
Decolonizing Sociology

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The idea of decolonizing the curriculum is now under discussion in universities in many parts of the world. Behind this lies the question of decolonizing the knowledge economy as a whole, and the disciplines and domains within it.

In this paper I outline what is involved in decolonizing the discipline of sociology. This is not actually a new issue: there is a whole back-story of social critiques of empire. We need to access this history as well as understand how contemporary sociology is shaped by the global economy of knowledge.

Dealing with those matters raises conceptual problems about power and agency, the agenda of change, and epistemological structure. But this work also leads to practical questions: how to redesign curricula, reshape sociology's workforce, and redistribute resources. There is no single blueprint for change; but there is enormous scope for invention and experiment, on the small scale and the large.

The Question of Empire

It is now five hundred years since the overseas connections of Europe with other parts of the world took the shape of armed conquest, permanent colonies, and colonial states—in other words, the structures of empire. Perhaps the decisive moment was not 1492 but 1505, when the Portuguese sent their seventh armed fleet (*armada*) into the Indian Ocean and appointed Francisco de Almeida the first Viceroy of the Indies. He was given the job of setting up permanent bases, grabbing control of the intercontinental spice trade, and fighting off local rulers. All this he did. The Indians didn't get rid of the Portuguese until 1961.

The dividends of empire were not only spices and gold. They also included knowledge, on an increasing scale. Reports flowed back to imperial centers from sailors, soldiers, governors,

missionaries, explorers, surveyors, doctors, translators, and more. In time this became professionalized, with specific data-collecting expeditions, some of them including great names in the history of science: Joseph Banks, Alexander von Humboldt, Charles Darwin. The great botanist Linnaeus didn't go himself but sent out his apostles: one of them was aboard Lieutenant Cook's *Endeavour*, sent to make astronomical observations from Tahiti, when the ship arrived at "Botany Bay."

Information from the colonized world was crucial for the growth of—among other fields—botany, linguistics, geography, geology, evolutionary biology, astronomy, atmospheric science, oceanography, and of course sociology (Connell 1997; Steinmetz 2013). The hegemonic modern knowledge system is not so much western science as imperial science.

Empire was challenged from the start by the physical resistance of the colonized. Soon intellectual contestation was added. One of the most remarkable documents in the history of empire is the *Nueva Corónica* of Guamán Poma, a descendant of the Andean nobility. It is an illustrated description of the social and political order under the Incas, a narrative of conquest, and an extended critique of the violence and inequality of colonial society under Spanish rule—and it was written about 1615. The author was a contemporary of Shakespeare.¹

Critique from the perspective of the colonized continued throughout the history of empire. Striking examples include the Islamic anti-imperialism of Sayyid Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani in the nineteenth century (translations in al-Afghani 1968); Chinese

¹ It was not published in Guamán Poma's lifetime but survived in manuscript and can be seen in an excellent online edition today: <http://www.kb.dk/permalink/2006/poma/titlepage/en/text/?open=idp23904>

perspectives on western empire in the early twentieth century, such as the nationalism of Sun Zhongshan (Yat-sen) (1927) and the socialist feminism of He-Yin Zhen (translations in Liu et al. 2013); and the powerful analysis of settler colonialism in southern Africa by Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje, published as *Native Life in South Africa* in 1916.

We are today more familiar with the post-1950 texts known as “postcolonial” theory or critique in the humanities. One of its best-known documents, Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, grew immediately out of the military struggle for independence in Algeria. Edward Said’s cultural critique in *Orientalism* was less directly based on anti-colonial struggle, but Said had grown up under British colonial rule in Palestine and Egypt and knew the story.

There was a continuing *social* critique of empire, colonial life, and postcolonial dependence. In the 1930s the young Jomo Kenyatta managed the amazing feat of turning Malinowskian ethnography into a critique of colonization, in *Facing Mount Kenya*; Gilberto Freyre published the first version of his famous account of slave society in colonial Brazil, *Casa-Grande e Senzala*; and C. L. R. James published his dramatic history of slave revolution in colonial Haiti, *The Black Jacobins*.

In the 1950s, the young Samir Amin launched the rethinking of political economy that eventually was published as *Accumulation on a World Scale*; and the not-so-young Raúl Prebisch launched the CEPAL analysis of Latin American economies that transformed development studies and developing state strategies. In the 1960s, Ali Shariati launched his synthesis of Shiite theology and critical sociology in scathing critiques of neocolonial society, and Syed Hussein Alatas launched his sociological critique of colonialist culture, postcolonial stagnation, and intellectual dependence. These are just some high points.

