Within, beyond or against the canon: What does it mean to decolonize social and political theory?

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Abstract
Increasing calls to decolonize the university brought forward by student-led movements have raised the question regarding how to reassess the canon of European social and political thought. This article offers a critical but appreciative reading of Gurminder Bhambra’s and John Holmwood’s Colonialism and Modern Social Theory, based on the first chapter titled “Hobbes to Hegel: Europe and Its Others.” It discusses the strategies of intervention into the canon proposed by the authors and argues for complementary strategies of transformation if decolonizing the canon means to move beyond the myths, metaphors, fictions, and false universals of modern European thought.

Keywords
Canon, decolonization, empire, modernity, political theory

Sailing the Caribbean Sea in the age of Enlightenment and revolution, one of the main characters of Alejo Carpentier’s Explosion in a Cathedral, a young Cuban named Esteban, finds himself thrown into a world of contradictions. Confronted with a quotation from the decree of the National Convention of 1794 abolishing slavery in all French colonies, the captain of a slave ship replies: “We live in an illogical world. Before the Revolution a slave trader sailed these seas, owned by a philosophe and a friend of Jean-Jacques. And do you know what she was called? The Contrat social” (Carpentier, 1963: 189). Carpentier’s novel anticipates what has lately become the object of academic enquiry and scholarly debate: how can we, as social and political theorists, make sense of the intimate relationship between reason, colonialism and racial capitalism? How do we deal with the fact that philosophers from the early Enlightenment onward developed...
universal conceptions of freedom, equality, and rights while justifying the colonial appropriation of Indigenous lands and the dehumanization of people of African descent, sometimes even being personally invested in colonization and enslavement? Is this a paradox, an inconsistency between theory and practice, a discrepancy between ideal theory and non-ideal conditions? Or are these the constitutive and complementary dimensions of political modernity that cannot easily be dissociated from one another? If the latter is the case, how can we find more complex and adequate ways to confront the colonially contaminated canon of modern social and political theory?

Contaminated landscapes: The canon and its colonial unconscious

These questions belong not only to a colonial past. They reverberate well into our present, as can be seen in the ongoing debates, political as well as theoretical, over restitution, reparation, redress for historical injustices and multidirectional memory. Berlin, currently labeling itself the “city of knowledge” in a public relations campaign launched by its mayor and senate, is a case in point, with the Humboldt Forum as an unapologetic resurrection of a glorious past, a revival of colonial fantasies of collecting, knowing, and dominating the world. The intricate connection between research and a largely disavowed colonial history also came to light on the campus of Freie Universität Berlin, which the archeologist Susan Pollock describes as a “contaminated landscape” (Buchholz, 2021). During construction work in 2014, more than 16,000 bone fragments were found on the premises of the former anthropological institute. The institute, which engaged in eugenics and racial research between 1927 and 1945, housed medical and ethnological collections of colonial provenance. It also received bodies and eyes from Auschwitz. It is assumed that the human remains are those of 107 persons of Jewish and Romani descent as well members of colonized peoples. The excavations exposed how the “colonial unconscious” (Traverso, 2016: 174) haunts German universities. Today, the Otto Suhr Institute of Political Science resides on these premises. How can the institute as the place of political and social theorizing that is literally built on a contaminated landscape deal with this material and its epistemic legacy in a post-National Socialist as well as a postcolonial present? Is it possible to turn the colonial unconscious into an object of self-critique without at the same taking postcolonial critique seriously?

