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## Decolonizing the Western Mind: Gurminder K. Bhambra, in discussion with Albenaz Azmanova

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## Decolonizing the Western Mind: Gurminder K. Bhabra, in discussion with Albena Azmanova

### Keywords

Imperialism, colonialism, race, capitalism, social science

## On Imperialism's Afterlife

**Albena Azmanova:** The five centuries during which humankind lived in the shadow of the West were officially over with the dismantling of colonialism in the second half of the twentieth century. The U.S. failure in Vietnam and more recently in Afghanistan, and the rise of China as a superpower have displayed the futility of Western powers' aspirations to impose their order on the world. Yet, the issue of the pervasive and persistent impact of Western imperialism keeps reemerging. The insidious legacy of empire endures via the permeation of Western worldviews in the former colonies, the perpetuation of racial injustice even after decades of anti-discrimination struggles, and the structuring of the global economy of knowledge around epistemic inequalities and dominations moulded by colonialism. Putin's invasion in Ukraine in February 2022 and the justification of that aggression with a narrative about sovereignty and emancipation (e.g., defense of Russian territorial sovereignty and claims of liberating the purportedly oppressed Ukrainian population) is but the latest symptom of the tenacity of Western imperialistic common sense. It is high time to decolonize the Western mind. Your writing has been at the forefront of calls for a radical decolonizing not only of politics, but also of practices of knowledge-creation and learning. Let me open this conversation by trying to articulate the radicalism of your position in the following way:

The role of colonialism in the development of modern society is by now well acknowledged. We have long known that colonialism and slavery fuelled the development of European economies – there is no Manchester without the Mississippi and Mumbai. But in a number of works, most recently, in the book *Colonialism and Modern Social Theory* (Polity 2021), which you co-authored with John Holmwood, you have extended the thesis of the colonial constitution of modernity to the “colonial constitution of social science”. You have argued not only that the injustices of the past have continued into the present and are in need of repair (and reparation), as many thinkers within the de-colonial and post-colonial movement have urged, but that this reparative work must also be extended to the disciplinary structures of the social sciences themselves. Yours is therefore a more radical claim: you argue that to rethink modernity, we need to rethink social science and transform the sociological imagination. This is the case because social science,

as it developed in parallel with the historical practices of imperial expansion and oppression, not only served and justified that expansion, but was *constituted by* that oppression and thus has remained *constitutively* marked by it. In other words, colonialism has so deeply affected social science that we don't even have the conceptual tools of performing the emancipatory critique to which we, social scientists, are committed. And hence you urge a thorough *transformation* of social science, which is, of course, more ambitious than simply adding in the missing elements.

**Gurminder K. Bhambra:** The key issue that I am concerned with in my work is the systematic failure to take colonial histories into account in our understandings of the social sciences. Colonialism did not happen just as something parallel to the development of modernity, it was *integral* to it. So, if modernity is seen to be foundational for the social sciences – that they are both a product of modernity and articulate modernity's self-understanding – then colonial processes also have to be addressed. What is missing in dominant accounts, then, is a proper consideration of the world-historical processes of dispossession, appropriation, elimination, extraction, enslavement, and indenture which colonialism represents and how they are central to the emergence and development of modernity and what social science takes to be its distinctive institutional forms. The failure to take into account the connected histories of colonialism and modernity that produce our shared present leads to our inability to effectively address social and political problems in the present.

I propose that the standard understandings of social science can be criticized both substantively and in terms of their epistemological claims. The substantive issues, as just mentioned, are that the historical record is different to that found within most sociological and social scientific understandings. Recent arguments have drawn attention to two key deficiencies within these narratives. First, that the endogenous processes deemed significant in understanding the key events of modernity had broader conditions of emergence and development. Second, that other global processes usually not addressed by sociology, specifically colonial processes, are also central to the development of modernity, but are elided in sociology's conceptual framing of it. In terms of epistemology, it is important to note that sociology is both a system of knowledge oriented to history and is *constituted by*

*that history*. In this way, the displacement of colonial structures from accounts of modernity means that sociological thought is unreflectingly colonial in how it has been formed and developed. This is the key object of my analysis.

### **Social Science's Crimes and Misdemeanors**

**Albena Azmanova:** Before we address the specific deficiencies of social science that need to be remedied, let us first clarify the object of your critique: social science. Even if we reduce it to its most narrow scope, as 'social theory', social science is a diverse entity: it extends from Weber's account of the various legitimation resources of power to Foucault's analysis of biopolitics; from rational-choice theory that still permeates neoclassical economics to value-centered social constructivism that has gained popularity of late. How do you establish the common denominator that allows you to articulate a distinct object that is in need of transformation?

**Gurminder K. Bhambra:** We have come to think of the social sciences as an aggregation of discrete and mutually inconsistent undertakings, both in the relation between disciplines (say, economics and sociology) or within disciplines (in the different approaches within sociology, for example). While there are many differences expressed within the social sciences, there are two things that they all share. They share an absence – that is, any address of colonial history – and they also share a common focus on modernity, where this absence is most pertinent.

Sociology is a specific and separate discipline, but it also represents itself as organizing the relations between disciplines. Its emergence, as Habermas has set out, should be understood in the context of economics and politics establishing themselves as specialized sciences and, as a consequence, leaving sociology with the residue of problems that were no longer of concern to them. This disciplinary construction separates the sphere of the rational (system) – that is, economics, with its object being the market; and politics, with its object being administration and strategic action (or bureaucracy) – from the sphere of the non-rational (social). In this perspective, sociology emerges as a particular form of reflection upon the sphere of the 'system', how it impinges on the social and, in turn, how it is impinged upon by the social; in other words, as Habermas put it, sociology is expressed in a theory of

action which encompasses the dimensions of system and social integration, while its specific object is social integration.

