THE POSSIBILITIES OF, 
AND FOR, GLOBAL SOCIOLOGY: 
A POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the way in which perceptions about the globalized nature of the world in which we live are beginning to have an impact within sociology such that sociology has to engage not just with the changing conceptual architecture of globalization, but also with recognition of the epistemological value and agency of the world beyond the West. I address three main developments within sociology that focus on these concerns: first, the shift to a multiple modernities paradigm; second, a call for a multicultural global sociology; and third, an argument in favor of a global cosmopolitan approach. While the three approaches under discussion are based on a consideration of the “rest of the world,” their terms, I suggest, are not adequate to the avowed intentions. None of these responses is sufficient in their address of earlier omissions and each falls back into the problems of the mainstream position that is otherwise being criticized. In contrast, I argue that it is only by acknowledging the significance of the “colonial global” in the constitution of sociology that it is possible to understand and address the necessarily postcolonial (and decolonial) present of “global sociology.”
INTRODUCTION

This article addresses the way in which perceptions about the globalized nature of the world in which we live are beginning to have an impact within sociology such that sociology has to engage not just with the changing conceptual architecture, as Saskia Sassen (2007) calls it, of globalization, but also with recognition of the epistemological value and agency of the world beyond the West, as Leela Gandhi (1998) has put it. The idea of a “global sociology,” I shall argue, has been promoted as a way in which sociology can redress a previous neglect of those represented as “other” in its construction of modernity pointing toward a rejuvenation of sociology that is adequate for this new global age. In this article, I shall address three main developments within sociology that focus on these concerns: first, the shift to a multiple modernities paradigm away from earlier theories of linear modernization; second, a call for a multicultural global sociology taking into account the work of scholars from other parts of the world; and third, an argument against the perceived methodological nationalism of much social science in favor of a global cosmopolitan approach. While the three approaches under discussion are based on a consideration of the “rest of the world,” usually in response to earlier critiques of a lack of such an engagement, its terms, I suggest, are not adequate to the avowed intentions. My argument will be that none of these responses is sufficient in their address of earlier omissions and that each falls back into the problems of the mainstream position that is otherwise being criticized. To a large extent, these approaches replicate existing divisions and problems as opposed to challenging and resolving them.

Instead, I shall argue that a postcolonial “connected sociologies” approach, with its critique of Eurocentrism and its central concern with histories of colonialism and slavery, provides more adequate resources for making sense of our contemporary global world. It is only by acknowledging the significance of the “colonial global” in the constitution of sociology, I suggest, that it is possible to understand and address the necessarily postcolonial (and decolonial) present of “global sociology.” Recognition of the historical role of colonialism and slavery in the making of the modern world enables us to examine how these world-historical processes have constructed our conceptions of the global in terms of racialized hierarchies embedded both in institutions and in the development of sociological concepts and categories. The re-organization of understanding through the lens of coloniality, I argue, acknowledges the significance of a specific kind of hierarchical ordering that has, for the
most part, been implicit to our discipline and remains missing in the three responses under discussion. While the sociological imagination hitherto has been formed around particular transformations of hierarchy – for example, from status to citizenship (and the associated issues of class and gender in that process) – the postcolonial sociological imagination broadens this remit through an examination of the reproduction and transformation of racialized hierarchies on a global scale and the argument that they have similar significance to other hierarchies and are similarly embedded within them.

The emergence and development of postcolonial criticism within the social sciences has led proponents of the “standard” view to make minor adjustments, but then to suggest that this is all now very familiar. The argument is that, while the critique may once have had purchase, its force now is only in relation to positions that have already been superseded. The minor modifications made to existing positions are believed to be sufficient and the focus is generally on changing future applications of sociology in line with these modifications. I argue, however, that the postcolonial critique of sociology has not yet properly been acknowledged, let alone superseded. Further, any proper transformation would require a reconstruction “backwards” of our historical understandings of modernity and the emergence of sociology, as well as “forwards” in terms of how this newly reconstructed sociological understanding would enable us to address present and future issues differently. A parallel that might be useful to think with is that of feminism and its critique of sociology.