There is, then, a big back-story to the renewal of interest in postcolonial perspectives among social scientists; we have a legacy. It is only recently, however, that an agenda of transforming the discipline of sociology

in a postcolonial direction has gained traction and has begun to look like a collective undertaking.

I see this as the significance—beyond their specific arguments—of four collections that appeared almost simultaneously in 2010: Julia Reuter and Paula-Irene Villa’s *Postkoloniale Soziologie*; Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez, Manuela Boatcă, and Sérgio Costa’s *Decolonizing European Sociology*; Sujata Patel’s *ISA Handbook of Diverse Sociological Traditions*; and Michael Burawoy, Mau-kuei Chang, and Michelle Fei-yu Hsieh’s *Facing an Unequal World: Challenges for a Global Sociology*.

They are reinforced by individually written but wide-ranging texts such as Syed Farid Alatas’s *Alternative Discourses in Asian Social Science* (2006), Gurminder Bhambra’s *Rethinking Modernity: Postcolonialism and the Sociological Imagination* (2007), Wiebke Keim’s *Vermessene Disziplin* (2008), Julian Go’s *Postcolonial Thought and Social Theory* (2016), and my *Southern Theory* (Connell 2007).

This movement has already moved beyond initial statements. It has led to critique and reformulation at a conceptual level (e.g., Rosa 2014; Bhambra 2014) and detailed reexamination of the history of sociology’s entanglements with empire (Steinmetz 2013). It has also led to new perspectives in specific fields of sociology and allied disciplines, including criminology (Carrington, Hogg, and Sozzo 2016), the sociology of education (Epstein and Morrell 2012), the sociology of disability (Meekosha 2011), the sociology of gender (Connell 2015), urban studies (Robinson 2006; Watson 2009), and more.

Reasons for Action

Sociology is part of the global economy of knowledge that grew out of the imperial traffic in knowledge. In a process most clearly formulated by the philosopher Paulin Hountondji (1997), empire generated a structural division of intellectual labor between periphery and metropole. This division is still deeply embedded in modern knowledge formation. The colonized world was, first and foremost, a source of *data*. Here raw material of very diverse kinds was collected, often

with the aid of indigenous knowledge workers, for shipment to the metropole.

The metropole, or imperial center, aggregated data from different parts of the colonized world in libraries, scientific societies, universities, museums, botanic gardens, and research institutes—a process now automated in databanks. This milieu in the metropole became the site of the *theoretical* moment in knowledge production. Research methods were formalized and routinized; and specialized workforces were created for producing and circulating knowledge, forming the modern collective intellectual worker. In northern institutions, research was further transformed into applied sciences such as engineering, agronomy, and medicine. In this applied form, knowledge was returned to the global periphery. Here it was used by colonial powers and, later, postcolonial states, in the mines, in agriculture, and in government.

In our time, this traffic continues. The periphery is as vital a source of raw materials for the knowledge economy as it is for the material economy, yielding data for the new biology, pharmaceuticals, astronomy, social science, linguistics, archaeology, and more. It is, for instance, a key source of data for the giant quantitative models central to climate science, a relationship that can be seen in the famous reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

In this economy of knowledge, intellectual workers in the global periphery are pushed toward a particular cultural and intellectual stance. Hountondji calls this stance “extraversion”: being oriented to authority external to your own society. It is reflected, in the simplest possible way, in citation patterns. Researchers in the global North usually cite other researchers in the global North, often *only* researchers in the global North; researchers in the global South mainly cite researchers, and especially theorists, in the global North. But extraversion is expressed in many other ways, too: in academic travel, in appointments to jobs, in research practices, in publication preferences, and so on.

Sociology is part of this global economy and reproduces its structure. The discipline’s

main institutional base is a set of elite universities in the United States with PhD programs and equivalent elite universities and institutes in western and northern Europe. All the top-rated journals are edited here, most of the research funding is concentrated here, the hegemonic curriculum is formed and practiced here, overseas scholars travel to study or visit here, and the PhD graduates from these institutions are strategically placed to shape sociology in the next generation.

In mainstream theory (including methodology), there is little sense of being the product of such a specific milieu. Read a modern-classic text like Garfinkel’s *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, Coleman’s *Foundations of Social Theory*, Bourdieu’s *Logic of Practice*, or Habermas’s *Theory of Communicative Action* and you will see, rather, an assumption that the thoughts produced here simply apply universally. “The tasks of a critical theory of society”—to quote the final chapter of Habermas’s magisterial work—are the tasks that can be seen from a window in Starnberg, Westwood, or Hyde Park. And in due course, sociologists everywhere in the world start looking at their own societies through those windows in Starnberg, Westwood, and Hyde Park.