This framing is commonly accepted and the key issue I would draw attention to is that the social is understood in terms of a theory of the 'modern' social. It is the modern social without recognition of colonialism as also integral to its constitution – colonialism is neither part of the 'system' nor of the 'lifeworld', and the analytical categories are presented in terms of processes of capitalism and community endogenous to Europe. To the extent that colonialism is taken into account within the social sciences it is likely to be within the discipline of anthropology whose domain is seen to be that of the traditional and pre-modern, not the modern. While the dividing line between the social sciences is their orientation to modernity (politics, economics, sociology) or tradition (anthropology), what connects them, through its absence, is colonialism.

There is, then, an alternative colonial frame within which we can come to understand that the making of societies as modern or as traditional is produced out of colonial relationships. The failure to acknowledge these connections is the common absence amongst the social sciences and what is needed is an address of the modern not in terms of the modern-traditional divide, but to think about how the modern comes to be in terms of understandings of it as 'colonial-modern'.

**Albena Azmanova:** How should we therefore understand more specifically the endemic deficiency of social science? In what way have colonial practices been omitted from social science? We surely know about slavery because colonial practices have been recorded and studied. Moreover, you claim that colonial histories have not only been omitted as a subject-matter (so, there is a lack), but that this omission has affected our *very understandings* of the social sciences – so there is a deeper effect of that omission, an affliction in the wiring of the Western mind. This is an extremely interesting proposition. So, what is this deeper deficiency in the social sciences and how would our understanding of social sciences change if we to develop a proper understanding of the 'colonial-modern'?

**Gurminder K. Bhambra:** Histories of colonialism and slavery exist. These histories tend to be associated, by social scientists, with activities that are not seen to be significant to how we understand the modern world. Properly acknowledging the

significance of these histories within contemporary social science would require us to reconstruct the dominant paradigms that had been established without taking them into account. They should cause us to rethink our accepted frameworks of explanation which had been established on the basis of narrower histories. The facts and interpretations that support standard ideas of European modernity, for example, are countered by a growing body of literature that presents alternative interpretations and contestations of those 'facts'. The weight of such arguments is sufficient to suggest that an alternative to the grand narrative of 'European modernity' is both plausible and likely to be productive of new insights. The task that postcolonial criticism asks us to consider is to rethink modernity in the context of this new data and develop paradigms adequate for a global age in which the global is now understood as the *condition* of the modern world, not its *consequence*.

For example, social, political, and economic changes associated, variously, with the Renaissance and the French and industrial revolutions are argued to have brought a new modern world into being, one that was marked by two forms of 'rupture'. The first is a temporal rupture dividing a traditional rural past from a modern industrial present. The second is a spatial disjuncture that located change in Europe (later to be widened to the category of the West more generally) from the rest of the world. Taken together, key events associated with modernity are framed within a particular narrative of European history understood in narrowly bounded terms. There is little acknowledgement of their situatedness within broader connections.

When discussing the Industrial Revolution, for example, most people suggest that it begins in Europe, in Britain, and even more specifically, in the cotton mills of Manchester and Lancaster. However, cotton isn't a plant that is native to Europe let alone to Britain. It comes from India as does the technology of how to dye and weave it. The raw material is grown in the Southern states of the US by Africans who have been taken there as part of the European trade in human beings. The raw material is shipped to Manchester where it's turned into cloth and that cloth is sold around the world, usually at the point of a gun because it is of inferior quality to cotton produced elsewhere.

As such, there were already global connections that enabled Manchester to come to be seen as the origin of the Industrial Revolution. Yet if we start from Manchester, we efface these existing relationships. We imagine industrialization happening spontaneously within Europe and then creating capitalist global relations

in its spread outwards when actually there are colonial global relations that underpin the very possibility of the emergence of industrialization and then capitalism. Why this matters, is because of the ways in which we understand global inequality in the present. Differences between regions are often naturalized and poverty elsewhere is presented as a consequence of internal deficiencies as opposed to emerging as a consequence of colonial processes. This leads to solutions to poverty being posited in terms of arguments for development or aid or charity, as opposed to thinking through the necessity of global redistribution and reparations as a more appropriate way to redress such issues. The wealth of Europe has been established on the basis of illegitimate colonial processes; justice in the present requires us to take these historical processes into account when thinking through how best to address global inequalities.

**Albena Azmanova:** You remarked that, when discussing the industrial revolution, most people think it begins in Britain -- I wonder whose ignorance is at stake here. I doubt that most people would be able to place Manchester on a map, but surely most historians acknowledge the history of Manchester's cotton mills. Social science has studied the colonial enablers of European industrialization for years. In fact, there is such a disconnect between academia and the opinions of the average taxpayer that 'liberal' higher education is blamed by the far right for our governments' wasting taxpayer money on welcoming 'undeserving immigrants' that are seen as strangers invading 'our land'. Whose thinking do you have in mind when you speak of most people's flawed or deficient knowledge of colonialism?