The issue within feminist debates in sociology was not simply about a claim that the empirical range of problems that sociology addresses needed to be extended, but also that existing topics needed to be understood in terms of the relation to the issues of gender that were, and are, implicit to them. In its strongest form, feminism introduced a conceptual reorientation of sociology around the idea of patriarchy, and in a weaker form, around the gendered nature of social relations. These critiques did not simply involve statements that at the moment of recognition of gender we had entered a world that was now to be understood as gendered and that, in the future, sociological categories should address gender issues. Rather, the argument was also that established understandings about the past were deficient precisely insofar as gender was an issue of the past (albeit having been unrecognized) as well as of the present and future. The necessity for the reconstruction of sociology’s objects was not discernible prior to the impact of feminism upon sociology and sociology has necessarily been reconstructed as a consequence of engagement with feminist critique (Holmwood,
MODERNITY, SOCIOLOGY AND POSTCOLONIAL CRITIQUE

Sociology and modernity, as many scholars have argued, need to be understood as co-constitutive (Heilbron, 1995).² It was with the emergence of what is understood to be the “modern world” – the combined and cumulative events of the Renaissance and Reformation, the Scientific Revolution, the French and Industrial Revolutions – that a new, “modern,” form of explanation, sociology, emerged to make sense of that world. Indeed, setting out the parameters of “the modern” became defined as a key task of sociology, both conceptually and methodologically. Even where sociologists have subsequently disagreed about the nature of modernity, the timing of its emergence, or its later character, they all agree on its central role in the configuration of the discipline (see, e.g., Giddens 1973; Heilbron, 1995; Nisbet, 1966). Further, notwithstanding the many differences between sociologists in their attempts to delineate modernity, they all agree that it is marked by ideas of rupture and difference: a temporal rupture between a premodern past and a modern industrial present, and a qualitative spatial (cultural) differentiation between Europe (and the West) and the rest of the world. With sociology being constituted both in the context of the emergence of the modern world and organized in terms of providing a modern form of explanation of that world, it is no surprise that sociology came to be strongly associated with understandings of “the modern.” The “traditional,” from which the modern was distinguished, was seen as the preserve of anthropology, or then area studies (see Steinmetz, 2007).³ In this way, the disciplinary divide itself structured a division of the world that
obscured the interconnections constituting the global that was in process of being divided. Indeed, it re-cast that division in terms of a developmental process that would resolve differences in the diffusion of a modernity that was represented as world-historical in its significance.

This division – posited as both explanatory and normative – was carried through methodologically via the use of ideal types as the basis for comparative historical analysis. Ideal types necessarily abstract a set of particular connections from wider connections and, further, suggest *sui generis* endogenous processes as integral to the connections that are abstracted (for further discussion, see Holmwood and Stewart, 1991). The connections most frequently omitted are those “connecting” Europe and the West (the modern) to much of the rest of the world (tradition). These connections are thereby rendered exogenous to the processes abstracted from them at the same time as these processes are represented as having a significant degree of internal coherence, independent of these wider connections. In this way, a dominant Eurocentered focus to the analysis is established, both methodologically and normatively, while relegating non-European contributions to specific cultural inflections of preexisting structures that are held to be a product of European modernity (Bhambra, 2007a). This is best exemplified by the continuing belief in the miracle *in* Europe, if not *of* Europe; that is, following Weber, a belief that modernity emerged first in Europe and then diffused around the rest of the world. While the association of modernity and Europe is now less likely to be presented as a normative exemplar, it is nonetheless posited as historical fact; and one where there is an elective affinity between the instituted structures of modernity and Enlightenment values attributed European origin. In this way, modernity is conflated with Europe and the process of becoming modern is rendered, at least in the first instance, one of endogenous European development, followed by diffusion to the rest of the world.

Industrialization, for example, is seen to be a European phenomenon that was subsequently diffused globally. However, if we take the cotton factories of Manchester and Lancaster as emblematic of the industrial revolution in the West, then we see that cotton was not a plant that was native to England, let alone the West (Washbrook, 1997). It came from India as did the technology of how to dye and weave it. Cotton was grown in the plantations of the Caribbean and the southern United States by enslaved Africans who were transported there as part of the European trade in human beings. The export of the textile itself relied upon the destruction of the local production of cotton goods in other parts of the world (Bhambra,
In this way, we see that industrialization was not solely a European or Western phenomenon but one that had global conditions for its very emergence and articulation. The history of modernity as commonly told, however, rests, as Homi Bhabha argues, on “the writing out of the colonial and postcolonial moment” (1994, p. 250; see also Chakrabarty, 2000). The rest of the world is assumed to be external to the world-historical processes selected for consideration and, concretely, colonial connections significant to the processes under discussion are erased, or rendered silent. This is not an error of individual scholarship, I suggest, but something that is made possible by the very disciplinary structure of knowledge production that separates the modern (sociology) from the traditional and colonial (anthropology) thereby leaving no space for consideration of what could be termed, the “postcolonial modern.”

