

Decolonizing Sociology

Ali Meghji, *Decolonizing Sociology*. Cambridge: Polity, 2021. ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-4195-9 (pbk), 202 pp.

Demands to decolonize sociology have grown spectacularly in Anglo-American and some others contexts over the last few years. They have risen in tandem with the Black Lives Matter movement, being augmented by some of its energies. While some students desire the decolonization of teaching curricula, some sociologists call for further decolonization of the knowledge creation and dissemination practices of the discipline.

Ali Meghji's book is both a reflection of these movements and a noteworthy contribution to them. It is in part a manifesto and rallying-cry, aimed at changing how sociology has been customarily done, critiquing inherited Eurocentric biases in thematics, theory and methodology, and correcting them with post-, anti- and de-colonial pedagogic and research practices.

Of course, attempts to decolonize sociology have a far longer history than the recent irruptions into sociology departments in the US, the UK, and similar countries. Different sorts of people have been seeking to decolonize the discipline for at least the last fifty years. One of the strengths of this book is that it gives a strong sense of that history, and of the geographical and cultural variety of such attempts in different parts of the world.

As someone who has recently researched this history, I very much appreciated the way in which this book has been composed. It manages to cover a great deal of historical and conceptual terrain, but in relatively concise form. To my mind, nothing essential in the intellectual universe of decolonizing sociology has been missed out. Major authors and practitioners of decolonizing, or putatively decolonized, sociology are presented and summarized in an admirably clear fashion. The central epistemological issues are also set out in a very lucid manner. By the end of the book, the reader has been effectively primed on both the past and the present of decolonizing endeavours within and upon sociology, as well as what is at stake in attempts to do that today. Overall, it is an excellent piece of writing, and an adept exercise in intellectual compression.

My further response to the book concerns more what it does not say than what it does. It is understandable that a book which operates as a kind of manifesto will not dwell on some of the particularly difficult problems thrown up by the intellectual and social movement that it advocates for and which it is a part of. Still, these problems need to be tackled. And while the book is relatively silent on some of them, nonetheless in its implications it does point towards them. There are several interrelated issues that future writings on such matters probably should deal with.

First, while the book offers readers some very concrete advice on how to decolonize their own sociological practice, the institutional underpinnings of such practice need further consideration. In future there will need to be more detailed, and perhaps sometimes uncomfortable, discussion of how decolonizing activities are being dealt with, or not, within the reward systems of universities and other relevant institutions, such as funding bodies. The decolonizing of sociology is to some extent an insurgent movement, seeking to transform dominant thought patterns and practices. But if it is to be over time more than a brief insurgency, with no solid lasting consequences, then it presumably will have to be institutionalized, in one way or another. That raises the thorny issue of how decolonizing

activities could or should be rewarded by authorities who police career advancement systems. It is probably the case by now that signifying one's commitment to decolonizing sociology in a Masters' thesis or PhD dissertation is in many institutional contexts not going to penalize the candidate, and is in fact going to help them, not least by being seen as being very up-to-date with the current state of the discipline. Conversely, in the (probably unlikely) event that any early career sociologist was to come out explicitly against de-colonizing sociology, one may imagine that the response of many gatekeepers today would be rather unfavourable, with various negative consequences following on from such judgements.

It remains an open question as to what extent career advancement, promotion, and tenure will be achieved by doing – or saying that you are doing – decolonizing sorts of things. If they do not become established parts of the academic reward system, then the insurgency is at risk of petering out, becoming just another fad destined to be replaced by others. But if decolonizing practices do become institutionalised elements of career progression, then there are multiple risks: that such practices are incorporated into the hegemonic institutional modes of operation of Developed World universities; that paying lip-service to them becomes a way to advance oneself career-wise; and that 'doing being' decolonial and postcolonial in one's professional life becomes either useful or even obligatory career move. So, what if decolonial practice becomes the terrain of careerism, as well as a prime mode of seeking to win power and influence in the sociological field? What if such practice does not just throw up in the air established forms of academic power, but also depends on existing forms of scholarly patronage and extends others? What then for the liberatory power of the original intellectual insurgency?

