Book Review

Decolonizing Sociology: An Introduction. Ali Meghji. Cambridge; Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2020. 200 pp. £50.00 (hardback), £15.99 (paperback), £11.99 (epub). ISBN: 9781509541942 (hardback), 9781509541959 (paperback), 9781509541966 (epub)

Published in Polity's 'Decolonizing the Curriculum' series, *Decolonizing Sociology* is an introductory guide to Sociology's Eurocentricity and how it might be overcome. Ali Meghji traces the colonial conditions under which Durkheim, Marx, Weber, and others from the Global North advanced universalist claims and achieved global 'canonisation'; examines the epistemic and ethical issues associated with such claims – arguing, for example, that classical Sociology itself 'contributed to producing and reproducing colonial difference' (p. 6); introduces a range of 'decolonial' thinkers and proposes a 'Southern standpoint' in Sociology, which recognises and values 'the agency of people and knowledges from the Global South' (p. 46); and offers suggestions for decolonising the practice of Sociology. These are important challenges, of course: decolonisation is currently top of many sociological agendas, and it resonates loudly with wider contemporary debates.

Meghji's critique of the canon draws inspiration from Bhambra, Hall, Saïd, and others. He argues that Durkheim conceived of 'primitive' colonised societies as embodying 'the past in the present' (p. 9), and that Marx and Weber 'generalized "the East" as pre-modern' (p. 91) and 'the West' as modernising mainly via endogenous processes – thereby reinforcing Orientalist binaries. His account of the Haitian revolution, and its significance for the ending of slavery and emergence of 'Enlightenment' thinking, is used to identify deficiencies in the standard (Eurocentric) versions. On Bourdieu and Foucault, he argues that while both were 'firmly embedded in the French 'empire/knowledge complex'' (p. 117) – notably via their experiences in colonial or post-colonial North Africa – these influences on their work are now mainly overlooked.

Among decolonial scholars of note here are Du Bois, Fanon, and Mignolo, as well as lesser-known figures such as Anzaldúa, Khaldūn, and Shari'ati. Meghji advocates 'decentring' canonical thought and drawing it into 'a horizontal dialogue between *sociologies* which relate to one another as equals' (p. 97). So for example Du Bois extends Marxist class analysis to take account of racial bifurcation in the USA, European colonies and colonial metropoles; while Fanon 'stretches' Marx's understandings of alienation to show that while '(white, Western) workers do not "feel themselves" at work . . . the colonized can *never* feel like themselves, as their whole schemes of self-recognition and valuation were ruptured by the material and psychological violence of colonialism'

(p. 107). Difficulties associated with decentring of classical theory are reflected in the debate between proponents of 'Indigenous' and 'Autonomous' Sociologies. However, all point towards a 'pluriversalist' (rather than universalist) approach, which is sensitive to historical and geographical context – and which recognises, in keeping with the epistemic principles of standpoint theory, that 'all knowledge . . . is socially situated' (p. 130).

Somewhat surprisingly, therefore, Meghji's own vision is primarily of a re-codified Sociology, rather than of one which reflects the colonial legacy's interactions with current social affairs and actors. Wider contemporary debates are almost absent: no reference at all to *Black Lives Matter*, for example, nor to their detractors and to the 'culture wars' currently raging in the UK, USA, and elsewhere. And his 'suggestions for what teachers and students can do to decolonize sociology' (back cover) scarcely engage with the institutional and pedagogic issues around decoloniality and diversity/inclusion in higher education that are reflected in (among others) Bhambra et al. (2018), Chantiluke et al. (2018), and Tran (2021). Writing from the vantage-point of a British metropolitan university, where many of my students proclaim a colonial heritage and wish to develop *applied* sociological practices of relevance to their own (post-colonial, metropolitan) lives – for example, in coursework projects on racism or diasporic relationships, in political activism, and in professional or voluntary work with third sector organisations – *Decolonizing Sociology* speaks mainly to the concerns of detached academic scholarship.

Finally, the book's compressed and unimaginative format raise further questions about its effectiveness as an 'introductory' text. For example, it seemingly presumes extensive prior knowledge of the canon, absence of which may invite uncritical surface learning. And for those with a tenuous grasp of colonial and post-colonial histories and geographies, a wider-ranging guide to resources including those of the *Connected Sociologies Curriculum Project* – and to books such as Alexander (2010) and Akala (2018), along with 'contrarian' accounts such as Ferguson (2004) – would have been helpful in meeting the needs of *Decolonizing Sociology*'s intended audiences.

References

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