Following Bhabha (1994), I argue that the starting point for any understanding of “global sociology” has to be consideration of a history adequate to the social and political conditions of the present. These conditions are not simply informed by understandings of “globalization,” but more specifically by an understanding of the postcolonial global conditions which are rarely the starting point for sociological analyses (see Bhambra, 2007b). As Seidman remarks, for example, sociology’s emergence coincided with the high point of Western imperialism, and yet, “the dynamics of empire were not incorporated into the basic categories, models of explanation, and narratives of social development of the classical sociologists” (1996, p. 314). Those who defend the dominant approach to comparative historical sociology frequently accept that Eurocentrism is a problem that has sometimes distorted the way in which modernity has been conceptualized within sociology. They also argue that “Eurocentrism” cannot be denied as “fact,” that, put simply, the European origins of modernity cannot be denied. However, it is precisely that “fact” that is denied when global interconnections are recognized (see Bhambra, 2007a; Hobson, 2004). In this article I argue that continuing to see Europe as the “lead society,” to use Parsons’s (1971) significant formulation, albeit the lead society within what is now characterized as a globally constituted plurality of “multiple modernities” (e.g., Beck 2000; Eisenstadt 2000; Wittrock, 1998), keeps in place a problematic (and implicitly normative) hierarchy, based on an historically inadequate account of the emergence of modernity, that does not enable the consideration of a properly global sociology. In a properly global sociology, interconnections would be recognized as constitutive of modernity and its institutional orderings and not simply be seen as an aspect of a later phase of globalization.
MULTIPLE MODERNITIES AND GLOBAL CULTURAL VARIETIES

In recent years, modernization theory, with its assumption of unilinear global convergence to an explicitly Western model, has been supplanted by the approach of multiple modernities and its concern with global cultural variations (Eisenstadt, 2000). Within this approach, the modern is understood as encompassing divergent paths, with the global variety of cultures giving rise to a multiplicity of modernities. The shift from earlier modernization theory has come, in part, as a consequence of scholars beginning to appreciate that the differences manifest in the world were not, as had previously been believed, simply archaic differences that would disappear through gradual modernization. Instead, there is recognition that other societies could modernize differently and that these differences, for theorists of multiple modernities, now represent the different ways in which societies adapted to processes of modernization. There is still a belief that modernity was, in its origins, a European (and Western) phenomenon, but now the argument is that in its diffusion outward it interacted with the different traditions of various cultures and societies and brought into being a multiplicity of non-convergent modernities. It is this multiplicity that is seen to set the theory of multiple modernities apart from earlier modernization theory which, it is allowed, was Eurocentric in its postulation of a singular modernity to which all other societies were expected to converge. This apparent recognition of difference and the structural inclusion of multiplicity within the conceptual framework of modernity are deemed to be sufficient modifications to answer the postcolonial critique of modernity as Eurocentric.

The argument put forward by theorists of multiple modernities is that, while the idea of one modernity, especially one that has already been achieved in Europe, would be Eurocentric, theories of multiple modernities must, nonetheless, take Europe as the reference point in their examination of alternative modernities (Eisenstadt & Schluchter, 1998, p. 2). This is as a consequence of their characterization of modernity in terms of a division between its institutional form and a cultural program which, they suggest, is itself “beset by internal antinomies and contradictions, giving rise to continual critical discourse and political contestations” (Eisenstadt, 2000, p. 7). These internal antinomies are regarded as the basis for the variety of forms of modernity – usually pathological – that subsequently come into being, such as the communist Soviet types and the fascist, national-socialist
types (see Arnason, 2000). The standard European type of modernity is presented as the exemplary form – in which the tensions between issues of autonomy, emancipation, and reflexivity, on the one hand, and of discipline and restrictive controls on the other, are resolved – and as the basis of critique of other pathological forms. While theorists of multiple modernities point to the problem of Eurocentrism, then, they do so at the same time as asserting the necessary priority to be given to the West in the construction of a comparative historical sociology of multiple modernities.