I have framed these issues in the familiar terms both of classical German social theory – involving the routinization of charisma and the crushing of original vital Spirit by deadening Circumstances – and of one of its main offspring, neo-Marxism – involving the incorporation of deviant energies into forms of established social power. Perhaps the terms I have matters into are thereby too Eurocentric, an issue decolonial sociology has made its adherents highly attendant to. Still, the prospect of bureaucratically-demanded forms of decolonization – where a teacher must tick boxes to inform their managerial overseers how they have decolonized their curricula – seems about as enticing a prospect as the flourishing of careerist strategies draped in the colours of the decolonial. Meghji's book does indeed give some indications of how to avoid some of these problems – basically, don't instrumentalize or neo-liberalize decolonial practices in sociology – and for those pointers it is to be applauded. But discussion of such matters has much further to go.

A second critical issue that comes out of reading the book is the connection of decolonizing sociology, as a series of ongoing practices, to postcolonial sociology as a knowledge formation. Probably in line with most accounts of decolonization of sociology, the book seems to assume a straightforward and direct connection: postcolonial sociology provides the major, if not only, knowledge base for decolonization. Yet according to all forms of critical sociology, of which postcolonial sociology is ultimately a variant, there are no straightforward and direct connections in the world, although hegemonic ways of thinking often wish to construct connections of that sort. What if postcolonial sociology is in fact a necessary but not sufficient condition for decolonizing sociology? If all knowledge systems are partial, then what are postcolonial sociology's gaps, absences, and lacunae?

If postcolonial sociology is itself limited and problematic in various ways, then it can hardly operate as the unproblematic and unproblematized basis for decolonizing sociology. It could

be argued that postcolonial sociology is indeed limited in various ways. It could be said to be unintentionally and perversely Eurocentric; unconsciously presentist, because of being ill-attuned to history before 1500 CE when the global rise of the European empires begins; and too inattentive to parts of the world and social groups that were not directly influenced by those empires, meaning that much of Eurasia is *terra incognita* to post-colonial sociological sensibilities (arguments made in Inglis and Almila, 2020).

The book under review gives a sense of postcolonial sociology as a general panacea to sociology's perceived ills. Yet it is a knowledge formation just like any other: it has its various strengths and weaknesses. The latter have not yet been systematically adumbrated. But that is not a good enough reason to convey, intentionally or not, to the intended readership of this book, which perhaps will appeal very much to passionately engaged students and early career scholars, that postcolonial dispositions in sociology are the only really intellectually satisfactory and morally laudatory ones available today.

A third critical matter concerns the construction of alternative canons of sociological classics beyond the standard Eurocentric ones. Meghji is very good on what is at stake in canon construction, and the need to avoid obvious pitfalls in building new ones: 'While building a decolonial canon may appear to be a justifiable course of action ... we may continue to reproduce inequalities if we merely put new scholars on the sociological pedestal' (p. 150). But that is arguably what the decolonizing movement is currently partly involving: setting up new stars as the figures in the sociological field apparently endowed with intellectual and moral authority. The older, now despised, hegemons are being thrown like statues into the water, while new ones emerge who may seem very different, but who also have their own wills-to-power aimed at dominating the sociological world. In the ongoing rush to be seen to be decolonizing one's one particular portion of sociology, as the avant-garde are imitated by ever widening bunches of imitators, new authorities are set up and deferred to.

In terms of more ancient authority figures, no clear or widely accepted non-Eurocentric criteria have yet emerged that would enable people to judge, in non-parochial ways, whether certain non-European figures of the past should replace the Western classical figures, or at least stand equally beside them, in terms of what is taught and what is deemed worthy of intellectual veneration and further scholarly exegesis. For example, despite the efforts over several decades of those scholars who have sought to present the 14th century North African polymath Ibn Khaldun as at least as worthy of canonical treatment as figures like Marx and Weber as a foundational sociologist, it is still not at all apparent if he is in fact all he is claimed to be in that direction, as is averred by his present-day partisans. Nor is it clear how such claims could be fairly adjudicated. It is more than understandable that some non-Western intellectuals would like to elevate a non-Western figure into the pantheon, perhaps disrupting the sacred vaults as they do so. But the jury is still out on whether Ibn Khaldun's work is as intellectually capacious, and as potentially useful today, as the work of Marx and Weber can be argued to be, and that not only on naively Eurocentric grounds. Indeed, it is not obvious either who will comprise that jury and where they will come from - intellectually, geographically, and otherwise - or on what epistemic grounds they are meant to reach their conclusions.