**Gurminder K. Bhambra:** As I've said, my concern is primarily with the failure of social scientists to adequately reckon with the shared histories that have produced our modern world. It is simply incorrect to say that the standard works of social science – those works which form its concepts and the curricula that are taught – address the colonial contexts of industrialization or adequately reckon with the histories of chattel slavery in the construction of the modern world. These issues, for example, are not discussed in Giddens' *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory* nor in Nisbet's *The Sociological Tradition* nor in Münch's two volume *Sociological Theory*. Colonialism and chattel slavery form no part of the discussions of the more recent

formulation of 'multiple modernities' either. Moreover, the political engagements of social scientists are not so different to those of politicians, which is presumably why academics with erstwhile social democratic sympathies can find themselves referring to immigrants as 'invaders'. It is precisely the failure to acknowledge our histories in common that prepares the ground for the narrow and atavistic politics that we see dangerously on the rise across Europe.

**Albena Azmanova:** Would you exempt from this account of social science's neglect the work of scholars like Immanuel Wallerstein, for example who builds on Marx's notion of primitive accumulation and exploitation in order to give a detailed historical account of the emergence of the Modern World System through military and cultural colonization, a process in which the Occidental 'core' subjugates the 'periphery' in a perpetual process of abuse of human beings, their societies and their natural environment? Before him, Marx was well aware of the significance of the colonization of the Americas, India or China, of the slave economy in the industrial revolution, and of the role of India in British capitalism (e.g. in *The Communist Manifesto*). Similarly, Kari Polanyi writes about the origins of capitalism in the colonial slave/sugar economy, and David Graeber has covered this territory exhaustively. And how about thinkers like Rosa Luxemburg and Lenin, for whom imperialism is a central theme? Georg Lukacs, for instance, has claimed that irrationality is immanent in fascism, capitalism and imperialism (in his *Destruction of Reason*). Moreover, by positioning their analysis within an ontology of social systems as systems of social relations, such thinkers are not beholden epistemologically to notions of territorially bound power such as 'nationhood' and 'statehood'. This attention to the system, to the whole, allows analysis in principle, as a matter of its basic conceptual framework, to remain open to alternative voices and practices, it seems to me, exactly in the way you urge social science to be epistemologically inclusive. Would you argue that these thinkers haven't gone far enough in their analysis, or that their work hasn't adequately penetrated the mainstream of social science?

**Gurminder K. Bhambra:** There are absences within the work of individual scholars that require address, as well as absences that accumulate within the disciplines. The idea that there is a 'system' or conceptual framework that exists as, in principle, able

to address ‘absences’ which are then deemed to be no more than additional instantiations is a common assumption within the social sciences. It is something John Holmwood and I address as one of the fictions of modern social theory, the idea of a transcendent sociological reason. Of course, the specific nature of what is argued will vary by author.

For example, as I argued previously in *Connected Sociologies*, Wallerstein’s modern world-system can be understood as follows. The long sixteenth century saw the emergence of a European world-economy that was a system of economic linkages greater than any juridically-defined political unit. It was distinguished from empires, which were regarded as political units, and differed from earlier world-economies precisely by not being also transformed into empires. While Wallerstein recognizes that the economic linkages between places were appropriately understood in the context of the world, he circumscribes the remit of political action to that of the national state. But the very context for a worldwide division of labour that included slavery and coerced cash-crop labour, sharecropping, bonded labour, and free labour was usually an imperial or colonial regime that participated in enslavement and subjugation beyond its national boundaries. The realm of political action extended beyond the national state and was constituted in the imperial or colonial states within which ‘worldwide’ economic differentiation was created and managed. By distinguishing a world-economy from an ideal type of world-empire, Wallerstein has little room in his analysis for the very real empires of European states, or the ‘free-trade imperialism’ they operated, that had worldwide reach. Where these are discussed, they are discussed in terms of their peripheral relation to the European world-economy (the Americas) or as external to it (Asia) and the manner of their ‘incorporation’ is naturalized.

While there is much to be gained from the scholarship of all those you list, there is also an absence in common – the failure to take actually existing empires and histories of colonialism seriously in the construction of sociological concepts and categories that are otherwise established on the basis of the endogenous histories of Europe.

**Albena Azmanova:** I’d like to probe further your thesis that sociological thought is unreflexively colonial because the making of societies as modern or as traditional is produced out of colonial relationships. The status of colonial practices within social

science could be understood in two ways. If these practices have been enabling conditions for the development of modernity, they have indeed made an important causal impact, but they remain just that -- enabling conditions. In such a case, there is no logical reason to see them also as *constitutive* elements of modernity – that is, elements in the very structure of modernity that define its character. (Insemination as a cause for the creation of a child, but semen is not as a constitutive element of the child.) Under the first option (of a causal link between colonialism and modernity) colonial practices allow the social sciences to be used for nefarious political goals, for instance in eugenics, but are not indispensable to the functioning of modernity. Under the second option, colonial practices are constitutive of knowledge, have shaped social theory and pervaded its existence. You seem to be making both claims. Can you clarify the second one? How is colonialism, in your view, not just an enabling condition but also an element in the very constitution of modern social science? And what is the specific fallacy this entails – how is social science epistemically deficient?

**Gurminder K. Bhambra:** The significance of colonialism to the constitution of the social sciences can be considered from two perspectives. One is their adequacy in the light of what they purport to describe. Second is the implication of a different understanding of their significance for the categories that theorists have sought to separate from those histories.

In terms of the first kind of misrepresentation, we see that in early modern social theory, in addressing the issue of the rights of property, a God-given commons is seen to be available to be brought into possession through the use of one's labour (including the labour of one's servants). This theory, that CB Macpherson called the theory of possessive individualism, is most usually seen as the precursor to a capitalist mentality. However, it is clear that, in the writings of Hobbes and Locke, for example, it arises in the immediate context of encounters with others in the lands that come to be known as the Americas. This clearly is a colonial context and not only Hobbes and Locke but also others at the time were participants in the corporations that took land and other people into possession. The misrepresentation involves also denying the practices of agriculture and husbandry of those others encountered on the lands being taken into possession. This is necessary to deny that they have established claims over those lands through their labour. Equally, in

other writings, the resistance to incursions is treated as a sign of barbarism that warrants being taken into possession. Enslavement is not then perceived as a barbaric practice enacted by Europeans, but as a condition suited to ‘barbarians’ by which they might be improved and readied for a modernity defined separately of such processes.