The suggestion by theorists of multiple modernities that modernity needs to be understood in terms of an institutional constellation inflected by cultural differences, enables them to situate European modernity – seen in terms of a unique combination of institutional and cultural forms – as the originary modernity and, at the same time, allows for different cultural encodings that result in modernity having become multiple. In this way, Europe becomes the origin of the Eurocentered type and its Enlightenment assumptions (Eisenstadt & Schluchter, 1998, p. 5). Further, those assumptions are argued to be necessary to the critique of pathologies at the same time as they are absolved of implication in the creation of those pathological types. In particular, it is notable that issues of colonialism and enslavement appear neither in representations of the exemplary, nor the pathological forms and are, in fact, not regarded to be a part of the socio-political or economic structures of modernity. Arguing for the cultural inflection of institutions enables multiple modernities theorists to present the idea that core institutions are not themselves socio-culturally formed. In this way, issues of race and ethnicity, for example, come to be regarded as external limits on, or additions to, market forms, rather than themselves being built into market forms. Whereas one sociological response to conventional accounts of modernization was to argue that core institutional forms should be understood as structured by class or by gender, what remains missing is the parallel criticism that those forms also embed racialized hierarchies (see Bhambra, 2007b; Holmwood, 2001).

As Arif Dirlik has argued, by identifying “multiplicity” with culture and tradition, “the idea of “multiple modernities” seeks to contain challenges to modernity” – and, I would argue, to the substantial reconfiguring of sociology – “by conceding the possibility of culturally different ways of being modern” (2003, p. 285), but not contesting what it is to be modern and without drawing attention to the social interconnections in which modernity has been constituted and developed. By maintaining a general framework within which particularities are located – and identifying the particularities with culture (or the social) and the experience of Europe with the general
framework itself – theorists of multiple modernities have, in effect, sought to neuter any challenge that a consideration of the postcolonial could have posed. In this way, theorists of multiple modernities seek to disarm criticism by allowing for multiplicity at the same time as maintaining the fundamental structure of the original argument. The idea of multiple modernities can be argued to represent a kind of global multiculturalism, where a common (Eurocentered) modernity is inflected by different (other) cultures. In this context, it is significant that other – seemingly unconnected – calls for global sociology have the form of a call for a global multicultural sociology.

GLOBAL MULTICULTURAL SOCIOLOGY

While the argument of multiple modernities provides a critique of linear modernization theory and engages with a re-examination of the substance of sociological categories, what I am calling global multicultural sociology addresses issues of sociological epistemology in the context of multiple modernities. The most recent arguments for a global multicultural sociology have come in the wake of two conferences of the National Associations Committee of the International Sociological Association organized respectively by Sujata Patel in Miami in 2006 and by Michael Burawoy in Taipei in 2009. The discussions from these conferences have been widely reported in journals, edited volumes and other publications (see, e.g., Burawoy et al., 2010 and Patel, 2010b), and they consolidate themes from earlier engagements by sociologists on understandings and delineations of “global sociology.” The 1980s, for example, saw extensive debate on the possibilities for the “indigenization” of the social sciences, centered on the arguments of Akinsola Akiwowo (1986, 1988). Akiwowo’s project of indigenization was based upon a call for learning from the traditions of various cultures in order to develop, through a process of investigation and argumentation, universal propositions and frameworks that would be adequate for the task in a variety of locations. While calls for the indigenization of sociology opened up “spaces for alternative voices,” they were seen to have had little discernible impact on the hierarchies of the discipline more generally (Keim, 2011, p. 128; see also Keim, 2008). The critiques were dismissed as political, or politically correct, and there was little engagement with the epistemological issues being raised (notwithstanding that they raised similar issues to feminist critiques of sociology at more or less the same time (see, e.g., Hartsock, 1984; Smith, 1987)).
The debates on indigenization were followed in subsequent decades with discussions concerning the development of autonomous or alternative social science traditions. These arguments for a newly constituted version of global sociology were put forward by scholars such as Syed Hussein Alatas (2002, 2006), Syed Farid Alatas (2006, 2010), Vineeta Sinha (2003), and Raewyn Connell (2007), and focused on the need to recognize multiple, globally diverse, origins of sociology. The debate, as outlined by S. F. Alatas, focused on two complementary strands: one, “the lack of autonomy” of Third World social science and two, “the lack of a multicultural approach in sociology” (2006, p. 5). The common position among the different arguments put forward by these scholars centered on a belief in the importance of the civilizational context for the development of autonomous, or alternative, social science traditions. With this, they aligned themselves, intentionally or not, with the approach espoused by theorists of “multiple modernities” whereby the Western social scientific tradition, linked to modernity, is given centrality and is regarded, as “the definitive reference point for departure and progress in the development of sociology” in other places (S. F. Alatas, 2006, p. 10).

