

## **A Post-Colonial Comment on Collins**

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R.W. Connell's (1997) "Why is Classical Theory Classical" pursues a rich combination of arguments. At their core is the proposition that the birth of sociology involved "the structure of world society" rather than simply the historical development of European societies. Consequently, sociology "was formed within the culture of imperialism and embodied a cultural response to the colonized world" ( p. 1519). Connell's argument recommends that if we pay greater attention to the imperial context within which the sociological canon was constructed, we will better understand the mechanisms of its formation, rather than see that formation as the effect of a few great men musing on the birth of industrial society, as it has been routinely presented in influential sociological textbooks. We all now accept the argument put by Immanuel Wallerstein (1974, 1984) and many others, that societal development from the 1400s onwards should not be seen in internalist terms as the development of isolated nation-states or "societies", but in global terms as the development of a very differentiated world society, and Connell's discussion is largely a sustained defense and explication of the idea that the same perspective should be applied to the history of sociological thought itself.

Randall Collins (1997), however, cares little for this proposition, and his reply, "A Sociological Guilt Trip", mounts an attack on Connell's article. One is immediately struck by the tone: Connell is clearly letting the sociological side down in Collins's view, with what he regards as a "polemic". Connell is apparently intent on showing "sociology at its worst", aiming to "humble us", to attach a "lurid coloring" to the history of the discipline using only empty "rhetorical pathos", to engage in a "denunciation" and, above all, to indulge in "trendy political sloganizing" seeking to make us feel "guilty" - hence Collins's choice of title.

Perhaps because we are Australian compatriots of Connell's we are all too familiar with the gloss that Collins provides. We have, in a sense, heard it all before. In Australia, for example, the current conservative Prime Minister, John Howard, has complained about the attention paid to the violence and injustice of the treatment of indigenous Australians over the past two hundred years, because to do so today only makes people feel "guilty". There is, the Prime Minister insists, no point in reflecting through the mode of what he refers to as a "black armband" view of history. History is over and done with, and the present generation bears no responsibility for possible unfortunate incidents in the bad old days. Anyway, to dwell on the negatives is to fail to recognize all the positive advances which have been made since the initial foundations. Best to steer clear of imperialism, colonization and their savageries.

Given these current political realities it should be evident that both Connell and Collins have hit on a sore spot in their respective commentaries. While Connell argues that we cannot understand who we are, sociologically, without a better understanding of how our discursive historical formation was embedded within that of European colonialism, Collins seems uncomfortable about any mention of empire and colonization in the context of sociology's foundations. His tenor bears some remarkable similarities to Howard's response to contemporary political discussions that seek to implicate the power relations within which a range of colonial histories have been located. Collins seems to find it implausible to think that such an honorable pursuit as sociology today could have a problematic history that has somehow been forgotten, overlooked or repressed. Connell's act of remembrance it is thus an act of bad faith.

What of the substance of Collins's argument? His reply can be reduced to the following four points. 1) The earliest generation of French social theorists thought and wrote more about

Europe than about the rest of the world. We should interpret this to mean that internal concerns were more influential in the discipline's history than comparative, colonial ones in this important foundational case. 2) There is only a weak connection between empire and sociology, because sociology's origins in France predate France's colonial efforts. Moreover, sociology did not emerge in countries like Holland, Portugal and Spain which were important early imperial powers, nor did it emerge in parallel with the imperial adventures of the British state. 3) The articulation of difference between metropole and colony, when it did emerge in sociology after about 1880, was simply incorporated into internalist concerns, and made little difference to the structure of sociological thought. 4) It is no surprise that those writers defined as classical were only a selection of available writers in sociology. Discrimination and privileging of forefathers happens in all disciplines.