This then moves to the second form of misrepresentation. Here, we begin to see others depicted in terms of stages of history. That is, the colonial practices of Europeans are presented as enacted upon populations at different stages in history which are destined to disappear in the course of progress. This construction not only makes other peoples disappear, it also renders invisible the continuity of the practices that establish a modern world theorized independently of them. In addressing what scholars at the time did write about colonialism and bringing it into the focus of attention, in *Colonialism and Modern Social Theory* Holmwood and I seek to show how a proper accounting of colonialism and empire would disrupt the integrity of the categories they otherwise promote and open up new ways of thinking about modern social thought. The issue now, however, is not simply to add colonialism to sociology’s repertoire of topics, but to show how that repertoire has been structured by the absence of its consideration and must be fundamentally transformed.

**Albena Azmanova:** It is true that virtually all of the early leading political thinkers and theorists of liberal democracy (Tocqueville, J. S. Mill, M. Weber) were not only Eurocentric, not just failed to address the injustices of imperialism, but were also ardent and unscrupulous advocates of colonialism and (“social”) imperialism. And yet, what should we make of the strands of reflexive critique of science that have been developed within Occidental social thought? We do not even have to go as far as critical theory, for instance, the critique of instrumental rationality developed within the Frankfurt School. We can remain with the pantheon of the founders of social science and take Max Weber as an example. One can hardly find a harsher criticism of occidental reason than Weber’s discussion of the irrationality of increased rationalization in modern Western societies. This criticism is clearly contained in his thesis that the disenchantment that Modernity engenders effectively entraps us in an iron cage of systems based purely on teleological efficiency, rational calculation and control – this is not something Weber celebrated. He denounced Western

civilization in no uncertain terms, describing it as a world of “specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart”; he calls it “a nullity that imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved” (in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*). Even more closely relevant to your concerns with modern social theory is Weber’s lecture ‘Science as a Vocation’, in which he highlights the limits of scientific knowledge, speaks about the historical nature of knowledge, the particularity of its insights, its inability to grasp the whole or to establish objectivity, before coming to the dramatic conclusion that “science is meaningless because it gives no answer to . . . the only important question ‘What shall we do and how shall we live?’” Weber states here that the highest aim of science is exploring ‘the devil’s ways to the end in order to realize his power and his limitations’; realizing these limitations leads to an ethic of responsibility. How is this position, so unambiguously critical of occidental social science, still tainted or deficient? You seem to point not just to the absence of critique and self-reflexivity but to the absence of a *certain type* of critique.

**Gurminder K. Bhambra:** In *Colonialism and Modern Social Theory*, we were interested in rethinking the ideas of the classical social theorists by locating them within the times through which they lived. We were interested in what they had to say about those times, what they missed out, and what difference that makes to what we had thought we knew about their scholarship. We were also interested to think about how subsequent commentators have failed to engage with the limited discussions of colonialism in their thought.

Weber’s definition of the modern state, for example, as that entity which secures the legitimate exercise of coercive power within a given territory, is widespread across the social sciences. His conceptualization of the modern state was based upon an understanding of the contemporary German state as defined by its national boundaries. However, the construction of the ‘national’ state was concurrent with, and indeed constituted by, its associated imperial activities. The establishment of the German state in 1871, for example, was followed by the intensification of processes of ‘de-Polonization’ and ‘Germanification’ at the borderlands of the new state. Further, within 13 years of unification, the German state had begun the process of acquiring the fourth largest colonial empire at the time.

The state, as standardly defined, then, did not simply lay claim to a monopoly of the legitimate use of violence within a given (national) territory, but extended that violence into other territories and in support of non-state actors (such as trading companies and the appropriations of settlers) and their property rights. What we commonly understand as the nation – and as the concept of the nation bequeathed to the social sciences by Weber – was actually an imperial state, not a national one. While Weber elides the concept of the nation with imperial power, what enables the concept to gain traction in its own terms is the omission of German imperialism from what are presented as ‘national’ histories.

Our argument in the book is that this exercise of violence upon ‘others’ matters in its own terms and in terms of how it requires us to rethink central concepts within the social sciences such as political legitimacy and accountability. In this way, what is at stake here is the conceptual architecture that has been bequeathed to us through particular thinkers.

**Albena Azmanova:** Let me counter this with the following observation. Granted, Weber’s thinking about the modern state is likely to have been informed by his knowledge of the contemporary German state as defined by its national boundaries. And yet, the *conceptual apparatus* developed by Weber, namely, the distinction between legality and legitimacy, between power as the capacity to achieve a purpose, on the one hand, and on the other, the legitimacy of public authority as being rooted in the moral beliefs of the political community over which power is exercised (ergo, his taxonomy of forms of authority in reference to various sources of legitimacy), his account of public authority as the capacity of a regime to command the allegiance and support of the subjects of power— all this enables us to condemn colonialism precisely as a matter of illegitimate use of force – because it is illegitimate in the eyes of the subjected populations. Doesn’t this show that concepts developed in a particular era with particular biases are not shackled to the past, and are therefore not necessarily deficient because they come from a historically bigoted time? In what sense is this conceptualization of legitimate power (which in Weber’s account is not conceptually confined to Western statehood or even to modern sovereignty) deficient in the sense you claim? A still more clear example is the notion of liberty developed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. America was founded by a group of

slaveowners that claimed all men to be created equal and free. This doesn't make "freedom" deficient or unable to transcend its time, or does it?

