

Review - Connected Sociologies

Written by Lisa Tilley

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LISA TILLEY, FEB 15 2017

Connected Sociologies
By Gurminder K. Bhambra
London: Bloomsbury, 2014

The discipline of sociology is presently a shifting and reconfiguring terrain; its epistemological centre, long understood implicitly or explicitly to be located in Europe, simply cannot hold. Gurminder K. Bhambra's 2014 text *Connected Sociologies* is, in part, a frank and lucid re-mapping of this shifting sociological terrain, understood in its broader context in relation to the colonial history of the world. In this sense alone, the book is a vital pedagogical resource which not only familiarises the reader with dominant scholars within the sociological canon, but also deepens understanding of their texts by positioning them in their global historical context. Beyond this expansive analysis of the epistemological foundations of (Eurocentred) sociology, the book also provides us with alternative grounds for future sociological work beyond the bounds of the European former imperial core.

Bhambra's overall vision for reconstructing sociology takes inspiration from Sanjay Subrahmanyam's (1997; 2005a; 2005b) method of producing 'connected histories' from plural standpoints which are otherwise artificially isolated by the ways in which disciplines are structured. Like Subrahmanyam, Bhambra departs from a place of deep methodological discontent with modes of scholarship centred on ideal types. These, she observes, do the epistemic work of separating and isolating entities and occurrences which are, in reality, deeply connected. Ideal-type method and located epistemology are, therefore, bound together, working in concert to separate and isolate. Bhambra's text challenges us instead to do the remedial work of "[reconstructing] theoretical categories – their relations and objects – to create new understandings that incorporate and transform previous ones" (p.4). In this sense, Bhambra actively compels us to reconstruct our understanding of social worlds by means of the identification of new connections between events, entities, and people(s).

Connected Sociologies is ordered within three main parts. The first of these is *Sociological Theory and Historical Sociology*, which advances a re-examination of understandings of 'the global' in both theoretical and historical sociology. The second, *Social Sciences and Questions of Epistemology*, covers contemporary calls to work towards more global, 'cosmopolitan' forms of social science. The third and final part bears the book's own title, *Connected Sociologies*, and concentrates on reimagining possible future configurations for the discipline.

Across the early chapters of the book, Bhambra's incisive critiques of existing influential theoretical perspectives work to demonstrate the ways in which much sociological work is impoverished by its own wilful amnesia when it comes to how colonial histories have inflected the formation of the discipline. In the context of this amnesia, Eurocentrism is preserved rather than dismantled. In Chapter 3, for example, Bhambra points out that Ulrich Beck's cosmopolitan social science, while making a claim to reach towards global 'inclusivity', nonetheless maintains Europe as modernity's point of origin within which the Others of Europe are expected to be 'included'. Beck, Bhambra argues, sought to erase methodological nationalism with a vision for a cosmopolitan social theory yet found himself resting upon a methodological Eurocentrism instead.

Over the course of Chapter 4, Bhambra engages with the cognate work of scholars such as Raewyn Connell, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, and Sujata Patel, who are largely driven by a similar ethico-intellectual commitment to

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reconfigure a discipline which makes claims to universal knowledge yet continues to organise itself along historically configured and parochial lines. If the previous chapters form something of a lamentation of the fact that Eurocentric knowledge is still being uncritically reproduced without consciousness of its own provincialism, this fourth chapter injects a genuine optimism by demonstrating that momentum is gathering rapidly around truly global theoretical movements; movements which are also advancing in productive dialogue with one another.

Beyond this, however, *Connected Sociologies* is by no means limited to an extended disciplinary reflection of concern only to sociologists; indeed, the broader points made in the book continue to enhance understanding of our changing and troubled times. Consider, for a moment, that Bhambra's book was published back in 2014, and was therefore written during a time in which the Brexit and Trump outcomes in the UK and the US could barely have been imagined, let alone predicted. It is quite remarkable, then, how far the arguments made in the book speak so authoritatively to the political present. Take, for instance, Bhambra's firm and repeated objections (p.153) to the centrality of the national political order in European self-understandings (reproduced in sociological scholarship as much as in the media and popular discourse). England and Scotland, she reminds us, were already imperial states prior to union, therefore Britain can barely be understood historically as a nation state. The nature of this historical lesson becomes all the more prescient in today's context in which sovereignty is reimagined as "taking our country back", appealing to imagined centuries of nation-statehood which never existed in reality.

On the whole, this is a detailed, yet expansive book, which more than fulfils its twin goals of critiquing 'backwards' the Eurocentric canon of sociology, and reconstructing 'forwards' connected sociologies produced from plural locations. As such, and in combination with other projects, *Connected Sociologies* provides firm grounds for the reconfiguration of the discipline. Taking the conversation forwards from here could begin with those voices this text did not have space to cover. The figure of W.E.B. Du Bois, for instance, makes very few appearances in Bhambra's mapping of sociologies, past and future. With pedagogy in mind, the book left me wondering how Bhambra would weave Du Boisian concepts and contributions into relational positions within the sociology/sociologies she maps out. Further, if the future of a discipline built on connected sociologies will be, in part, decolonial, this claim to decolonial knowledge should spring from existing work by Indigenous scholars. This would involve reaching beyond the decolonial school of Mignolo and others in order to be led by more-than-modern scholarship which challenges Eurocentred knowledge on the deepest ontological level.

As sociology's imagined European centre comes apart and a truly global discipline is crafted in its place, *Connected Sociologies* will remain a vital guiding text for those wishing to understand where we have been and where we are going to. Further, as our political and social worlds are re-organised into ever-more troubling formations, Bhambra's voice is an increasingly vital source of historically-informed sense which will continue to steer us through seemingly incomprehensible times.

References

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