

Durkheim and the possible connections between social theory and colonialism

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journals.sagepub.com/home/jcs**Matt Dawson** 

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Abstract

In this piece I explore how Bhambra and Holmwood's *Colonialism and Modern Social Theory* implies three different questions that can be asked concerning the connections between colonialism and social theory. With reference to their discussion of Durkheim, I suggest the answers they offer to these possible questions return us to what Kurasawa termed the 'constitutive paradox' of Durkheim's relation to colonialism, namely a mix of political acceptance while also questioning its ideological legitimacy. While exploring Durkheim's comments on colonialism, race, the state and his own Jewishness, I emphasise the need for a careful historical sociology which reckons with the different possible connections between social theory and colonialism.

Keywords

Classical social theory, colonialism, Émile Durkheim, empire

In his collection of lectures entitled *Moral Education* Durkheim says the following:

Wherever two populations, two groups of people having unequal cultures, come into continuous contact with one another, certain feelings develop that prompt the more cultivated group – or that which deems itself such – to do violence to the other. This is currently the case in colonies and countries of all kinds where representatives of European civilization find themselves involved with underdeveloped peoples. Although it is useless and involves great dangers for those who abandon themselves to it, exposing themselves to formidable reprisals, this violence almost inevitably breaks out. Hence that kind of bloody foolhardiness that seizes the explorer in connection with races he deems inferior (Durkheim, 1961:192–193).

How should the contemporary reader take this quote? In many ways, it seems to reflect much of the colonialist logic – of 'unequal cultures', 'underdeveloped peoples' and 'the

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more cultivated group' – that the decolonial critique has so valuably forced us to confront in some classical literature. On the other hand, there's a condemnation of colonial violence here – the 'bloody foolhardiness' – and an indication that these supposed inequalities may reflect that one group '*deems* itself' superior. Durkheim goes on to suggest that due to 'the superiority he arrogates' the violence of the coloniser 'is a game with him, a spectacle in which he indulges himself, a way of demonstrating the superiority he sees in himself' (Durkheim, 1961:193).

This opening quote is reproduced in Fuyuki Kurasawa's (2013:198) study of the 'constitutive paradox' shaping Durkheim and the Durkheimian school's relation to empire. In short, the school did not question the political existence of empire, and at points were willing to engage with French colonialism when it advanced the case of the ethnology they favoured. However, they also questioned the 'ideological legitimacy' (Kurasawa, 2013:199) of empire by rejecting the notion of 'higher' or 'more advanced' cultures. For Kurasawa this was a *constitutive* paradox in the sense that access to ethnological studies and data, often products of empire, were formative to the Durkheimian school, yet they would put this knowledge to ends which critiqued colonialism's cultural justifications.

I started with this quote and discussion since, while the opening quote is gestured towards, and the following quote is cited more fully, in a footnote of Bhambra and Holmwood's (2021: 225–226) *Colonialism and Modern Social Theory* it is not interrogated and instead they offer the claim that Durkheim 'failed to address colonialism' (2021: 169). Kurasawa's chapter is also cited but his argument is not discussed since he is said to focus not on Durkheim, but on the Durkheimian School. While Kurasawa is outwardly concerned with the Durkheimian school, his focus is largely on Durkheim along with his nephew Mauss. It is curious then to not give his argument any discussion. Especially when, and here I agree with Bhambra and Holmwood, such a discussion has been otherwise absent in the secondary literature on Durkheim. I would suggest this choice on the authors' parts reflects a tension in the goal of their text that, despite its virtues as a book, makes assessing its claims challenging. I will focus primarily on the Durkheim chapter in this piece but would suggest the issues I identify can be found across the text. This chapter contains an impressively broad and detailed overview of Durkheim's work and thankfully avoids the oft-repeated claims of Durkheim constructing a rigid system, instead highlighting how his method is correctly seen as 'rules of thumb' (p. 142). However, I will limit myself to the discussion of colonialism and Durkheim in what follows.

It is possible to frame the question of colonialism and social theory in three ways: (1) is a historical question, to explore how colonialism shaped the thought of particular social theorists or social theory more generally, most notably during the height of empire. This is the approach Kurasawa took in his work; (2) is a different form of this historical question, more genealogical – to trace how the presence/absence of colonialism has been reproduced throughout the history of social theory; finally, for question (3) the analysis could be more contemporary, looking at how social theory today suffers from omissions of colonialism and empires, either past or current. It is to Bhambra and Holmwood's credit that rather than accept this distinction of different questions they instead attempt to answer them all. Their argument is that the legacy of 'modern social theory', by which they actually mean the social theory of modernity, expressed primarily in de Tocqueville,

Marx, Weber and Durkheim (with Du Bois as a counter-weight) has provided an impoverished legacy to contemporary social theory due to the respective inabilities of each writer to account for colonialism in their writings.

