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Postcolonial and decolonial dialogues[1]

GURMINDER K BHAMBRA

The traditions of thought associated with postcolonialism and decoloniality are long-standing and diverse. Postcolonialism emerged as an intellectual movement consolidating and developing around the ideas of Edward W Said,[2] Homi K Bhabha[3] and Gayatri C Spivak.[4] While much work in the area of postcolonial studies has directly addressed issues of the material, of the socio-economic, there has also been a tendency for it to remain firmly in the realm of the cultural. In contrast, the modernity/coloniality school emerged from the work of, among others, the sociologists Anibal Quijano[5] and María Lugones,[6] and the philosopher and semiotician, Walter D Mignolo.[7] It was strongly linked to world-systems theory from the outset as well as to scholarly work in development and underdevelopment theory and the Frankfurt School critical social theory tradition.

As well as a disciplinary difference, there is also a difference in geographical 'origin' and remit; that is, the geographical locations from where the scholars within the particular fields hail and the geographical focus of their studies. Postcolonialism emerged as a consequence of the work of diasporic scholars from the Middle East and South Asia and, for the most part, refers back to those locations and their imperial interlocutors (Europe and the West). Decoloniality similarly emerged from the work of diasporic scholars from South America and, for the most part, refers back to those locations and their imperial interlocutors—again, primarily to Europe although addressing a much longer time frame. Whereas postcolonialism refers mainly to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, decoloniality starts with the earlier European incursions upon the lands that came to be known as the Americas from the fifteenth century onwards.

Postcolonial and decolonial arguments have been most successful in their challenge to the insularity of historical narratives and historiographical traditions emanating from Europe. This has been particularly so in the context of demonstrating the parochial character of arguments about the endogenous European origins of modernity in favour of arguments that suggest the necessity of considering the emergence of the modern world in the broader histories of colonialism, empire, and enslavement. However, there has been little work, thus far, bringing together the various trajectories of these fields. This piece—necessarily selective and incomplete—is one contribution to this larger project of what I call 'connected sociologies'.[8] In it, I examine the traditions of postcolonialism and decolonial thinking and discuss their radical potential in unsettling and reconstituting standard processes of knowledge production.

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I

Edward Said's *Orientalism*, not only presented a thorough-going critique of the arcane discipline of Oriental Studies, but opened up the question of the production of knowledge from a global perspective. While he was not the first to address such a question, his positioning of it in the context of interrogating the Orient/Occident divide was novel. He unsettled the terrain of any argument concerned with the 'universal' by demonstrating how the idea of the universal was based both on an analytic bifurcation of the world and an elision of that bifurcation. This double displacement removed the 'other' *from* the production of an effective history of modernity. History became the product of the West in its actions upon others. At the same time, it displaced those actions in the idea that modernity was endogenous to the West and therefore removed the very question of the 'other' *in* History. In so doing, it also naturalized and justified the West's material domination of the 'other' and in this way suggested the complicity between Orientalism as scholarly discourse and as imperial institution. It was no accident then, as Said suggests, that the movements for decolonization from the early twentieth century onwards should provoke a fundamental crisis within Orientalist thought; a crisis that fractures the complacent rendering of the 'other' as passive and docile and which challenges the assumptive conceptual framework underpinning such depictions.

It is this challenge to dominant conceptual frameworks that has become central to the broader project of Postcolonial Studies and is one that is developed at length within the work of Homi Bhabha. His essays—collated in *The Location of Culture*—cover a number of themes, but coalesce around a dual engagement with social ethics and subject formation on the one hand, and (the representation of) contemporary inequalities and their historical conditions, on the other; as well, of course, as the relationships between these aspects, which is perhaps best captured in Bhabha's words that 'we must not merely change the *narratives* of our histories, but transform our sense of what it means to live'.[9] Postcolonial theory, according to Bhabha, is no longer (if it ever was) simply about the establishment of separatist trajectories or parallel interpretations, but should be seen instead as 'an attempt to interrupt the Western discourses of modernity through … displacing, interrogative subaltern or postslavery narratives and the critical-theoretical perspectives they engender'.[10] The issue is more about re-inscribing 'other' cultural traditions into narratives of modernity and thus transforming those narratives—both in historical terms and theoretical ones—rather than simply re-naming or re-evaluating the content of these other 'inheritances'.