**Gurminder K. Bhambra:** This returns us to the issue of the idea of a conceptual system that transcends the particularities of its use. For example, Weber is not only the author of a set of analytical categories that purport, as you suggest, not to be context dependent, but also the author of the methodological justification of that position. Significantly, within Weber, the conceptual system has less the character of a system than of an aggregation of 'types'. Once these 'types' are examined, as we do in *Colonialism and Modern Social Theory*, we see that what is organized within each type is mutually contradictory. Each type is argued to be coherent in itself, but no relations among types can be specified, only their 'empirical' combinations. The fact that the types can only occur empirically in combination suggests the inability to provide a theoretical specification of their relations, which is a serious limit on Weber's theories. For example, how would one address issues of legitimacy and legality in a divided political community, such as is a feature of empire, except by taking the point of view of the dominant group? This is what Weber does and we do not think it is a failure on his part to understand the implications of his methodology, but its necessary consequence.

### **Is Critical Theory a Culprit?**

**Albena Azmanova:** Frankfurt School critical theory's explicit commitment to emancipation, together with its ambivalence towards modern conceptions of progress make it the ultimate test to the claim that social science, as it stands today, lacks the conceptual resources needed for a critique of modernity. So, let's come back to critical theory. I would argue that this particular strand of social theory, developed effectively within Occidental social science, has in fact accomplished the radical reconceptualization of social critique you advocate, in the following way. First, a cornerstone of this tradition is the dialectical approach to the heritage of the Enlightenment (the wellspring of modern social theory) that Horkheimer and Adorno developed – calling attention to its nefarious impulses (very much like Weber, in fact) – in the "Dialectic of Enlightenment" where they unambiguously reject a progressist reading of modernity. Walter Benjamin comes even closer to your project with his

verdict that "every document of civilization is also a document of barbarism" and his notion of the debt we owe to those gone (in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History.") In terms of the epistemic foundations of social science, I cannot think of a more radical stance than the position that *any theory* – no matter how pluralist it claims to be – is potentially oppressive in the closures it imposes (someone will always be left out of any distinct model no matter how complex and pluralist it is). To be consistently pluralist, one needs to be a pluralist all the way down, and reject theory altogether. This is what Adorno in fact did, under the impact of Kant's *Critique of Judgment* – he gave up theory but not critique, no longer arguing for a critical 'theory' but for a way to critique the social order (e.g. in his *Aesthetic Theory*). This is currently the stance of many of us working in the Frankfurt School tradition. Shouldn't this distinction between critical theory and social critique be enough to allow for emancipation without foreclosure, without the epistemic oppression of closure and exclusion (as even a theory that is 'enriched' with missing perspectives would invariably be). I wonder in what sense this might still be deemed insufficient to deliver the kind of analysis you advocate?

**Gurminder K. Bhambra:** Critical theory's insufficiency rests on the fact that it doesn't seem to be able to break out of its own modernist presumptions; that is, it understands emancipation as associated with modernity. Whether one regards modernity as a finished project, in terms of an end of history thesis, or as an unfinished project, as with Habermas, in both cases it is understood separately from colonialism. If we understand the modern world to indicate empirical historical progress, we must take into account the horrors that were associated with it. Otherwise, it's as if we're saying that emancipation can be for us, here in the West, without us having to take into account the fact that the very possibility of our lives has been enabled through the subjugation and oppression of others.

Progress in and for Europe came at the cost of the lives and livelihoods of others. Not to engage with the entanglement of the histories that have produced modernity is to give up any authority to speak of the universal. This is why I suggest that it is the belief in historical progress that very precisely means that Frankfurt School critical theory can make no progress on this topic. I find remarkable the idea that empirical historical progress can be said to have occurred, and emancipation

and freedom be possible, without any consideration of the debasement of humanity that occurred through processes of colonization, enslavement, and indenture.

**Albena Azmanova:** One of the conceptual cornerstones of the Frankfurt School, its trade-mark, so to speak, is the understanding that modernity *is not* marked by an empirical historical progress. The Angel of History, writes Walter Benjamin, faces backwards; “Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet.” (“Theses on the Philosophy of History”). Indeed, the Frankfurt School authors from the 30s to the 50s did not address colonialism, but at the time they were preoccupied with a painful puzzle: Why is it that the disasters of fascism, authoritarianism, war and genocidal racism did not meet with effective resistance? Confronting these specific forms of historical evil allowed them to develop a methodology to address all social evils, including that of colonialism. As to the modernist presumptions: indeed, they are strongly present in Habermas’ version of critical theory, but have been openly rejected by other core authors of that tradition. In the first chapter of *The Dialectic of Enlightenment (in discussing Odysseus)* Horkheimer and Adorno make the point -- that time is circular, hence rejecting the progressive theory of temporality that underlies modernity. In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno posits that that critique, not being based on a concept (an epistemological object) is freed from its association with a theory of modernity. In other words, critique is not based on the logic of modernization. This position is adopted by most critical theorists nowadays. We don’t need to endorse Habermas’ very particular conception of the tasks of critical theory, nor his philosophy of history, to perform a historically textured and sociologically informed critique of injustice within the Frankfurt School tradition – and my recent *Capitalism on Edge* aligns in this regard with James Ingram’s *World Crisis and Underdevelopment* (in which he addresses the pervasive effect of colonialism), Andrew Feenberg’s *Technosystem: The Social Life of Reason*, Gerard Delanty’s *Critical Theory and Social Transformation*, and Maria-Pia Lara’s *Beyond the Public Sphere: Film and the Feminist, Imaginary*, to mention just a few recent works. And finally, if the whole issue is about a theory of time, i.e., modernity, what temporal framework does the de-colonial project work out of? If it focuses on emancipation, is it not within an evolutionary framework?