This is where we get to the tensions in how Bhambra and Holmwood (2021: 21) answer their founding questions. They argue that their goal is to ‘place firmly within their times theorists with whom we engage, and we discuss their writings in light of the histories they were living through’. This is an approach which grounds their discussion in what I presented as question (1). Indeed, this produces some fruitful discussions concerning, for example, the contrasting absence of the Haitian Revolution in de Tocqueville’s work and the attention Du Bois gave to colonialism in his own conception of the colour line.¹ However, the historical approach they take can sometimes be surprisingly flat and circumstantial.

To return to the chapter on Durkheim, others who have tackled this question have put Durkheim into the inevitably messy and interconnected web of his time. For example, we see Kurasawa highlighting the implicit acceptance of an imperial political formation due to the historical juncture and Durkheim’s historical placing as an actor seeking to justify sociology leading to his ‘constitutive paradox’. Or, we can turn to Fields (2002) grounding of the Dreyfus Affair and the antisemitism Durkheim personally experienced as the basis for an imaginary exchange with Du Bois on the nature of humanity. For Bhambra and Holmwood (2021: 176), by highlighting events that happened during Durkheim’s time – but that he did not discuss – we get the suggestion that, while ‘Durkheim answered the Jewish Question he failed before the Muslim Question.’² This is justified by reference to Durkheim’s silence on French imperialism in Algeria, which, based upon literature available in English seems, to my knowledge at least, correct. But, this is expanded beyond a claim that Durkheim did not discuss something to also claim that he suggested ‘the colonised had no rights’ (Bhambra and Holmwood, 2021: 174). This assertion is based solely on an exchange at a debate where Durkheim claims he ‘had never known what constituted a savage people’ (Bhambra and Holmwood, 2021: 174). The reader is left unsure how this constitutes Durkheim ‘failing the Muslim Question’, unless by ‘fail’ is meant not discussing it.

This possible interpretation of ‘failing’, of sins of omissions, suggest how Bhambra and Holmwood do not want to limit themselves to history but also want to answer the second and third questions above concerning colonialism and social theory. They open the book discussing Trump and Brexit, including what they claim are sociology’s failings in response to these events. This leads them to suggest part of the problem is ‘in none of the writers who make up the usual canon of modern social theory is there a discussion of race as central to the social structures of modernity’ (Bhambra and Holmwood, 2021: viii). However, in the conclusion of the book we find the claim that their key concern is that ‘colonialism and empire are absent from sociology’s current jurisdiction’ (2021: 210). This second comment seems strangely dismissive of what is now a sizeable amount of post/decolonial literature in sociology which has done a great deal to direct our attention towards colonialism. But, even if both comments are true, leaving aside one is a historical and the other is a contemporary claim, having an appropriate conceptualisation of race is different from accounting for colonialism. For example, a theorist writing at the same time as those discussed here, L.T. Hobhouse, criticised colonialism extensively and

saw this as central to modernity, but he did not properly conceptualise race (see Collini, 1979).³ Here we see the confusion of whether the book is attempting a historical analysis or a statement about sociology today. It seems they really want to answer questions (2) and (3), not question (1).⁴

Returning to Durkheim, this confusion can be seen in issues with two of the other critiques Bhambra and Holmwood offer about his work: race and the state. I will start by attempting to correct the record before turning back to my broader point of Bhambra and Holmwood's goals. To start with race, if Bhambra and Holmwood are concerned not just with colonialism but with Durkheim's lack of accounting for race then, yes, his sin of omission regarding Algeria and Muslims is a problem in his work. But, such an argument would also need to confront the questions of Durkheim's Jewishness and discussions of antisemitism. Bhambra and Holmwood, unlike Fields (2002) who they discuss here, ignore the multiple examples of Durkheim being racialised and singled out for antisemitic abuse before, during and after the Dreyfus Affair, suggesting only that his 'Individualism and the Intellectuals' was partly a response to a general antisemitism during the Affair. A fuller account of Durkheim's thought on race would also need to consider 'Anti-Semitism and Social Crisis', written at the same time as 'Individualism and the Intellectuals'. Here, Durkheim (2008) discusses the nature of antisemitism, distinguishes 'acute' and 'chronic' forms and highlights the significance of antisemitism as a political strategy for consolidating power. Bhambra and Holmwood may suggest that Durkheim's racialised position as a Jew in *fin-de-siecle* France and this fragmentary discussion of antisemitism does not, in and of itself, mean Durkheim accounted for race fully in his work. I think there is merit in that argument, but it needs to put, rather than focussing solely on a sin of omission concerning colonialism.