The autonomy of the different traditions rests on studies of historical phenomena believed to be unique to particular areas or societies. As S. F. Alatas argues, autonomous traditions need to be “informed by local/regional historical experiences and cultural practices” as well as by alternative “philosophies, epistemologies, histories, and the arts” (2010, p. 37). Western social science, then, becomes a reference point for the divergence (or creativity, as expressed through the appropriation of Western traditions read through local contexts) of other autonomous traditions, as opposed to the site of convergence (or imitation, as expressed through the application of Western traditions to local contexts), as was believed to be the case with earlier indigenization approaches (that, it was suggested, simply sought to replace expatriate scholars with “local” scholars trained in the expatriate traditions).

As with multiple modernities, however, there is little discussion of what the purchase of these autonomous traditions would be for a global sociology, beyond a simple multiplicity. The most that is suggested is that the development of autonomous traditions would require new attention to be “given to subjects hitherto outside our radius of thinking” and that this “would entail the repositioning of our sociological perspective” (S. H. Alatas, 2006, p. 21). There is little discussion, however, of why these subjects might have previously been outside our radius of thinking or what the process of bringing them inside consists of; the exclusions are naturalized.
and made issues of identity, not methodology or disciplinary construction. The limitations of existing approaches are seen to reside in their failure to engage with scholars and thinkers from outside the West and the main problem is taken to be one of marginalization and exclusion. The solution, then, is a putative equality, through recognition of difference, and redressing the “absence of non-European thinkers” in histories of social and sociological thought. While this may enable the creation of a (more) multicultural sociology for the future, it does little to address the problematic disciplinary construction of sociology in the past (see, Adams et al., 2005, and for discussion, Bhambra, 2010, 2011a).

Unsurprisingly, the idea of a multicultural global sociology, as with feminist critiques before it (see Stanley, 2000), has generated claims of a problematic relativism which is seen to debilitate sociology. Margaret Archer, for example, in her Presidential Address to the ISA World Congress, criticized the move within sociology toward what she saw as fragmentation and localization. With the title of her address, “Sociology for One World: Unity and Diversity,” Archer proceeded to map “the irony of an increasingly global society which is met by an increasingly localized sociology” (1991, p. 132). Piotr Sztompka, another former President of the ISA, followed Archer in arguing strongly against the move to establish a multicultural global sociology. In a recent review of the volumes that came out of the ISA Taipei conference, Sztompka (2011) argues that a particular ideology has pervaded the ISA – one which regards the hegemony of north American and European sociology as problematic; which believes in the existence of alternative, indigenous sociologies; and sees the struggle for global sociology as a way of contesting the hegemony of the dominant forms and creating a balanced unity of the discipline. In contrast, his key concern, following Archer (1991), is highlighting the fact that “there is, and can be, only one sociology studying many social worlds” (2011, p. 389). The place of sociologists outside of the West, according to him, is to supplement the truths of the centre. As he suggests, “the most welcome contribution by sociologists from outside Europe or America is to provide evidence, heuristic hunches, ingenious, locally inspired models and hypotheses about regularities to add to the pool of sociological knowledge which is universal” (2011, p. 393).

There is little understanding that the new knowledges thus generated might in some way call for the reconstruction of existing sociological concepts and categories and thereby maintain a single sociology; that is, one reconstructed on the basis of these new insights. This is so notwithstanding the acceptance in the orthodox account of an explanation of the origins of
sociology in a moment of “de-centering” of Europe by societies at its North Western edges. A de-centering of sociological epistemologies is taken to be a one-off matter, which is ironic, given that the sociological conditions of present concerns about globalization look very much like a similar geopolitical shift in power to that which accompanied the emergence of modernity as presented in standard accounts.