**Gurminder K. Bhambra:** This again illustrates the point that I am making – issues of colonialism and empire are rendered as ‘empirical’ and, as such, should not be allowed to call the analytic categories into question. However, the analytical categories must have some empirical instantiations, so the question to ask is why some instances are more important or emblematic than others.

Modernity tends to be understood in terms of historical progress, even if that progress constitutes an “unfinished project” and one which continually raises new questions concerning issues of domination and emancipation. The ruptural break seen to be established by modernity—the break that enables Europe to be understood in its own terms without having to take the rest of the world into account—frames the possibilities for the self-understandings of Frankfurt School critical theory and presents an insurmountable problem from the perspective of postcolonial and decolonial theories. These latter theories are based on an understanding of modernity as constituted by coloniality such that modernity does not emerge from separation or rupture, but through the connected and entangled histories of European colonization. This immediately complicates the understanding of historical progress which otherwise provides the ground for much critical theory. Rather than ‘emancipation’, my concern is repair and reparation.

**Albena Azmanova:** Shall I then understand that you do not dispute the dialectical view of the Enlightenment articulated by the *first generation* of Frankfurt School authors (who were openly sceptical of historical progress in the face of the Nazi atrocities), but only Habermas’ felicitous take on modernity as implying progress, be it unfinished – along the lines of Amy Allen’s criticism in her *The End of Progress*?

**Gurminder K. Bhambra:** No, the very idea of constructing the Enlightenment in this way means that the first generation are rightly confronted by one of the horrors it contains – the Holocaust. This took place decades after others were also the objects of disastrous mistreatment in the name of Enlightenment. It is to the credit of Horkheimer and Adorno that they grapple with this contradiction and we need to broaden the frame to bring the colonialism with which it is bound up into the analysis. Habermas does not follow their lead, but it would be mistaken to think that they themselves provided sufficient ground for the critique that is necessary.

## Recasting the Social Sciences

**Albena Azmanova:** Apart from the call for systematically acknowledging the impact of colonial histories, you also seek an epistemological solution to the problem by suggesting that we build a kind of theory that will incorporate colonialism. If we undertake the transformation you suggest, what would ensue in substantive theoretical terms, how would we think about critique differently? What would, for instance, Weber say about modernity if he paid proper attention to colonialism and international inequalities?

**Gurminder K. Bhambra:** Of course, intervention into the nature of conceptual frameworks and how they construct the field necessarily raises epistemological questions – and these are not questions I shy away from. However, my primary interest in sociology and social theory is not epistemological, but substantive. It's not so much a question for me of moving from the epistemological to the substantive, but understanding how one's substantive engagements require a sorting out of epistemological questions. In short, I'm a social theorist in that sense by necessity and my concerns revolve around my interest in the problems of the present. I'm interested in questions of injustice and inequality in the present and my concern is how best we can mobilize the resources of the social sciences to enable us to intervene more effectively in the address of these problems. In that context, one of the key problems that we have been confronting within Europe, for example, has been the crisis for refugees that has occurred over the last few years. One of the ways in which this discourse has been set out, including by well-known social scientists, is to regard such people as 'invaders' who are unfairly and illegitimately accessing the patrimony of the national state.

However, my argument is that if we understand European states not as having been nations but for the most part as having been empires or involved in colonial projects, then we would understand that the wealth of Europe has not been created endogenously through the labour of Europeans. Rather it has also been

produced through the appropriation of colonial wealth, of the taxation of colonial subjects, the extraction of their labour and resources. As such, it is not a national patrimony that European states have, it is a colonial patrimony. If we were to recognize it as a colonial patrimony, then maybe that could open up different ways for us to think about what we might owe others.

This is particularly the case when we have, more often than not, been responsible for creating the conditions that have necessitated their movements, whether through war, famine, or climate change and so on. We could think about our responsibilities differently if we were to acknowledge that the state that we are in has not historically been a national state, it's been an imperial state. This is true even for countries in Scandinavia and Eastern Europe who often wish to disassociate themselves from the idea of a European colonial past by suggesting that they did not have empires. While they may not have had empires, they certainly participated in 'emigrationist colonialism'; that is, their populations were part of the processes of dispossession and settlement of the lands that we now call the Americas, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa. The wealth they generated in these processes was also sent 'back home' to help support and develop local economies in Europe.

Taking colonialism seriously would transform how we understand the state, the colonial nature of what is presented as its national patrimony, and questions of legitimacy and belonging in the present.

**Albena Azmanova:** But doesn't this very appeal to acknowledge that the state has always been an imperial state, as you put it, in fact reproduce thinking of power and responsibility as being confined to the territorial range of power's empirical application? Isn't that a rather narrow way of thinking about justice and power, tied to notions of territorial sovereignty? And isn't therefore Enlightenment's all-inclusive humanism a more reliable ground for addressing injustice than any territorially-confined notion of repairing specific past injustices? For instance, written in the 1760s when colonialism was just getting going on its largest push for world dominion, Denis Diderot's "Supplement to the Voyage of Bougainville" is an ardent anti-colonial satire whose humanism defies the facile opposition between virtuous nature, represented by Tahiti, and corrupt civilization, represented by Europe. In this way it offers a critique of injustice that is not tied up with any territorially-bound affinities. Significantly, the pamphlet was published not by Diderot who knew it would

get him jailed, but after his death by a right-wing Abbe seeking to show the degeneracy of the Enlightenment!