The first point carries some weight. However, it fails to engage with what Connell actually argues. Connell analyses the contents of the *Année sociologique* between 1898 and 1913 in order to show exactly how "comparative" and global French sociology had become. The whole thrust of Connell's argument is precisely that the transition from pre- to post-1880 French sociology involved, crucially, a transition to much stronger comparative, imperial concerns. These were organized around "a central idea: difference between the civilization of the metropole and an Other whose main feature was its primitiveness" (pp. 1516-17). Collins contends that "it is easy to document just how concerned pre-1914 sociologists were" with internal questions such as the French Revolution and its aftermath, class formation, and family change, but his examples are drawn from pre-1880, not pre-1914, French sociology - Saint-Simon, Comte, de Bonald, de Maistre, Le Play. Unfortunately, it is precisely these authors who are excluded from the canon - who now reads Saint-Simon? Le Play? In any case, in relation to Le Play we should remember that the stability of his ideal of a "stem" family structure in Europe, with its exclusion of all but one son from inheritance, depended crucially on the possibility of settlement and cultivation, by the remaining sons, of new lands and "territories that formerly remained subject to abandonment and barbarism" (in Zimmerman and Frampton 1966, p. 19) - namely, Australia, North and South America, and Africa. Empire was by no means absent from Le Play's field of vision; indeed for him it was essential to the stability of French family life. So, even for those scholars who do enter Collins's time-span of discretion as founders, the imperialist concerns are evident.

Collins's second point rests on a rather simple logic, one that assumes we are talking about a mechanical "correlation" (p. 1561) between a particular mode of thought and the presence or absence of a nation's troops in far-flung lands. But Connell's argument concerns the positioning of sociological thought within the culture of empire, not simply correlating with the brute fact of establishing actual colonies, and it is perfectly reasonable to suggest that French (and Scottish) social theorists framed their thought in terms of a connection between "global difference" and "progress" quite independently of their uniformed compatriots actually marching across the countryside. As Heilbron argues, one of the most important preconditions for the rise of modern social theories was a particular anthropology, one which saw human beings as reasoning creatures able to manage their passions in the self-advancing pursuit of rational aims (1990, pp. 82-3). However, this anthropology was centrally organized around the contrast between those (European) cultures which had more or less achieved the structuring of human action around amour-propre and those which had not - the "uncivilized" cultures of the world. The 'will to empire' and the 'imperial gaze' preceded actual colonization: Le Play is an obvious example. In 1939, Norbert Elias drew our attention to Napoleon's 1798 cry to his troops on their way to Egypt: "Soldiers, you are undertaking a conquest with incalculable consequences for civilization." (Elias 1994, p. 41). To suggest that Connell claims "that imperialism leads to sociology" (p. 1562) is an extreme misreading of his text, and Collins's critique of an argument no one supports simply draws our attention away from Connell's real concern, the location of sociological thought within a well-established imperialist cultural context. Indeed, once the elective affinities are pointed out, as Connell's argument does, it is implausible that somehow

sociology had escaped the cultural milieu within which its earliest practitioners lived.

After 1880, Collins concedes, “an increasing awareness of non-European societies” (an unfortunate formulation) does make a difference to sociological thought, but merely to be “incorporated” within ‘the framework of ideas already developed’” (p. 1559). However, Collins himself is well acquainted with the fact that this increasing awareness arose from a process of “overseas conquest and economic penetration, beginning in the late 1400s”, so how is it possible to ascribe any priority to internalist concerns in eighteenth and nineteenth century French social theory? Ought one not, equally, ask why these internalist concerns arise when they do, given the earlier history of conquest and warfare, and their contemporary context where warfare was redefining national space? Not only Anglophone, but also Francophone and Latin communities were imagining themselves in increasingly bizarre imperial terms (Anderson 1982). Michel Foucault spoke in the 1970s of an effet retour (“return effect”) of colonial practices on Occidental institutions and mechanisms of power, so that from the sixteenth century onwards European societies should be regarded as articulated with a form of “internal colonialism” (cited in Stoler 1995: p. 75), and the same argument applies to Occidental social thought. As Ann Stoler has argued, summing up a growing body of scholarship, we should regard “race, racism, and its representations as structured entailments of post-enlightenment universals, as formative features of modernity, as deeply embedded in bourgeois liberalism, not as aberrant offshoots of them” (1995, p. 9).