GLOBAL COSMOPOLITANISM

While Archer (1991) and Sztompka (2011) have criticized the move toward a multicultural global sociology from the standpoint of the adequacy of existing forms of sociological understanding, others have done so by outlining an alternative position. Perhaps the most persuasive articulation for an alternative to global multicultural sociology is in the claims for a new universalism of a globally cosmopolitan sociology as put forward by Ulrich Beck (2000, 2006). His argument goes some way toward recognizing the “localism” of the centre, but it does so by casting it as a restriction on future developments (from elsewhere) as we shall see in the following section. For Beck, the problem is how to avoid the relativism of local knowledges, including that of Western sociology, rather than how to learn from local knowledges elsewhere.

Over the first decade of the twenty-first century, Beck (2000, 2006) has argued for the necessity of a cosmopolitan approach to engage critically with globalization and to go beyond the limitations of state-centered disciplinary approaches typical of the social and political sciences. He suggests that sociology delimits the object of its inquiry within national boundaries, displaying an outdated methodological nationalism, rather than in the more appropriate context of “world society.” As a consequence, it is less well able to engage with the “increasing number of social processes that are indifferent to national boundaries” (2000, p. 80). This global age, for Beck, is marked by a transition from the “first age of modernity” which had been structured by nation-states, to a cosmopolitan “second age” in which “the Western claim to a monopoly on modernity is broken and the history and situation of diverging modernities in all parts of the world come into view” (2000, p. 87). The global age, then, is necessarily perceived as being a multicultural age, given that multiple modernities are said to be the expression of cultural differences. With this, Beck follows the approach of multiple modernities theorists in their general analysis, but his call for a
second age of modernity, and what follows from this – a call for a cosmopolitan sociology – is distinctive.

Beck (2000, 2006) not only argues that modernity is now multiple, but further suggests that the concepts which had been in use in developing sociological understandings in the first age are now no longer adequate to the task of understanding modernity in its second age. This is primarily a consequence of the fact that the standard concepts of the social sciences were developed to understand a world composed of nation-states. Now that we are in the second, global, age of modernity, he argues, these concepts are no longer appropriate. Instead, what is needed is a new set of categories and concepts that would emerge from reflection upon this new cosmopolitan age of modernity as represented by the moves toward world society. While I have also argued that sociological concepts are inappropriately bounded – specifically, that they are “methodologically Eurocentric,” rather than methodological nationalistic – this is not something that is only now becoming an issue as a supposedly “first modernity” gives way to a contemporary now-globalized world. At a minimum, “first modernity” could be argued to be as much characterized by empires and regional blocs as by nation-states (see also Wimmer & Schiller, 2003). As a consequence, the concepts of the “first age,” I argue, were as inadequate in their own time as they are claimed to be today and need more comprehensive reconstruction than is suggested by Beck.

Beck (2002) sees cosmopolitanism – and the reconstruction of sociology through a cosmopolitan paradigm – as an issue of the present and the future. There is no discussion in his work of thinking cosmopolitanism back into history and re-examining sociology’s past in light of this. Further, there is little acknowledgment that if certain understandings are taken to be problematic today, they are likely also to have been problematic in the past and thus require a more comprehensive overhaul than he proposes. Indeed, Beck argues that he is not interested in the memory of the global past, but simply in how a vision of a cosmopolitan future could have an impact on the politics of the present. He seems to think that it is possible to discuss “the present implications of a globally shaped future” (2002, p. 27) without addressing the legacies of the past on the shaping of the present. He simply brushes away the historically inherited inequalities arising from the legacies of European colonialism, imperialism, and slavery and moves on to imagine a world separate from the resolution of these inequalities. In contrast, I would argue that any theory that seeks to address the question of “how we live in the world” cannot treat as irrelevant the historical configuration of that world (for discussion, see Trouillot, 1995). In this way, I argue, Beck’s
cosmopolitan approach is as limited as the state-centered approaches it
criticizes precisely in the way that it sanctions the appropriateness of their
concepts to the past, arguing that it is simply their application to the present
and the future that is at issue (for further discussion, see Bhambra, 2011b;
also Patel, 2010a).