**Gurminder K. Bhambra:** I guess for me, the answer is straightforward. Why must the places that have been subject to voyages of depredation rely on the 'superior' traditions of those from where those voyages issued? If you are saying that there are critical traditions within Europe, that is easy to accept. But you seem to be implying that those subject to European power must be grateful for the generosity that is contained within the tradition notwithstanding that power always trumps it.

**Albena Azmanova:** My point is quite different – it doesn't have to do with gratitude but with 'right to use', with range of validity. Those who have been subjected to European power should be free to make their claims to justice in the terms they deem comprehensible and on terms they deem fair. What is the reason, however, to exclude from that repertoire of forms of thought those parts of the intellectual heritage of the Enlightenment that are critical and emancipatory? What would be the downside of the subjugated populations' adopting these strands of the Western humanistic tradition for their own causes of emancipation, repair and reparation? This need not be the only available or obligatory option, but why discard it altogether? The validity and performability of ideas is surely not determined by the origin or the pedigree of those ideas. In other words, can't we separate intellectual validity and usefulness from geographical genesis?

**Gurminder K. Bhambra:** It is a standard Western idea that knowledge has a history, but also, at the same time, that 'our' knowledge transcends its history. As scholars such as Anthony Bogues and Robin Celikates have set out, it is an interesting argument that suggests that emancipation and freedom are possible without having to take into account the debasement of humanity that occurred while practicing coercive power over people who had been colonized and enslaved.

The parallels with gender justice should be self-evident here. Patriarchal practices are not overcome by the inclusion of women under the sign of masculinity. Why should we not expect the same of coloniality except that it is constructed as being in and of the past and not part of the social structures of the modern present?

Our failure to understand the extent to which colonialism structures the modern means that we expect to find solutions to problems within the language of modernity, which is actually the language of coloniality. This has not and will not be sufficient.

**Albena Azmanova:** Indeed, we should not fall into the trap of what I have named ‘the paradox of emancipation’: as we fight for inclusion and equality, we tend to increase the value of the otherwise unjust system within which we seek equal inclusion.

It is high time to decolonize the Western mind, but this is also the time to think how this endeavor could go wrong. The Enlightenment stumbled over its own hubris: as Marx observed, the normative liberalism of abstract humanism declared that a level-playing field existed where in fact power asymmetries enabled oppression. That is why he urged that what matters, instead, is people’s ‘social humanity’ or ‘human sociality’ (he uses both terms in his *Thesis on Feuerbach*) – social science should focus therefore on the concrete social practices through which human togetherness is enacted, rather than on abstract, totalizing generalizations.

What are the possible pitfalls ahead for the decolonizing project? How could it be derailed? For instance, isn’t it endangered by the tendency to think of the modern West, as well as ‘the rest’, as compact entities, and also by the inclination to present the Western mind in uniformly negative terms, while those of the colonized peoples in uniformly positive terms? Modern Europe doesn’t hold a monopoly on barbarism nor did it invent it. Slavery, for instance, had been a globally spread practice millennia before human bondage was included into the global supply chain of capitalism in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Sub-Saharan Africa had long been a source of slaves, not to the Europeans, but to North African and Middle Eastern kingdoms. The Ottoman empire sourced its Christian slaves from Eastern Europe. The fact that skin colour was not a major factor hardly made those practices less barbaric. When the Portuguese began their lucrative slave trade in 1444, they tapped into an existing network of slaves, and the Great North African kingdoms acted as middlemen cutting a piece of the profits. I think it is safe to say that violence and oppression were integral to all premodern societies, including those of the colonized territories. The Japanese samurai had a tradition of cleanly hacking through a passer-by to test out their new sword. Surely cruelty is not only white and European, not only modern; it has existed and still persists in forms that have nothing to do with European Empire.

The fact that these take ‘authentic’ local forms is not much of a consolation. Admittedly, this is a separate trajectory of criticism: we do not need to address the injustices with which the non-Western world is riddled in order to address the harms the West has committed. But wouldn’t a more historicist and dialectical take both on the Western and the non-western world and their interactions advance us more securely in the pursuit of justice? Focusing on the historical practices of subjugation and debauchery within the West, by the West, but also outside the West (i.e. erasing the distinction ‘the West’ vs ‘the rest’ on which both the colonizing and the de-colonizing projects are based) — shouldn’t that be the purpose of the critical enterprise?

Moreover, some fear that questioning the heritage of the Enlightenment now, especially when the liberal order is waning, this would weaken these invaluable sources of empowerment that are needed in the struggles for justice around the world. In other words, should we abandon the idea of freedom because of the abuses in its name when so many still rely on that very idea to free themselves?

**Gurminder K. Bhambra:** Decolonization, first and foremost, should be understood as a political movement for the dismantling of colonialism. While it has more recently become associated with struggles for reform of teaching curricula and the practices of knowledge production more broadly, this also has a longer history (for example, Ngūgī wa Thiong’o’s *Decolonizing the Mind*). As such, in our use of the term we would do well to heed Tuck and Yang’s oft-cited caution that ‘decolonization is not a metaphor’. This is the key pitfall that I see in such conversations.