This pattern is familiar to every sociologist in the global periphery. I’ll give just one example. When sociology was being launched as a new discipline in Australian universities, the most coherent statement of what the name meant was an article in an Australian journal by Harold Fallding, “The Scope and Purpose of Sociology” (1962). Fallding declared that sociology was the study of systems of social action, analyzed functionally in the manner of Talcott Parsons. He was quite clear that there was no other path for sociology. Theoretical fashions change, but extraversion remains. Fifty years later, in 2013, the Australian Sociological Association’s journal published a special issue, in fact a double issue, called “Antipodean Fields: Working with Bourdieu.”

What’s wrong with that? Bourdieu was an impressive theorist; so, for that matter, was Parsons. But to understand them in depth is to realize that their theorizing embeds

perspectives on the world that arise from the social formations of the global North, *because of* their historical position in imperialism and their current core position in the neoliberal world economy. I've made a rough inventory of these effects: the claim of universality; reading from the center; gestures of exclusion; and grand erasure (Connell 2006). I'm sure that list can be improved on.

Extraverted sociology in the periphery, then, is the project of understanding colonial and postcolonial societies through concepts proposed in the metropole for understanding the metropole; using methods developed in the metropole; and, following the demands of corporate-style managers, trying to publish the results in top journals of the metropole after jumping through the hoops of assessment by researchers in the metropole.

Extraverted sociology in the periphery is a viable academic project. It's acceptable organizationally because its practices appear to Rectors, Deans, and Vice-Presidents (Research) quite like the practices of the biomedical and engineering research that they love. It's acceptable educationally because it fits with the bestselling northern textbooks, which need only minor local adaptations. It's acceptable professionally since it speaks a conceptual and methodological language known all over the world. It might get you published in the *American Sociological Review*.

But if you do that, you are reproducing the conventional global division of labor, supplying data from the periphery for theoretical processing in the North. Extraverted sociology is endlessly disappointing as an *intellectual* project, a continuous, cautious remaking of the intellectual dependency that Hussein Alatas (1977) was analyzing forty years ago. Because the discipline in the metropole took almost no interest in the social critics of empire mentioned earlier—they don't fit the story of the Three Founding Fathers, or the old and new testament of Classical Theory and Modern Theory—extraverted sociology in the periphery hasn't taken much interest in these critics either. A gulf arose between the professionalized discipline of sociology and the many projects of critical social thought in the majority world. It's that gulf

that the movement for postcolonial sociology is trying to bridge.

That is why a key task for some of the participants has simply been recovering the history of social thought from the colonized world and bringing it into contemporary sociological discussion (see, e.g., Patel 2011; Maia 2008, 2011; Qi 2014). Farid Alatas's *Alternative Discourses in Asian Social Thought* is exemplary here. It is notable that Alatas (2012, 2014) has gone on to make a deeper analysis of a powerful social thinker entirely outside the European canon, showing how ideas from Ibn Khaldun can cast light on states and political-economic changes beyond Ibn Khaldun's own time.

What "decolonizing sociology" means, then, is correcting the distortions and exclusions produced by empire and global inequality and reshaping the discipline in a democratic direction *on a world scale*. It concerns sociology in the global North as much as the global South.

Three Intellectual Questions

This project faces a number of conceptual difficulties; I will briefly discuss three.

The first concerns how we understand inequality and agency in the global economy of knowledge. The more militant versions of postcolonial criticism often speak of cultural and intellectual "domination" by the global North. That is familiar in Afrocentric arguments, for instance in the recent "Rhodes Must Fall" campaign in South African universities. It's an accent also heard in the decolonial literature concerned with Latin America, together with a particularly sharp critique of colonialism as the "darker side" of European enlightenment (Mignolo 2011).

In such a perspective, cultural struggle is itself a kind of decolonization; one simply replaces the alien knowledge system. No one could deny that colonial power imposed culture. Valentin Mudimbe in *The Invention of Africa* (1988) summarizes what empire had to do: dominate space, integrate the local economy into global circuits, and re-form the natives' minds through religion and education. The British in India did the last quite systematically, setting up the largest of all

colonial university systems with a European-derived curriculum designed to train a local workforce of empire.