Ultimately, Beck’s arguments for a cosmopolitan sociology continue to
take Western perspectives as the focus of global processes, and Europe as
the origin of a modernity which is subsequently globalized. His particular
version of cosmopolitanism, I would suggest, is an expression of cultural
Eurocentrism masquerading as potential global inclusivity; potential,
because this inclusivity is dependent upon “others” being included in the
“us” as defined by Beck (2002). It is not an inclusivity that recognizes
“others” as having been present, if marginalized and silenced, within
standard frameworks of understanding; nor is it an inclusivity that seeks to
establish cosmopolitanism from the ground up (for properly cosmopolitan
understandings of cosmopolitanism, see Lamont & Aksartova, 2002;
Mignolo, 2000; Pollock et al., 2000). Rather, for Beck, a cosmopolitan
sociology is a normative injunction determining how others ought to be
included and how those others ought to live with us in this newly globalizing
age. His hostility to others is nowhere better exemplified than in the title of
his article, “Cosmopolitan Society and its Enemies.” In contrast, a global
sociology that was open to different voices would, I suggest, be one that
provincialized European understandings in its address of the global and
created a new universalism based upon a reconstructed sociology of
modernity.

TOWARD A POSTCOLONIAL GLOBAL SOCIOLOGY

The different approaches discussed above – multiple modernities, multi-
cultural sociology, cosmopolitanism – all attempt to grapple with two main
issues in their statement of a global sociology. First, how can sociology
address the critiques made by postcolonial theorists, among others,
regarding its failure to address issues of difference as it is manifest in the
world; and second, how can sociology be made relevant to a world newly
understood in global terms. The main way of addressing the first issue is
through an additive approach that celebrates a contemporary plurality of
cultures and voices. The multiple modernities paradigm, for example,
recognizes the diversity of globally located cultures and accepts the
possibility of culturally diverse ways of being modern. These aspects, of
multiplicity (over singularity) and divergence (over convergence), are deemed to be sufficient to address earlier critiques. Yet, there is little acknowledgment of the presence of these “others” in the history of modernity as understood in its originary form. The world-historical events recognized in the constitution of modernity remain centered upon a narrowly defined European history and there is no place for the broader histories of colonialism or slavery in their understandings of the emergence of the modern. This failing of multiple modernities is replicated in the move to multiple, or multicultural, global sociologies where the centrality of the West remains in place and new voices are allowed to supplement the already existing truths about a Eurocentered modernity, but not to reconstruct them.

If the new cosmopolitanism in the “age of second modernity” appears different, it is only by virtue of eschewing multiculturalism, while paradoxically accepting the conceptual and methodological premises of the multiple modernities paradigm. As Holmwood notes, although scholars allow for new (postcolonial) voices within sociology, their understandings of the sociological endeavor are such that these new voices “do not bear on its previous constructions” (2007, p. 55). All reconstruction is to be applied to the future while maintaining the adequacy of past interpretations and conceptual understandings.

In their address of the global, all three approaches regard it as constituted through contemporary connections between what are presented as historically separate civilizational contexts. None of the approaches take into consideration the histories of colonialism and slavery as central to the development of the “global” and, therefore, they work with an impoverished understanding that sees the global only as a phenomenon of recent salience. Beck’s global cosmopolitanism, for example, addresses the inadequacy of sociological concepts for the present age, but he does not recognize “the global” as constituted historically. Rather, he is simply concerned with the emergence of a new cosmopolitan global age and a cosmopolitan sociology adequate to new challenges in the future. In a similar fashion, calls for a multicultural global sociology, in which voices from the periphery would enter into debates with the centre, are based on the idea that sociology could be different in the future with little acknowledgment that, in order for this to happen, sociology would also need to relate differently to its past. In contrast, I argue that to address what is regarded as problematic within contemporary understandings of sociology, we need to start by examining the way in which sociology understands the past and how this influences its configuration of categories and concepts in the present. The main issue, I propose, is the failure to
address the omission of the colonial global from understandings of how the
global came to be constituted as such.