That sort of task is made even harder given that very few sociologists, located in or hailing from anywhere in the world, are in a position to study a figure like Ibn Khaldun in a deep way. It is much easier for many sociologists, and not only Euro-American ones, to operate with German language texts and to reconstruct the societal context of 19th century Germany, than for them to feel comfortable working in medieval Arabic and to understand in detail the

situation of North Africa and environs in medieval times. What *is* possible, because it is easy, is to present non-Western and putatively new (but actually old) ‘classical’ figures like Ibn Khaldun as multicultural window-dressing in textbooks and courses, providing students with a deeply superficial account of the scholar, his times, and his ideas, and most likely even more superficial than the usual accounts offered of Marx, Weber and the other European usual suspects. Name-checking the likes of Ibn Khaldun and offering up simplistic information about his (proto-)sociology would be a facile form of decolonizing the sociological canon, but I fear it will probably be the most likely mode for the time being. Not until there is more systematic and serious engagement with such figures, carried out by specialists and non-specialists alike, and beyond the work of partisan proponents, will a more intellectually satisfactory understanding of such persons within the history and present of sociology emerge.

The final critical issue that the book brought forth was perhaps the most provocative one. In the rules of the sociological field that decolonizing sociology sets up, who and what is criticisable, and who is not? Clearly Dead White Male thinkers are the fairest game, followed by their present-day followers, who themselves are often white and male, and generally middle-aged or older. As someone belonging to one of the latter categories of fair game, I can only reply in this manner: *fair enough*. Much of sociology in general, and social theory particularly, has been a primarily old white guys’ game since its inception, and that really must change for various moral, political, and intellectual reasons. But after that elementary point has been accepted, things become markedly murkier. I can think of at least several very eminent, senior, white male anthropologists whose works seem to me dubious on the grounds that postcolonial and decolonial thinking identify. But the cult of personality surrounding these figures seems to protect them from obvious decolonial criticism, even within the highly politicised field of anthropology, which has been oriented to decolonial matters for much longer and in probably deeper ways than has sociology. So, questions arise as to who gets to be apparently beyond criticism, why, and by which means? When do the social and personal characteristics of scholars matter in terms of appraisals of their ideas and claims, and when do they not? And who gets to set the rules about that?

In this regard, Meghji briefly, and it seems to me rather hesitantly, refers to a recent essay by Puwar (2019), which takes to task Raewyn Connell and Boaventura de Sousa Santos. They are presented as being privileged, white, Developed World scholars who have set themselves up as unavoidable spokespersons for scholars and intellectuals of the Global South, thereby in some ways silencing the voices of those they claim to represent. The implication here is that those in the Global South would be better off being facilitated by those in the Global North to be better able to represent themselves; their voices do not benefit from being mediated by privileged interlocutors. Puwar’s argument may be appealing to those that firmly believe white male privilege in scholarship is fair game for criticism (and to reiterate, I subscribe to that view). But what if scholars who are doing criticisable things regarding privilege and power are not white, not male, and not in or from the Developed World? Do their social characteristics protect them in some way from criticism when they are doing similar sorts of criticisable things as those people clearly defined as being in privileged positions do? Connected to that point is that at least some major authors of postcolonial and decolonial writings are drawn from the social and scholarly elites in their countries of origin or residence. Is their elite status somehow irrelevant or forgivable, when the elite status of other categories of person have been defined as highly relevant for critical appraisal? The elite social and scholarly status of at least some students and scholars calling for the decolonization of sociology also need to become objects of scrutiny and self-reflection more than has probably been the case until now.

There are no easy or universally agreeable answers to the questions raised here. I am not sure that within the current forms that decolonizing sociology takes that they are being fully expressed or debated. No doubt this broad intellectual and political movement will mutate over time, and some controversial issues will come more to the forefront of consideration. Once all the more obvious criticisms it can make against its antagonists have been made, the maturing decolonial sociology movement will perhaps take the opportunity to move on to tackle difficult issues concerning its own nature, both intellectual, institutional, and demographic. In the meantime, Meghji's book equips readers with much of the necessary background intellectual equipment to grapple with such matters as they unfold over the next decade and more.

References

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