Yet “western science,” as mentioned earlier, depended on very large inputs from the colonized world. It constitutes an economy, not a prison. And when we think about the global workforce involved, the teachers, writers, artists, researchers, priests, collectors, and administrators, we must recognize the agency of intellectual workers in the colonized and postcolonial world.

These workers were not passive, nor simply overwhelmed. Sometimes they were deliberately killed off—one thinks of the torture and killing of Maya priests, and the burning of their priceless books, by the Spanish in the Yucatán holocaust of 1562. But the intellectual opposition to colonialism continued in many forms, often trying to use the resources of the colonial regime itself. In more recent times, postcolonial states have expanded higher education and research centers in the global periphery. As recent research shows, the workforces of these institutions are obliged to engage with the authority of the metropole, but they also show their own agency—constructing new agendas, finding local audiences, and developing practical engagements (Connell, Pearse, Collyer, Maia, and Morrell 2017).

The second question concerns the agenda of change. Much of the programmatic discussion has focused on the intellectual and methodological framework of sociology, or social science more broadly. Starting from this work, an agenda of change would focus on finding new conceptual frameworks, or rethinking familiar methods, to make them usable for the social groups marginalized by empire.

Exactly that is the intention of Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s celebrated *Decolonizing Methodologies* (2012). It comes from the author’s involvement in the Kaupapa Maori project of educational and cultural change, launched by the colonized people of Aotearoa/New Zealand. Criticizing the whole tradition of ethnographic research on the Maori people, Smith asks how research can be of use to them and effectively controlled by them. She discusses knowledge resources that already exist in the culture and the way

new agendas of research can be set, and she gives a long list of knowledge projects being pursued by indigenous communities.

But there is another way of reshaping social science, addressing not how it proceeds but what it studies. Part of the case against mainstream sociology is how often its concerns are marginal to the biggest issues. It’s hard to get worked up about reflexive modernity or shifting subjectivities when you are facing starvation in a drought, rampant pollution in a mega-city, a grey economy embracing half the population, rape and femicide committed with impunity, military dictatorship, forced migration, climate disaster, or other such conveniences of modern life. If social science is to be relevant, it has to be a different social science.

Again, let me give one example. Land is hardly ever mentioned in northern social theory. It was an absolutely central matter for empire, and remains so for postcolonial indigenous life (Yunupingu 1997). It’s the subject of another classic of modern social science, Bina Agarwal’s *A Field of One’s Own* (1994), concerned with women’s land rights, and land use, across the different environments of South Asia. This book is a tremendous synthesis on family power relations and negotiations, legal structures, economic policies and processes, gender divisions of labor, and ideology. Agarwal is by profession a development economist, but there is a lot of sociology in *A Field of One’s Own*, and political science too.

In this breathtaking work, there is very little methodological innovation. Agarwal’s material comes from familiar ethnographic methods, legal and policy documents, and economic statistics. Its originality is essentially in what it’s about, in the object of knowledge that it constitutes. In that respect it’s a far cry from *Decolonizing Methodologies*. Plainly, we need both. But it’s not clear how to link these very different ways of formulating a postcolonial sociology.

The third problem concerns the epistemological structure of a postcolonial sociology. Mainstream knowledge formation, generally speaking, works on the assumption that there is one and only one episteme. There may be sharp conflicts within it, for instance between quantitative and qualitative methods or

structuralist and post-structuralist theory; but it's generally assumed they are contesting the same ground.

There is a certain grandeur in this conception: one social science that can work for all humanity. But there are stark problems, too. It violates just about everything we know in the sociology of knowledge. It's inconsistent with the experience of cross-cultural encounter. And because there is really only one body of social thought in a position to act globally as *The One*, in practice this epistemology provides an alibi for Eurocentrism.

Many people, therefore, have opted for a mosaic epistemology. In this conception, separate knowledge systems sit beside each other like tiles in a mosaic, each based on a specific culture or historical experience. Most indigenous knowledge projects seem to presume a local, at most a regional, validity (see the African examples in Odora Hoppers 2002). Mosaic epistemology offers a clear alternative to northern hegemony and global inequality, replacing the priority of one knowledge system with respectful relations among many.

However, a mosaic approach also faces difficulties, pointed out by Bibi Bakare-Yusuf (2004). Cultures and societies are not fixed in one posture. Pre-colonial cultures were not silos, but interacted with each other over long periods of time, absorbed outside influences, and had internal diversity. These arguments are reinforced when we recognize the massive disruption caused by colonialism and postcolonial power. Much contemporary research, outside the metropole, is done in conditions where "relative chaos, gross economic disparities, displacement, uncertainty and surprise" are the *norm*, not the exception (Bennett 2008:7).

