Interview – Gurminder K. Bhambra

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Gurminder K. Bhambra is Professor of Postcolonial and Decolonial Studies in the Department of International Relations in the School of Global Studies, University of Sussex. She is a Fellow of the British Academy, elected 2020. Previously, she was Professor of Sociology at the University of Warwick and also Guest Professor of Sociology and History at the Centre for Concurrences in Colonial and Postcolonial Studies, Linnaeus University, Sweden (2016-18).She is the founder of *Global Social Theory* and the *Connected Sociologies Curriculum Project.* Her first book, *Rethinking Modernity: Postcolonialism and the Sociological Imagination* was the winner of the BSA Philip Abrams Memorial Prize. Her recent book called *Colonialism and Modern Social Theory* makes an argument for rethinking the canon of social theory in the context of colonial histories.

Where do you see the most exciting debates/research happening in your field?

The past few months have starkly highlighted global inequality and how deeply it structures the world. Covid19 (and possible future pandemics) and climate change are perhaps the most urgent of these issues. The Covid-19 pandemic has had significantly different outcomes among populations *within* countries as well as highlighting disparities *between* countries (for example, in vaccine roll-out). Further, while being mindful of the need to address the issues that now confront us in terms of climate change, we have to remember that our 'modern' world was built on the destruction of the worlds of others. How do we address the climate catastrophe that is imminent as well as the ones that have already happened? A postcolonial ethics, I suggest, requires us to hold both questions within a common frame, one that acknowledges the connected histories that have produced our shared worlds and their inequalities. It is important for us to recognise how inequalities in the present come out of long-standing histories and factor an understanding of these histories into our responses.

As Patricia Lorenzoni argues – in Brazil, Corona and the History of Epidemics for *Discover Society* – five centuries of history resonate in our contemporary pandemic. This history is also central to the changes to the climate that will make our worlds unliveable. It was with the arrival of Europeans in the lands that would come to be known as the Americas that, according to Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin, there was a rapid and catastrophic decline in the populations of the continent. This event produced structural changes – the Orbis spike – that they suggest ought to be regarded as the beginnings of the Anthropocene.

Intersecting with the politics of the pandemic and with climate change, migration remains one of the defining social and political issues of our times. Its ongoing politicisation is used to stoke questions of legitimacy and fears of white replacement across Europe and north America. In the context of arguments about the demise of the welfare state being associated with processes of (racialized) migration, Peo Hansen's latest book, *A Modern Migration Theory*, systematically dismantles the idea that there is a trade-off between migration and the sustainability of welfare. Using the insights of Modern Monetary Theory, Hansen demonstrates that there is no economic cost to migration that is borne by the host population, but rather that spending on refugee integration makes welfare viable for the whole population. In a Europe that is accelerating modes of authoritarian populism organised around understandings of nativism, such arguments are more necessary than ever.

Another recent response to politically organised hostility towards migrants and minorities, and to the violence that produces refugees, is Mahmood Mamdani's *Neither Settler, Nor Native*. It provides both an analysis of the situation –

what he calls a genealogy of political modernity – as well as offering a startling insight: that perhaps the best way to address how we live together across differences is to work on the basis of what we share. In particular, he puts forward the idea that all of us are survivors of regimes that sought to differentiate between us in their production of (at times, lethal) hierarchies. Understanding the centrality of settler colonialism historically to states that we currently regard as nations, he suggests, would open up alternative ways of thinking and acting in relation to contemporary movements of occupation and dispossession. These are some of the key themes and issues associated with inequality that currently preoccupy me.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I grew up in Britain thinking that I was an immigrant. It was not until the debates around the referendum on leaving the EU that I was having a conversation with my parents and my Dad brought out all these old passports – mine, his, my grandfather's. All the passports were British. My grandfather had moved from India to Kenya as a British subject of Empire and then had come to Britain as a Citizen of the UK and its Colonies – a subjecthood and citizenship he shared with all people in Britain. My family had always been British subjects and then citizens as they had always lived within the ambit of British Empire. There was no difference between our history and that of people within Britain except that I was told that there was – even by academics studying citizenship and migration who should have known better! Once I came to understand my family's history as British I started looking more specifically at the connected histories of colonialism and empire that produced us and the ways in which these histories are regularly effaced in much scholarship in the metropole – and, more specifically, at the implications of such erasures for politics in the present.

Your research builds on a range of disciplines, including history, politics, sociology and international relations. How do you bring these disciplines together in your work? What does bridging these disciplines bring to debates about decolonisation?

I see my work as oriented to the address of problems and, as such, I am happy to utilise the resources that I see as most effective in helping to resolve those problems rather than worrying about disciplinary boundaries. My undergraduate degree was in History, my MA in History of International Relations, and my DPhil in Social and Political Thought. My research has always coalesced around key themes and fields which are central to and overlapping across the disciplines of history, sociology, and international relations – namely, global historical sociology, social theory, and political economy.

You have worked on multiple projects, namely Global Social Theory, Decolonising the University and Connected Sociologies. What is the relationship between these projects, and how do they contribute to the creation of a more equitable space in academia?

