



University
of Glasgow

Dawson, M. (2017) Book review: Syed Farid Alatas and Vineeta Sinha, *Sociological Theory Beyond the Canon*. *Sociological Review*, 65(4), pp. 905-907.

There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/147548/>

Deposited on: 8 September 2017

Enlighten – Research publications by members of the University of Glasgow
<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk>

Syed Farid Alatas and Vineeta Sinha, *Sociological Theory Beyond the Canon*. Palgrave Macmillan: London, 2017, 391 pp. ISBN: 9781137411334, £66.99 (hb)

Reviewed by: Matt Dawson, *University of Glasgow, Scotland*

One of the key points to emerge from debates on the sociological canon has been a concern with teaching. The selection of theorists for undergraduate classes is seen as one of the key ways in which ‘dead, white, European men’ come to be dominant with other voices sidelined/forgotten. Consequently, the responsibility for diversifying the voices of social theory is seen to fall especially on teachers of the topic. It is this command which this book responds to. Alatas and Sinha’s text emerges from their joint teaching of social theory and is presented as a tool to help anyone seeking to diversify their course. In doing this, the text is bookended by an Introduction and Epilogue (jointly written) and profiles of ten theorists for which authorship is evenly split. In general the book succeeds in its goal of introducing what the authors term ‘alternative sociologies’ (p. 337), but also leaves some unanswered questions.

In the Introduction Alatas and Sinha highlight what they see as the two key problematics for social theory: Eurocentrism and androcentrism. The former, ‘a way of seeing *and* not-seeing’ (p. 5) is rooted in assumptions concerning the subject and object of theory. The subject, or producer, of theory, is located in the West, while the object of theorising is located elsewhere. This means that while non-Western writers may be consulted it is for empirical data, rather than being seen as theorists in their own right. Androcentrism means that not only are women less likely to figure in the aforementioned undergraduate theory courses but if they do they are seen as peripheral figures, cut-off from the wider theoretical tradition. For example, little attempt is made to generate conversation between Martineau, Comte and Durkheim in the way it is among the ‘founding fathers’ (p. 10). The authors also introduce a distinction between ‘social theory’ and ‘social thought’ with the latter being ‘less formal and less systematically expressed’ than the former but which also ‘may be the basis of a more formal and systematic construction, that is, social theory’ (p. 13). In the text some authors are presented as thinkers, others as theorists.

It is likely that some of the writers profiled in this book will be new to readers (or, at least, were new to this reader). Among them are some truly fascinating scholars, out of which I

would like to discuss four. Ibn Khaldun, a 14th Century Islamic scholar, developed a form of historical and political sociology in which, seeking to separate the ‘absurd’ and the ‘possible’ in historical claims with reference to what would now be termed conjunctural analysis, explored state formation in North Africa. In doing so he used the concept of *‘asabiyyah* to signify a form of solidarity emerging from a sense of shared ancestry to explain the continual shift between nomadic and sedentary state forms. The second is José Rizal, a Filipino activist and scholar, who sought to critique the Spanish colonial rule of his homeland. In doing so, he wrote on how the supposed ‘indolence of the Filipino’ was partly caused by colonial rule. To resist this he placed his hope in the Enlightenment and the possibility for reason to break the hold of the Church-assisted colonial regime.

The next two writers, Harriet Martineau and Florence Nightingale, will be more familiar to readers. Both shared a fundamentally positivist worldview and, in the language of this text, are ‘social thinkers’ seeking out forms of reform (often, the authors suggest, those most likely to be dismissed from a canon which favours abstracted theorising, as was also the case for Pandita Ramabai Saraswati p. 246). Martineau is seen as a thinker uniquely interested in the connection between happiness, freedom and progress who, in her writings on America, achieved a level of detail and awareness of inequality missing in DeTocqueville’s more famous text. Meanwhile Nightingale, differing herself from Martineau’s form of positivism on religious grounds (‘laws’ are not actors, but rather allow us to see the working of God), made advances in the use of statistical techniques. She also wrote on questions of patriarchy, encouraging women to break out of their ‘idleness’, and colonialism, highlighting the hypocritical power of capital at work in India. The placing of these two in conversation is one of the goals of this text and generates interesting insights. Included in this is the role of Eurocentrism and androcentrism, of which both writers are guilty. Each see female emancipation as partly rooted in doing tasks women are ‘naturally’ good at. Also, while Nightingale adopted a more critical attitude late in life, her early writings, and Martineau’s whole corpus, tend to see the imperial project as worthwhile.

Alongside these profiles are chapters devoted to those conventionally seen as the ‘fathers’ of the discipline: Marx, Weber and Durkheim. What is notable about these chapters is, given the goal of the text, how uncritical they are. For example, as noted above, while the androcentrism of writers such as Nightingale and Martineau is discussed, this isn’t even mentioned when it comes to the ‘fathers’. Also, while some mention is made of

Eurocentrism for each this, with the exception of Marx, isn't fully interrogated. For example, Weber's Eurocentrism is seen as largely, though not totally, ascribed to him by his followers (pp. 126-132).

It is useful to reflect on what we learn about social theory from the writers discussed in this text, especially the 'non-canonical' selections. There are three notable things here. Firstly, many (Khalidun, Nursi, Ramabai and Nightingale) were driven by religious concerns, presenting a different image to that of social theory emerging from the secularising impulses of the Enlightenment. Secondly, some writers (Martineau, Rizal and Nightingale) used fiction – or, as labelled in this text, 'poetic argumentation' (p. 168) – to put forward their ideas. Finally, as already mentioned, many were inspired to think due to their desire to reform an existing system as a result of having their freedom limited by empire and/or patriarchy (Martineau, Rizal, Ramabai, Nightingale). This reflects a goal of the text to generate alternative sociologies 'informed by the local or regional historical experiences and cultural practices' (p. 170).

However, there are some unanswered questions in this text. Firstly, what is to be done with the 'fathers'? I'm in agreement with the authors that the goal is not 'wishing [the canon] away and more about pushing its boundaries' (p. 343). But, given how the fathers are presented here, is it sufficient to generate conversations across the diverse writers of this expanded canon, or does the Euro and androcentrism of the fathers need clearer interrogation alongside this? Secondly, I am unconvinced of the productivity of the distinction between 'social theory' and 'social thought', for two reasons. I'm not sure how clearcut it is. Durkheim certainly did 'social theory' as abstraction, but this partly emerged from the 'practical questions' he saw sociology as based in; how does this differ from someone like Nightingale? Also, it is notable in this text that the label 'social thinker' tends to be applied more to women than men – all the women in this text are labelled as such, only two men, Rizal and Nursi, are. Might, despite the authors' intentions, this simply introduce another hierarchy as a result of the means these women had available for communication at their time? Finally, not a question but a comment, this book could have done with a more thorough proof reading to correct the numerous mistakes found therein. This is disappointing to see and hurts the text at points.

To conclude, this is a valuable contribution to a burgeoning body of literature on expanding the canon. Its focus on teaching is especially welcome and the profiles here can serve as an aid for tutors seeking to introduce new voices. While its poor proof reading and unanswered questions can be frustrating, it has value for those seeking out the ‘alternative sociologies’ it presents.