If there is to be a third possibility, it must be some kind of solidarity-based epistemology (Connell 2015). This looks for the connections between knowledge projects, as much as the differences between them: what Chilla Bulbeck (1998) calls "braiding at the borders," or what Gurminder Bhambra (2014) calls "connected sociologies." Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) proposes the valuable idea of "ecologies of knowledges." It is early days yet, but I think this is the direction in which we must search.

Questions of Practice

Coming down from these heights, what does the project of decolonizing sociology mean for our everyday work as sociologists?

First and foremost, decolonizing the curriculum. There's now a lot of discussion about this, and some sharp controversies, more focused on the humanities than the social sciences. The idea is relevant not only to disciplinary sociology but also to applied sociology teaching in areas like health, education, and counseling. It involves rewriting course plans, textbooks, and online resources to give weight to the social experience of the colonized and postcolonial world.

There is pressure for this kind of change from the increased diversity of student bodies, and from mobilizations like the "Why Is My Curriculum White?" campaign in British universities.² Yet de-parochializing teaching in the social sciences can be justified whoever the students are. We simply need to ask ourselves what is required for an adequate knowledge of the major social questions facing humanity now.

In recent years there have been many more practical attempts to write courses and texts with a consciously global coverage. So we are building up experience. The problem with many of these efforts is the tendency to keep a northern conceptual framework while putting in more southern content—thus reproducing within teaching the asymmetrical structure of the global economy of knowledge.

It's essential, then, that a project of decolonizing the curriculum should address conceptual questions as well as content. We need to be bold. I'm strongly in agreement with Achille Mbembe's recent essay "Decolonizing the University: New Directions" (2016), which urges attention to the large and difficult intellectual questions involved in the reform project.

A knowledge formation is not just an episteme. It is a socially embedded and practiced episteme, involving the labor through which knowledge is brought into being,

² See <https://www.nus.org.uk/en/news/why-is-my-curriculum-white/>.

sustained, developed, and communicated. This includes practices of data-gathering, interpretation, or *ijtihad*; organizations like schools, madrassas, and universities; institutions like examinations, disciplines, journals, and (on the toxic side) league tables. Above all, it involves a workforce.

Decolonizing sociology therefore requires rethinking the composition of sociology's workforce and changing the conditions in which it produces and circulates knowledge. I don't think we currently have a clear picture of sociology's workforce on a world scale. We do have some valuable snapshots, for instance in the short accounts from different countries in the ISA's excellent *Global Dialogue* (<http://isa-global-dialogue.net/>), or in the discussion of underfunding and political pressure on social scientists in Thandika Mkandawire's *African Intellectuals* (2005).

What is clear is the existence of massive inequalities in income, research funding, and other resources—within particular countries, but especially important on a world scale. Resource inequalities, as well as language questions, are reflected in very unequal participation in meetings like the ISA World Congresses of Sociology and more generally in publication and citation patterns. These contribute to inequalities of recognition in the global economy of knowledge.

Decolonizing sociology, then, involves questions of redistribution, and that is something we do not normally imagine for an individual discipline. In today's managerial university, individual academics and even departments don't control large funds; most have to campaign to get even a single line for a new appointment. The big questions of overall levels of investment in research and higher education are beyond the power of individual universities.

But perhaps we give up too easily. Sociologists in rich countries seeking grants might take care to include some international collaboration in every project. Resources put into course development can be shared internationally by making curricula and curriculum materials available online. To be really useful this needs organizing through a body such as the ISA, but the inherent costs are low. Resources from the global North can be used to support South/South links and

research cooperation. This has been done, for instance, by the Dutch-funded SEPHIS program in combination with the Ford Foundation for social research on sexuality (Wieringa and Sívori 2013).

I'd like to finish with a do-it-yourself plea. We do not know the answers to many of the questions touched on in this essay. We will only find them by trying.

Colleagues and students interested in the decolonization project have often asked how I found the materials in *Southern Theory*, so they can find such material themselves. The answer is embarrassingly low-tech: I went and looked. I was confident the material was there to find, so I haunted libraries and bookshops (second-hand bookshops a specialty!), visited universities and institutes, read lots of regional histories, struggled with languages, and annoyed colleagues in every country I could reach with requests for their advice. When I began doing this, the Internet was in a primitive state; I had the advantage of international travel. I'm sure similar things can now be done with a much smaller carbon footprint.

And the beauty of any project for widening our own knowledge is this: nobody can stop us.

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