The *Global Social Theory* website was set up in 2015 in response to growing student calls to 'decolonize the curriculum' and a concern to address the often restricted nature of the way in which theory is taught. It is a critical, collaborative pedagogical resource that makes short introductions to thinkers from around the world, as well as related concepts and topics, freely available. I run this together with Lucy Mayblin, Lisa Tilley, and Angela Last. I am also co-editor, with John Holmwood, of *Discover Society*, an online magazine that aims to bring academic research to a wider, general audience. More recently, I was awarded funds by the Sociological Review Foundation to set up the *Connected Sociologies Curriculum Project.* This provides open access resources for schools and other educational institutions for the rethinking of social science topics on the basis of an inclusive understanding of colonial histories. It is run together with Amit Singh and Ishan Khurana.

A key motivation for all these projects is the idea that democracy requires an informed citizenry – one that can adjudicate between knowledge claims in service of the common good. In my view, social scientific research and teaching should facilitate public understanding and strengthen democratic debate. For this reason, all these projects are open access and freely available and hopefully contribute to the building up of a healthy public sphere.

In your recent book *"Colonialism and Modern Social Theory"*, you state the aim to "reconstruct mainstream social theory rather than to dismiss it". Can you explain what this entails, and how it impacts the way we study disciplines such as sociology and international relations?

In *Colonialism and Modern Social Theory*, our focus on Tocqueville, Marx, Weber, Durkheim and Du Bois is less to do with them as individual scholars than thinking through what they have bequeathed to sociology and the social sciences more generally. That is, we are interested in the ways in which their work – and commentaries on their work – has come to establish the conceptual frameworks of social theory that determine the shape and possibilities of our disciplines.

These frameworks have been established without taking colonialism seriously and have resulted in what we call a number of fictions of modern social theory. The fictions we identify are: the fiction of stages of social development; the fiction of modern subjectivity; the fiction of the nation-state; the fiction of class and formally free labour; and the fiction of sociological reason. Any renewal of social theory, then, requires us to recognise and address these fictions through an understanding that places colonialism as central to their configuration and redress. For this reason, we seek to reconstruct social theory rather than simply to set it aside. Colonialism has structured the modern world, but it doesn't exhaust all there is to say. Class divisions are significant, for example, and in order to understand how they are also formed within colonial relationships we need to understand how they are otherwise understood independently. Critique requires engagement.

Your research highlights the centrality of the empire in comprehending Britain as both a coloniser and a society. What is the significance of characterising Britain as an empire as opposed to a nation-state?

European states tend to be understood as *being* nation-states which contingently *had* empires, instead of more appropriately understanding what we call *nation*-states as having *been* imperial states, that is, empires. Decolonisation is as much an issue for the colonising state as it is for those whose territories were colonised. This is important because within much scholarship the question of the legitimacy of political rule is primarily discussed in terms of the nation. Since colonization and the establishment of imperial rule over others cannot be legitimated through such a discourse, it is usually evaded as a matter of relevant concern. In this way, scholars believe that it is possible to tell the histories of European states in national terms and to tell the histories of Europe in terms of the aggregation of these national histories. Yet, these histories spilled over their retrospectively ascribed boundaries and not to acknowledge this is also to fail to acknowledge the violence and domination associated with that 'spillage'. Equally, it is important to understand that European states are as much in a process of becoming nation states as are the supposed 'new' nations. We are used to the way in which a discourse of 'failure' is associated with the latter, without considering that similar problems may be experienced by the former colonising states.

In the context of Britain specifically, I am interested in the ways in which debates around the demise of the welfare state have been explicitly and implicitly associated with the inward movement of people from the New Commonwealth, that is, former Empire. The failure to acknowledge Britain as having been an Empire and not simply a nation-state sees these people as guests at best and as interlopers at worst. What they are not seen as is citizens who have historically contributed to the resources available to the state. These resources are, instead, regarded as a national patrimony now at threat by those who come. Recognising that Britain was an empire would change the way in which we understand such questions of legitimacy and entitlement. My British Journal of Sociology annual lecture addressed these themes in the context of understanding the relations of taxation (colonial) and welfare (national) in Britain – you can listen to it here.

What should decolonised universities in formerly colonised countries look like? Do you think the movement of "decolonising education" should also be extended to school-level education in these countries?

Ashis Nandy, in *The Intimate Enemy*, argues that the British conquest of India not only opened up a geographical terrain for occupation and exploitation, but also transformed the space of epistemology, that is, of knowledge and modes of knowledge production. Decolonization, then, is not simply about liberation from colonizers, but also

requires an address of the patterns and processes of knowledge production that come to be established through colonialism. This is as relevant for those who colonised as it is for those who were colonised.

Colonialism both structured our understandings of the world and was effaced from considerations of the world such that scholars talk about modernity without ever engaging with the colonial processes that constituted it. This reinforces hierarchies of knowledge and provides an inadequate basis from which to think about the world. However, what my previous response about modern social theory implies is that there is a reparative possibility within education when it is directed towards public goods and especially local definitions of public goods. As well as reckoning with the direct legacies of colonial knowledge systems, new legacies of commodified education organized by private for-profit providers also need to be challenged.

Together with the general financialization of education, such moves are producing higher education as a global positional good meaning that decolonizing education in formerly colonized societies also needs to detach higher education from its involvement in a system of the reproduction of global elites. Ironically, it is in this new marketized system of higher education within the UK that discussion of decolonization has gained most traction. How do we address this paradox? Perhaps the neoliberal representation of education as a private investment in human capital has brought the nature of (privatised) public goods to the fore. In this context, their nature, and current and past exclusions, have become an urgent matter that had been rather submerged in the period of public higher education.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

Ask questions, do the work, and pay it forward.