For Bhabha, then, there is no singular event of modernity and there are no moderns (that is, those who have lived through modernity); rather, modernity 'is about the historical construction of a specific position of historical enunciation and address'[11] and much can be learnt through examining the spatial contours given by theorists to the time of modernity. The insistent location of modernity in the French and industrial revolutions, for example, reveals the 'eurocentricity of Foucault's theory of cultural difference';[12] a eurocentricity that is made more apparent when we address the case of Haiti, among others.[13] By interrupting the passage of modernity, the assumed temporal action of modernity, what is revealed is the particular staging of modernity. By bearing witness to different pasts one is

not a passive observer but is able to turn from interrogating the past to initiating new dialogues about that past and thus bringing into being new histories and from those new histories, new presents and new futures. Postcolonial critical discourse at its best, Bhabha suggests, 'contests modernity through the establishment of other historical sites, other forms of enunciation',[14] and, in so doing, rearticulates understandings of modernity and the political possibilities associated with it.

Postcolonial scholarship has been integral to the exercise of opening out and questioning the implied assumptions of the dominant discourses by way of which we attempt to make sense of the worlds we inhabit. It has further provided the basis from which to reclaim, as Spivak argues, 'a series of regulative political concepts, the *supposedly* authoritative narrative of whose production was written elsewhere'.[15] The task, following Spivak, is less about the uncovering of philosophical ground than in 'reversing, displacing, and seizing the apparatus of value-coding' itself;[16] thus, I would suggest, accepting the possibility, in times of the postcolonial, of a critical realignment of colonial power and knowledge through a methodology of 'connected sociologies'.[17] Spivak does this by addressing Western efforts to problematize the subject and, in the process, questions how the Third World subject is represented in Western discourse.

In 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', Spivak offers an analysis of the relationship between Western discourses and the possibility of speaking of (or for) the subaltern (woman). She assesses the intellectual and political contributions of French post-structuralist theory and finds it wanting in terms of its failures in addressing the implications of imperialism in discussions of power and epistemic violence more generally. She suggests that for all that is good and innovative in what has been written there is still a problem to the extent that the question of ideology is ignored, as is the post-structuralist theorist's own implication in intellectual and economic history. To work with 'a self-contained version of the West', she argues, 'is to ignore its production by the imperialist project'.[18] This is not to suggest that the history of imperialism is the only history of the West, but to address more explicitly the question of how what is currently dominant and hegemonic came to be so. The silence of scholars such as Deleuze and Foucault on the (epistemic) violence of imperialism would matter less, she suggests, if they did not choose to speak on Third World issues. Too often, she argues, European philosophers have masqueraded as absent non-representers who seemingly allow, unproblematically, the oppressed to speak for themselves without considering the economic and intellectual privilege this involves.[19]

II

The theoretical distinction 'modernity/coloniality' was articulated by Anibal Quijano as 'Colonialidad y modernidad-racionalidad' and was first printed in English in 2007. Here, he argues that, with the conquest of the lands that we now call Latin America, 'began the constitution of a new world order, culminating, five hundred years later, in a global power covering the whole planet'.[20] This coloniality of power, expressed through political and economic spheres, Quijano continues, was strongly associated with a coloniality of knowledge (or of imagination), articulated as modernity/rationality. This was predicated on a belief

that knowledge, in a similar way to property, ought to be considered 'as a relation between one individual and something else',[21] not as an intersubjective relation for the purpose of something. The individuated form of knowledge production has as its correlate the 'radical absence of the "other"' and a denial of 'the idea of the social totality'.[22] This enables Europeans, both individually and collectively, to affirm their sense of self at the same time as making invisible the colonial order that provides the context for their 'self'-realization.

As Quijano states, the emergence of the idea of Europe is an admission of identity in that it emerges through a process of differentiation *from* other cultures. Yet there is little reflection within European social and political thought on how those other cultures constitute the ground of European self-realization (in both senses). Rather, most discussions of Europe are oriented towards endogenous explanations of who Europeans are and what Europe is. Against this dominant conception, Quijano argues that the modernity that Europe takes as the context for its own being is, in fact, so deeply imbricated in the structures of European colonial domination over the rest of the world that it is impossible to separate the two: hence, modernity/coloniality.