Further, I do think we need to be careful in how we represent others. I am happy to agree that the modern West does not have a monopoly on barbarism and that oppressive practices are found elsewhere. However, we need to be aware that the representation of others is part of a process of justification of actions towards them. My concern is with how European self-constructions of emancipation depend on oppression, not with an argument that only European modernity is oppressive. Equally, I don’t think anybody required a European conceptualization of freedom in order to free themselves from oppression. Colonialism has been resisted from its very beginning and we can see this through events such as the Haitian revolution and the first war of independence in India (more commonly known as the Indian

Mutiny). Further, that resistance to colonialism was often used as a way of justifying further violence against these populations. Resistance to enslavement, for example, was used by Europeans to justify enslavement. In this way, the European tradition of Enlightenment actually justifies its own violence through misrecognizing other people's commitments to wish to live freely and not be subordinated to Europeans.

As such, there is a lot to be learnt about what freedom means if we look at the resistance that there has been to European colonialism. What if we were to construct our narratives of freedom from these other sources? How might we understand freedom and emancipation then?

**Albena Azmanova:** Indeed, have these contexts generated a significantly different notion of freedom than the one fashioned by the European Enlightenment?

**Gurminder K. Bhambra:** Emancipation emerges as a key theme within European Enlightenment thought in the Old World at precisely the time that slavery is being instituted in the New. While the intellectual content of emancipation was contrasted to the condition of slavery; the concomitant practice of enslavement by Europeans did not render suspect their political and intellectual pronouncements on the topic. Articulated notions of freedom existed alongside continued practices of colonial domination, enslavement of populations, trade in human beings, and a belief that some had a greater right to be free than others. Freedom, in these terms, while espoused abstractly as a *universal* freedom was, in practice, more circumscribed – its full enjoyment restricted to white, propertied men of some distinction. Subsequent renditions of 'universal freedom' similarly maintain a limited, racialized understanding of the concept.

Alongside this tradition, however, there has been another tradition which developed a more expansive understanding of the concept. As Nikhil Pal Singh argues in *Black is a Country*, the freedom struggles of African Americans are as old as the systematic trade in human beings and include histories of 'resistance, refusal, revolts, and runaways.' Where emancipation has usually been understood in terms of formal equality (whereby the Jim Crow laws enacting a state of 'separate and equal' were regarded as not incompatible with emancipation), African American conceptions of emancipation emphasized the necessity of broader understandings of equality underpinning the possibilities of emancipation. Such an expansive account

has been central to the work of WEB Du Bois, for example, and it is one that has been little engaged with by theorists of Frankfurt School critical theory in their own development of such ideas. As such, one of the distinguishing characteristics of African American conceptions of emancipation was its expanded definition: from the narrow sense of being a counterfoil to slavery in terms of simple liberation from enslavement, to being regarded as the necessary condition for the fulfilment of one's capacities as a human being. Ultimately, I'm arguing for the need to transform our understandings which requires us having to learn from others. One of the things that I find so interesting is the utter resistance to think that Europeans have anything to learn from anyone else. The commitment is always to finding resources within one's own tradition. My question in relation to this is: why be so parochial? Why be so committed to a frame of reference that necessarily has a historical context and yet be so unwilling to address that context? And why call this unwillingness, reflexivity?

**Albena Azmanova:** Has really the West been averse to learning from others? The Europeans and the Americans have been very apt at appropriating, and even hijacking, non-Western and non-modern thought. Christianity appropriated pagan mythology (e.g. fashioning the Devil after Dionisius) just as contemporary business is deploying Buddhism in pursuing profit. The impact of Confucianism, via Physiocracy, on Adam Smith and from there on the Scottish Enlightenment, is well-known. Some parts of US constitutional thought were adapted from the Iroquois & Algonquins.

**Gurminder K. Bhambra:** Appropriation is not learning!

**Albena Azmanova:** Very true, and this is a crucial point: what constitutes learning? Appropriation might well be the nemesis of learning: absorbing new elements into one's epistemic framework does not necessarily change that framework, it might only change the connotation of the absorbed elements. Which brings us to the notion of learning that undergirds your vision of a thorough transformation of social science as a collaborative project in which all participants are peers, differently situated partners in a conversation in which no one has a privileged standpoint. How will this project avoid the fallacy of exclusion, of silencing the weak and privileging the strong that has haunted the Occidental forms of thought? Who would speak for the complex Indian society, for instance? What will be the filter of validity, of rightful belonging to

this inclusive project of mutual learning? We surely do not want to integrate foot-binding or sati into a global humanity's culture?

**Gurminder K. Bhabra:** As I wrote in the conclusion to *Connected Sociologies*, accounting for the contemporary configuration of the world, and addressing the inequalities that we find there, requires taking seriously the understandings of historical processes upon which disciplines are based. The most significant critique in this respect has emerged through the bodies of work known as postcolonial and decolonial thought. Both take the historical processes of dispossession and colonialism as fundamental to the shaping of the world and to the shaping of the possibilities of knowing the world. As a consequence, understanding the contemporary configuration of the world requires the dismantling of the disciplinary divides and of the disciplinary edifices constructed upon those divides. This process involves undoing hierarchies and provincializing knowledges, but this is not enough if those knowledges are seen to have been separately constituted and, further, not themselves constituted through connections. Without reconstruction, the radical moment, or movement, of deconstruction will always remain illusory. It is necessary to create conceptual frameworks that would enable us not just to think sociology (and other social sciences) differently, but also to do it (and them) differently. To think sociology differently is to take connections as the basis of the histories which we acknowledge; to do sociology differently is to act on the basis of having recognized the significance of those connections.