By silencing the colonial past within the historical narrative central to
the formation of sociology, the postcolonial present of Europe (and the
West) is also ignored. As a consequence, sociological attempts to address
the “newly” global are misconstrued and thereby inadequate for a proper
address for the problems we share in common. In accepting the adequacy
of sociological accounts that exclude considerations of the world from
understandings of world-historical processes, a form of ethnocentrism is
perpetuated. As Bhabha argues, however, shifting the frame through
which we view the events of modernity forces us to consider the question
of subaltern agency and ask: “what is this ‘now’ of modernity? Who
defines this present from which we speak?” (1994, p. 244). This provo-
cation calls on us to re-examine the conceptual paradigm of modernity
from the perspectives of those “others” usually relegated to the margins, if
included at all. The task, as he puts it, is to take responsibility for the
unspoken, unrepresented pasts within our global present and to
reconstruct present understandings adequate to that past (1994, p. 7); and,
I would add, reconstruct past understandings adequate to our shared
present.

One example of this would be for nation-states in the West to confront
their colonial and imperial histories (and thereby recognize their
postcolonial present) by acknowledging the “influx of postwar migrants
and refugees” as part of “an indigenous or native narrative internal to
national identity” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 6, emphasis added; see also
Amin, 2004). Just as in standard sociological accounts industrialization is
represented as endogenous and its extension as diffusion, so migration
has usually been regarded as a process both exogenous and subsequent to
the formation of nation-states. The idea of the political community as a
national political order has been central to European self-understanding,
and remains in the three sociological approaches discussed in this article.
Yet most European states were colonial and imperial states as much as
they were national states – and often prior to or alongside becoming
national states – and so the political community of the state was much
wider and more (and differently) stratified than is usually now acknowl-
dged. By locating migration as subsequent to nation-state formation,
migrants are themselves then located as newcomers with their stake within
that community regarded as different in relation to those accepted as native
to it (see Wimmer & Schiller, 2003). In this way, to the extent that migrants
are often racially marked, understandings of race and ethnicity become
associated with issues of their later distribution within a political community – as “minorities” – rather than an examination of their constitutive role in the formation of those communities. The essential “character” of these communities is argued to be formed independently of the processes by which migrants come to be connected to their places of new settlement. A more appropriate address would locate migrants within the broader systems of nation-state formation in the context of imperial states and colonial regimes and therefore to be understood as integral to such processes as opposed to being regarded as subsequent additions to them.

The turn to the global, as exemplified by the approaches under consideration here, is presented as a new development within sociology. However, as I have sought to demonstrate, these approaches simply perpetuate earlier analytical frameworks associated with understandings of the Eurocentered modern. Replacing the “modern” with the “global,” an increasingly contested sociological history is naturalized, enabling sociologists to sidestep the fundamental issue of the relationship between modernity and sociology. In this way, the global histories of colonial interconnections across, what are presented as, separate modernities continue to be effaced from both historical and analytical consideration. As a consequence, understandings of “global sociology” are seen to emerge through the accretion of “new” knowledge from different places with little consideration of the long-standing interconnections among the locations in which knowledges are constructed and produced. Nor is there recognition that global sociology would require sociology itself to be re-thought backward, in terms of how its core categories have been constituted in the context of particular historical narratives, as well as forwards in terms of the further implications of its reconstruction. A postcolonial approach to historical sociology, in contrast, requires address of histories of colonialism and empire in the configuration of understandings of the global. What is in prospect, is not an embrace of relativism, but a recognition that a truly global sociology with universal claims will derive from reconstructing present understandings in the light of new knowledge of the past and the present.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to John Holmwood, Ipek Demir, and Vicky Margree for comments and suggestions on this article. Any errors that remain are mine.
NOTES

1. For discussion of sociology’s engagement with issues of empire and colonialism, see Magubane (2005) and Go (2009).
2. The arguments of this section are developed in more detail in Bhambra (2007a).
3. In this context, it is significant that Latour’s (1993) challenge to the idea of modernity – that we have never been modern – is itself conducted from an “anthropological” perspective, asserting both difference and the lack of fundamental difference between the modern and what preceded it. However, in his elaboration of extended networks in the construction of social phenomena, Latour, himself, does not go beyond the West.
4. For further elaboration of the arguments in this section, see Bhambra (2007a, pp. 56–79).
5. Some of the arguments in this section are further elaborated in Bhambra (2011b).

REFERENCES