María Lugones builds on Quijano's coloniality of power by arguing for modernity/coloniality to be understood as simultaneously shaped through specific articulations of race, gender, and sexuality. This is not to provide a raced or gendered (alternative) *reading* of the paradigm of modernity/coloniality, but rather to re-read modernity/coloniality from a consciousness of race, gender, and sexuality *and* to examine the emergence and development of those categories within this context. Lugones argues that not only did colonization invent the colonized, it also disrupted the social patterns, gender relations and cosmological understandings of the communities and societies it invaded. In doing so, it rearticulated particular European understandings of gender and sex from a bifurcation between male and female to a racialized understanding of the same embedded within a logic of colonial difference. This further overlay and sought to erase the varied conceptualizations of gender, sex, and sexuality that pre-existed the European colonial/modern gender system. This system organizes the world into homogenous, separable categories arranged through hierarchical dichotomies and categorial logics which, in the process, erase colonized women from most areas of social life. As Lugones argues, for example, to suggest that 'woman' and 'black' are homogenous, separable categories, 'then their intersection shows us the absence of black women rather than their presence'.[23]

Mignolo develops Quijano's earlier theoretical work and, in particular, further elaborates his conception of modernity/coloniality in the context of the work of epistemic decolonization necessary to undo the damage wrought by both modernity and by understanding modernity/coloniality only as modernity. The decolonization of knowledge, he suggests, occurs in acknowledging the sources and geo-political locations of knowledge while at the same time affirming those modes and practices of knowledge that have been denied by the dominance of particular forms. He is not arguing simply for a geo-politics of location as central to any academic endeavour, but rather a consideration of *what* that geo-politics enables to be known and *how* it is to be known. The key issue for Mignolo is not only that epistemology is not ahistorical, but also, and perhaps more importantly,

that epistemology 'has to be geographical in its historicity'.[24] Mignolo's project of 'de-linking' points to the need to change the terms (concepts) as well as the content (histories) of the conversations on modernity/coloniality. He argues for a decolonial epistemic shift that enables the histories and thought of other places to be understood as prior to European incursions and to be used as the basis of developing connected histories of encounters through those incursions. In the process, he argues also for the epistemic delinking from 'the rhetoric of modernity' to involve rethinking 'the emancipating ideals of modernity in the perspective of coloniality'.[25]

III

As should be apparent from the preceding discussion, both postcolonialism and decoloniality are developments within the broader politics of knowledge production and both emerge out of political developments contesting the colonial world order established by European empires, albeit in relation to different time periods and different geographical orientations. The key issue to emerge from the work of decolonial scholars is to pull the time horizon of debates on modernity back to the late fifteenth century and extend them southwards to take into account both the activities of southern European countries such as Spain and Portugal, but also the southern half of the continent to be named the Americas. Quijano and then Mignolo after him have also done much to demonstrate the deep imbrications of the development of modernity within coloniality and, in establishing the concept of coloniality, providing us with a way to discuss the more profound realities of colonialism, especially 'after' the event. The colonial matrix of power, that Mignolo argues is the inextricable combination of the rhetoric of modernity (progress, development, growth) and the logic of coloniality (poverty, misery, inequality), has to be central to any discussion of contemporary global inequalities and the historical basis of their emergence.

Lugones extends the arguments of both Quijano and Mignolo to demonstrate how coloniality not only divides the world according to a particular racial logic, but also creates specific understandings of gender that enable the disappearance of the colonial/raced woman from theoretical and political consideration. In this, Lugones is close to Spivak's considerations in 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' and makes explicit the issue of listening and learning from others in any development away from current dominant structures of knowledge production. In pointing to the importance of coalitions of resistance as well as coalitions of understanding, she highlights the necessary relationship between hierarchies of oppression and the personal politics of knowledge production (where the personal is always understood in terms of the communities within which individuals are located and through which knowledge is produced). All the theorists considered here would argue strongly for such a conception of knowledge production and acknowledge their own debts—intellectual and other—to the communities that sustained and enabled their scholarship; from historical antecedents such as Waman Puma de Ayala (and their translators), to relative contemporaries such as Fanon and Césaire, as well as the academic research communities that develop and take the ideas and initiatives of these scholars beyond their initial conceptualizations.