In another case that both Collins and Connell address, that of British sociology, then it is impossible to understand its trajectory from the liberal concerns of Hobhouse and his LSE peers without at the same time recognizing that in England, at least, the Queen of the Social Sciences, historically, was anthropology rather than sociology, a more fitting science to prepare those about to assume the white man’s burdens of Empire. Indeed, sociology emerged out of a concern with the social administration of impoverished subjects at home rather than recalcitrant subjects abroad. (Perhaps that is why the present heir to the British throne read anthropology while he was an undergraduate?) When sociology began to flourish in Britain it was during the post-war era when already it had become represented in the US textbook mode; its main intellectual counter-weight was always anthropology, whose strength and prior claims to a field of knowledge helped explain its absence from some of the most privileged seats of learning in the heart of Empire, and which continued to shape the foundation syllabi of the LSE, and through it, the most influential departments in Britain.

Collins concedes that there are “genuine Eurocentric biases” to be found “here and there in Durkheim, Weber and Marx” (p. 1560). However, the issue is not “distortions” or “biases” in otherwise accurate accounts, easily identified “here and there” and tidied away, it is the very structure of classical sociological thought, its placement within a framework of perception organised around the establishment of frontiers and borders both within nation-states, between respectable and unrespectable, and between Europe and non-Europe, between the metropole and the colonies, civilization and savagery, essentially between civilized “whiteness” and barbaric, yet-to-be-civilized “blackness”, distinctions which all worked in close relation with each other.

Even if we maintain a resistance to seeing internalist and comparative themes as running parallel each other, often interweaving, and go along with the “incorporation” thesis, Collins begs the question of what difference such an incorporation of an awareness of global difference made. Surely it has become clear that European social thought was centrally formed by its sense of difference from the rest of the world; have we forgotten Said (1978) already? Indeed, Stoler suggests that we need to “question whether the key symbols of modern western societies - liberalism, nationalism, state welfare, citizenship, culture, and ‘Europeanness’ itself - were not clarified among Europe’s colonial elite and by those colonized classes caught in their pedagogical net in Asia, Africa and Latin America, and only then brought ‘home’.” (Stoler 1995, p. 16) In which case, it may not only be the relation of sociology to imperialism that requires rethinking, as Connell suggests, but also its relation to anthropology in the old imperial centres and colonies.

Finally, Collins advises, contra Connell, we should not be surprised that those writers ultimately defined as classical were only a selection of available sociologists, because a narrowing down of the pantheon of heroic pioneer figures is a feature of all disciplines. The example Collins chooses is philosophy, but Connell refers to the other social sciences and, in doing so, suggests that sociology is more concerned with its classics than economists, political scientists and historians. Perhaps philosophy is equally characterized by this affliction, but this does not weaken the observation. Philosophy aside, for there may be other, more effective arguments against Connell's point, the thrust of Connell's reasoning concerns not whether canonization took place, but an appeal to think more about how and why it happened - surely related rather than antagonistic to Heilbron's (1990) argument for the emergence of sociology as a "science of society" within the context of significance provided by the French "intellectual regime" between 1750 and 1850. We are not being asked to be amazed at how selectively few sociologists get canonized, but to be aware of the context of the process of canonization, and to think about some possible explanations, a concern very closely related to that of Levine's (1989) and Camic's (1989) work on the history of sociological theory.

Collins ends his commentary with an appeal to "broaden out" from the analysis of American sociology to "the formation of canons in other disciplines and in other parts of the world" (p. 1564). Quite so, but is it not odd that at the same time we are being instructed to feel "guilty", "humbled" and "denounced" about Connell's location of those processes of intellectual formation within the history of European imperial projects, particularly at the intersections between conceptions of "progress" and "development" and ideas about racial and sexual "global difference"? It may be, as Collins concludes, that "some day there will be a genuinely cosmopolitan account" (p. 1564), but not until we are mature enough to understand our discipline's history as integrally bound up with world history, including that of race, sexuality, colonization and empire, until we cease defining away serious attempts to do so as a mere polemical guilt trip. And, in drawing our attention as sociologists to the strangely selective empirical amnesia that has constituted our sense of how we got to be the disciplinarians that we now take ourselves to be, Connell, like Heilbron and Collins himself, does the discipline a considerable service. That a commentator as distinguished as Randall Collins takes this as contributing to what we know locally in Australia as a "black armband" view is surprising, even if it does redraw the lines of credit that some existing intellectual capital makes interest from. Against this preservation of interest, we suggest that the history of the discipline should, quite properly, be redrawn.

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