When it comes to the state, Bhambra and Holmwood (2021: 169) suggest 'it was as if he as oblivious to the fact that the [French] state. . . was an imperial state'. This is important to their argument since they see the belief in Western states being 'national' rather than 'colonial' to be one of the five 'fictions' of modern social theory (2021: 212–213). However, in his definition of the state, Durkheim (1958) distinguishes between 'external' and 'internal' functions. The external functions, which came first and were foundational to the state, include colonialism. Durkheim goes on to say that the state should focus increasingly on its internal functions, which he links to social justice, rather than 'the conquest of new territories, which is always unjust' (Durkheim, 1958: 50). Again, I do not highlight this to suggest Durkheim's theory of the state is beyond reproach but rather to suggest a proper reckoning with his work requires dealing with these claims.⁵

However, it could be suggested that such comments do not really matter to Durkheim's legacy. After all, these writings are clearly so poorly known that even Bhambra and Holmwood, despite their otherwise extensive and sophisticated discussion of Durkheim, are unaware of them. Consequently we may suggest that Durkheim's legacy, along with the other writers in this book is one of a lack of awareness of colonialism and a faulty conception of the nation state which continues into the current day and negatively shapes contemporary sociology. If we are answering questions (2) and (3) it is legacy we are concerned with rather than with the whole of Durkheim's oeuvre.

However, if one were to assess Bhambra and Holmwood's book on their ability to speak to the current day it becomes a much more challenging task. Here their book could

be seen as conservative due to a seeming assumption that for sociology to overcome its current limitations we need to reassess the classical writings of de Tocqueville, Marx, Weber and Durkheim and elevate Du Bois. In turn, this would seem to rest upon a further assumption that all, or at least most, sociological work today can trace itself back to these writers and therefore reproduces their main assumptions. This seems to me a hard claim to justify. For example, a recent text which celebrated the continued strength of Durkheimian research saw this as almost wholly based within American cultural sociology (Smith, 2020). It is hard to identify even this limited legacy when it comes to de Tocqueville. Meanwhile, a writer such as Bourdieu (who has his own sociologically interesting encounter with French colonialism in Algeria) could perhaps be said to have a bigger influence in sociology today (at least in Britain) than any writer discussed here, but is not included in this discussion given its focus on classical writers. Also, this again seems to somewhat marginalise the significant work many scholars have done on this project to this point.

It could be that Bhambra and Holmwood's intended area of discussion is narrower than this, rather than sociology, or even social theory *tout court*, it is the social theory of modernity which is their object of critique. This would of course follow on from previous work from Bhambra (2007). It would also be reflected in the references to Eisenstadt and multiple modernities in this text as well as the suggestion that the Habermasian notion of an 'unfinished project' of modernity 'presupposes that modernity is a civilising project and that we should look at all premodern societies as inferior precursors' (Bhambra and Holmwood, 2021: 212). This seems to be a very fruitful discussion to have but perhaps presupposes a different book to the one Bhambra and Holmwood have written. For example, this left me wondering where a figure like Jose Rizal, defending the promise of the Enlightenment while fighting colonialism in the Philippines, would sit in such a discussion (see Alatas and Sinha, 2017 for a valuable discussion of Rizal).

One of the great virtues of the decolonial critique is that it has reasserted the need for a historical perspective in sociology, which had sadly been somewhat lost in the late 20th/early 21st century. Bhambra and Holmwood's book, which encourages us to look back at classical writers and consider the context in which they wrote, along with the way colonialism exists mostly as an absence in their work, is timely. It is also though a reminder of the challenges of a historical sociology that attempts to speak to the current day. As I indicated earlier in my summary of the three questions we may ask of the link between colonialism and social theory, while these are interlinked, they each require distinct modes of enquiry and answers. As in the case with Durkheim, we may find more of the paradoxes Kurasawa noted previously, rather than a straight link between all three.

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Notes

1. Though I would note, like many discussing Du Bois as part of the sociological canon they underplay how his critique of colonialism became increasingly influenced by revolutionary communism, for better or worse (see, Mullen (2016) for an excellent discussion of this). This was a key part of Du Bois' context often missing in such discussions.
2. It is unclear if 'answered' here is meant as a purely intellectual way, that Durkheim discussed 'the Jewish question' effectively, or in a more holistically way, that Durkheim personally found an accommodation as an 'assimilated Jew' as they call him (Bhambra and Holmwood, 2021: 172). The second is much more questionable than the first.
3. It is another confusion in Bhambra and Holmwood's book that were one writing about how colonialism influenced the formation of social theory then, surely, some discussion of British social theory of the time would be valuable. Yet, of course, the lack of a canonised British theorist from that period makes them less valuable for the genealogical and contemporary questions on this topic.
4. This is also indicated in the emphasis the Marx chapter gives to his predictions about class and in the claims concerning the possible colonialist uses of ideal type ideology in the Weber chapter. I do not have the space to discuss these claims.
5. As an aside, while Bhambra and Holmwood, unlike many, correctly emphasise the extent to which Durkheim had a vision of an alternative society, they also say that 'all [Durkheim's] solutions depended on the effective and ethical role of the state' (p. 169). This is true only in the sense that Durkheim's normative vision relied upon a state that took on some broad ethical duties. However, his alternative more notably relied upon a strengthening of what he termed 'political society', the occupationally-specific associations (see Dawson, 2016). If these were not established then Durkheim claimed the state 'develops out of all proportion, becoming tyrannical and imposing itself unduly' (Durkheim, 1958:49).

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