doubt show Weber’s commitment to, or at least lack of criticism for, colonialism, I would like to suggest that the relevance of colonialism in Weber’s work is more widespread and even more explicit than it is often assumed. In *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism*, for instance, Weber explicitly and firmly denied that forms of predatory capitalism such as, for instance, the acts of violence which had accompanied colonial expeditions or wars of conquest, had played any role in the rise of modern capitalism, arguing that the latter was distinct from other forms of capitalism precisely because it had rationalised unadulterated *auri sacra fames* and unscrupulous greed. Yet in his study of Confucianism, he argued that China had been unable to develop ‘those types of capitalism common to occidental Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and modern times. These were the varieties of booty capitalism, represented by colonial capitalism and by Mediterranean overseas capitalism connected with piracy. While the barriers to overseas expansion partly depended on the geographical conditions of a great inland empire, in part [. . .] they resulted from the general political and economic character of Chinese history’ (Weber, 1951: 103–104). For Weber, in other words, China did not develop a capitalist ethos also because of its under-developed warfare skills, which it did not mature through more colonial expansion.

In his writings on India, on the other hand, colonialism is present as a remarkable absence. Weber mostly omitted the role of British colonialism on Indian economic development. Indeed, when he made any reference to the role of colonialism, he seemed

implicitly to deny that it had interfered with the Indian economic system, insofar as he assumed that any sort of capitalistic transition in India was 'highly unlikely' given its caste system (Weber, 1958: 112).

In his writings on religion, thus, we see contradictory statements on colonialism. The recognition of colonial violence as part of the history of modern capitalism, as it was briefly mentioned in the study on China, seemed to operate more as a Freudian-slip that confirmed rather than contradict the fundamental displacement at the heart of Weber's work. As I outlined above, such a displacement, for Bhmabra and Holmwood, has functioned predominantly through the temporal separation of colonialism and modern capitalism as two disconnected temporalities, a disconnection which is clearly (albeit contradictorily) stated by Weber.

However, the role of colonialism in Weber's work does not figure only as domestic politics (as in the case of his support for the German re-colonisation of Prussian land against foreigners), or as displacement, slip and denial (as in the case of his work on Protestant Europe, China and India). Colonial subjects and the non-Western world more generally also operated as Alter-Egos to the European Self in Weber's writings.

In his study of world religions, which included research on ancient Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism, Weber concluded that the Puritan *Beruf* (vocation) that sprang in Northern Europe and then spread to the Anglo-Saxon world was the only one that could facilitate the emergence of the modern capitalist ethos. Such a vocation functioned through the formation of a specific type of personality, one centred upon personal autonomy, anti-conformism and specialisation (Weber, 1951: 236). The capitalist ethos, thus, according to Weber, could not emerge out of any of the 'Oriental' religions, which he regarded as having failed to promote individuals' independence from kin and community ties, and anti-traditionalism. Weber thus characterised the Asiatic personalities developed in India and China in particular in terms of the absence of the specific traits that Weber saw embodied in the Puritan personality, and as crucial for encouraging the rise of capitalism.

By depicting non-Occidental Others as fundamentally passive, traditionalist and gregarious selves Weber was repeating, as well as contributing to shape, the Orientalist trope lucidly analysed by Edward Said in his work *Orientalism*. Interestingly, Weber based his studies on non-western religions upon missionaries' accounts, whose activities were central to the work of European colonialism. The stereotypical images of Indian or Chinese people that Weber assembled and reproduced also through missionaries' statements were thus themselves the product of colonial sources and knowledge production. Given the influence of Weber's work upon generations of social scientists, they became directly functional to represent colonial subjects and the colonial world in general as backward and lazy. Weber's relationship to colonialism, thus, was not only one of displacement and amnesia. Furthermore, it was not only a relation of explicit (if contradictory) approval of colonisation as a force that brings about social change and asserts German or European power. It was also a relationship marked by the assumption that colonial knowledge production amounts to official and reliable history. Weber indeed embraced colonial historical tales in order to reproduce a-critically stereotypical representations of non-Occidental, colonial others as alter-egos in confrontation with which he formulated his theory of the Western capitalist self.

There is a final point highlighted by Bhambra and Holmwood, which is directly linked to the discussion above. Insightfully, they argue that Weber's methodological toolbox, particularly the notion of ideal type, plays a conservative function. Its conservative side for them lays in the fact that the ideal type as 'a theoretical construct [that] is more or less useful, not more or less valid', cannot be revisited or rejected, but only 'enriched'. 'On this argument – they maintain – postcolonial criticism may give rise to new hypotheses, but it could not call into question the validity of existing theoretical constructs. It could only offer itself as a supplement' (Bhambra and Holmwood, 2021: 137). Sociologists thus, may suggest the importance of adding objects, stories or people to a specific ideal typical conceptualisation, but this 'requires neither the reconstruction of core concepts nor revisions of previously accepted histories – just additions to them' (Bhambra and Holmwood, 2021: 137).

I agree with their characterisation of the ideal type, and I would further argue that one more reason why the concept of ideal type is conservative is also because it played an important role in the formation of stereotypical representations of colonial others and thus of Eurocentrism as a cultural force. In particular, the notion of ideal type informed an understanding of Asiatic religions and societies in terms of what Edward Said, referring directly to Weber's ideal type, called a 'summational attitude'. As a result of such an attitude, a statement about one single aspect of 'the East' becomes 'a statement about the Orient as a whole, thereby summing it up' (Said, 1978: 255). The ideal type thus functioned both as a tool for the conceptualisation of different social phenomena by means of focussing upon a specific point of view, and as a 'telescope' or a 'yardstick' that classifies and compares social domains, in order to detect similarities or differences between, or the absence of, the properties that form the ideal-typical concept. In the comparative studies on world religions Weber applied the methodology of the ideal type in order to classify religious prescriptions regarding economic activity into 'types of economic ethics'. This resulted in a typology of different societies as those geo-culturally and geopolitically unified constellations that Said criticised as essentialist and stereotyped. Each of Weber's studies on so-called world religions led to the formulation of types of 'civilisations' that ultimately were assumed to be uniform and static. As a result, as many subsequent critics have emphasised, the variables 'time' and 'history' are cancelled from these unifying and essentialising ideal types (Farris, 2013). The impossibility to dismantle and rebuild an ideal type that Bhambra and Holmwood identify as a limit of this methodological tool, thus, also meant the impossibility to demolish the Orientalist and plainly racist characterisations of the colonial or Asiatic other that Weber created and contributed to spread with his work.

As a sociology student in the early 2000s, I was exposed to Max Weber as a sort of God-like figure, someone who had written some of the most important treatises on sociology to be read almost like sacred texts. In particular, Max Weber was the God who apparently could save us all from the 'dangerous simplifications' of Karl Marx. I wrote my PhD dissertation on Weber's sociology of religion as a way to explore his relationship with Marx, only to discover that Weber was a Janus-faced type of God. While we were presented only with his seemingly objective and rigorous face, be it through his methodological writings, *Economy and Society* and *The Protestant Ethic*, what was behind it was a rather unpleasant look. It was indeed the face of a man desperate to

categorise non-Western others as inferior economic beings and to promote authoritarian nationalism as the way to favour German ‘greatness’. Had we had access to sociological texts such as Bhambra and Holmwood’s, we would have perhaps learnt to read what could be valuable in Weber’s work, rather than worship him a-critically. I thus thank the authors for finally enabling a conversation not only on Weber and colonialism, but on social theory more generally that acknowledges that the only way to shape a future without colonial presuppositions is to recognise the endurance of the past in our present.

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