Said's influence within the academy (and further afield) has been as extensive as it has been diverse. His key theoretical contribution, I would suggest, is the demonstration of how the idea of the universal within European thought is based on a claim to universality at the same time as it elides its own particularity, and how this claim is sustained through the exercise of material power in the world. His argument is not one of immanent critique or the working out of a scholastic position within academic debate, but rather, is focused on exposing the ways in which relations of power underpin both knowledge and the possibilities of its production. Bhabha similarly is committed to the disruption of standard narratives that reinforce particular conceptualizations of power in the name of a broader humanitarian ethos and providing resources for the construction of other narratives. In arguing for the necessity of rearticulating understandings of modernity from other geographical locations and through a consideration of processes of colonization and enslavement, he aligns straightforwardly with scholars of the modernity/coloniality paradigm.

Postcolonialism and decoloniality are only made necessary as a consequence of the depredations of colonialism, but in their intellectual resistance to associated forms of epistemological dominance they offer more than simple opposition. They offer, in the words of María Lugones, the possibility of a new geopolitics of knowledge.

Notes on Contributor

Gurminder K Bhambra is Professor of Sociology and Director of the Social Theory Centre at the University of Warwick. Her research interests are primarily in the area of historical sociology and contemporary social theory and she is also interested in the intersection of the social sciences with recent work in postcolonial and decolonial studies. She is author of *Connected Sociologies* (2014) and *Rethinking Modernity: Postcolonialism and the Sociological Imagination* (2007), which won the Philip Abrams Memorial Prize for best first book in sociology. She has co-edited three collections, *Silencing Human Rights* (2009), *1968 in Retrospect* (2009) and *African Athena* (2011).

Notes

[1] This is an abridged version of my chapter, 'Postcolonial and Decolonial Reconstructions', in *Connected Sociologies*, London: Bloomsbury, 2014, used with permission.

[2] Edward W Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, London: Penguin, 1995.

[3] Homi K Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994.

[4] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988.

[5] Aníbal Quijano, 'Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality', *Cultural Studies* 21(2), 2007, pp 168–178.

[6] María Lugones, 'Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System', *Hypatia* 22(1), 2007, pp 186–209.

[7] Walter Mignolo, 'The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference', *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101(1), 2000, pp 57–96.

[8] Gurminder K Bhambra, *Connected Sociologies*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014. There are many excellent works outlining and summarizing the respective fields; see, for example, Roberto Briceño-León and Heinz R Sonntag (eds), 'Sociology in Latin America', Proceedings of the ISA Regional Conference for Latin America, 1997, www.isa-sociology.org/colmemb/national-associations/en/meetings/reports/Latin%20American%20Sociology.pdf; Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, London: Routledge, 2005 [1998]; Boaventura de Sousa Santos (ed), *Another Knowledge is Possible: Beyond Northern Epistemologies*, London: Verso, 2007.

[9] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p 256.

[10] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p 199.
[11] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, pp 201–202.
[12] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p 202.
[13] For discussion see Gurminder K Bhambra, *Rethinking Modernity: Postcolonialism and the Sociological Imagination*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007.
[14] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p 254.
[15] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Post-structuralism, Marginality, Postcoloniality and Value', in Peter Collier and Helga Geyer-Ryan (eds), *Literary Theory Today*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990, p 225.
[16] Spivak, 'Post-structuralism, Marginality, Postcoloniality and Value', p 228.
[17] Bhambra, *Connected Sociologies*.
[18] Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', p 289.
[19] Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', pp 292–293.
[20] Quijano, 'Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality', p 168.
[21] Quijano, 'Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality', p 173.
[22] Quijano, 'Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality', p 173.
[23] María Lugones, 'Toward a Decolonial Feminism', *Hypatia* 25(4), 2011, pp 742–759, p 742. Lugones, 'Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System'.
[24] Mignolo, 'The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference', p 67.
[25] Walter Mignolo, 'Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-coloniality', *Cultural Studies* 21(2), 2007, pp 449–514, p 469.