Against this backdrop, Bhambra and Holmwood’s (2021) impressive account Colonialism and Modern Social Theory could scarcely be more timely. As a “postcolonial intervention” into “modern social theory in its canonical form” (Bhambra and Holmwood, 2021: 15), it addresses the pressing questions outlined above while framing them in the larger context of student-led movements for the decolonization of the university and its curriculum. Taking into consideration the banalization of German colonialism and the general absence of postcolonial studies as an institutionalized academic field, Bhambra and Holmwood’s (2021) questions resonate all the more in German academia: “What does it mean to ‘decolonize’ a curriculum in which colonialism is not recognized?” (p. 209) In a moment when decolonization is increasingly commodified as a “marketing slogan” (Bhambra and Holmwood, 2021: 209) in the neoliberal university
of the Global North, the epicenter of Western and Eurocentric epistemologies, the book fleshes out what it means to decolonize the canon beyond a mere metaphorical reference to decolonization (see, Tuck and Wayne Yang, 2012). This is an uncomfortable and unsettling task if we understand epistemic decolonization as a method that not only reveals the “dark side” of modernity, but also confronts the contamination of the canon of European thought itself by this dark side (Bhambra and Holmwood, 2021: 214). In what follows, I will first highlight what can be gained by following the authors’ proposed project of a critical intervention into the canon by focusing on their readings of early liberal thought, the Scottish Enlightenment and German Idealism. In the next step, I will discuss the transformative potential of their reconstructive method in its relation to an immanent critique. I will conclude with some thoughts on the role of the canon in what can be understood as the unfinished project of decolonization (Maldonado-Torres, 2017: 118).

**Intervening into the canon: Europe and its Other from Hobbes to Hegel**

In his influential *Modernity. An Unfinished Project*, Habermas (1990) maps the emergence of political modernity in the wake of three major Western European events: the Renaissance, the French Revolution, and the colonization of the world. Colonialism and postcoloniality, however, continue to remain on the margins of political theory, the subdiscipline of political science in which I received my training. *Colonialism and Modern Social Theory* makes an important push toward filling this lacuna by setting the scene for a critical engagement with the canon of European thought that is attentive to colonialism. First, Bhambra and Holmwood start from the premise that colonialism has not only given rise to modernity but has also been constitutively inscribed in the central concepts of those thinkers from whose works the canon has been constructed. Second, they render plausible the notion that colonialism has been effaced only retroactively in the process of interpreting and canonizing the classics, with the effect that the theories in question have been “expurgated” from their colonial subtext (Bhambra and Holmwood, 2021: 210). Third, against the commonly held assumption that postcolonial critique collapses the Enlightenment with colonialism per se and thus dismisses the canon as a whole, the authors follow a more productive strategy. They offer a rigorous reconstruction of the way colonialism has entered, enabled and affected European thought by methodologically placing the key thinkers in their historical context, of which colonialism is a central dimension. Fourth, they convincingly argue that this intervention into the canon does not only provide a more adequate picture of the history of ideas. In as much as the “failure to account for the centrality of colonialism and empire within the modern world” (Bhambra and Holmwood, 2021: viii) results in a theoretical weakness and the inability of social sciences to present cogent analyses of current social and political phenomena, intervention into the canon is a task for the present. It allows for a fuller understanding of current problems in the United States and Western Europe—those subsumed under rubrics such as the “crisis of democracy,” the “migration crisis” or the supposed “failure of multiculturalism”—in light of how
colonialism in its unacknowledged continuities “haunts everyday life in the self-defined centres of modernity” (Bhambra and Holmwood, 2021: vii).

In the first chapter, Bhambra and Holmwood reach back to the forefathers as well as to the foundational fictions of modern European social and political thought. Reading Thomas Hobbes and John Locke as the central figures of contractualism in the Anglophone world through the lens of the early phase of colonialism, they shed light on the colonial entanglements of political liberalism that are often neglected vis-à-vis its connection with civil war, religious conflicts and the formation of early capitalism within Western Europe. In contrast, Bhambra and Holmwood situate the contractualists in an enlarged geography that reaches over the Atlantic to encompass Europe’s colonial grab for the Americas. In doing so, they present a systematic account of how Europe’s violent encounter with its colonized Other is inextricably inscribed into political liberalism as an ideology that sought to overcome traditional forms and justifications of political authority in the name of individual liberty, the sanctity of private property and the rule of law.

Going deeper into the classical texts, the authors trace how at first sight progressive ideas—such as the state of nature—turn into normative justifications of political authority to conquest and the appropriation of purportedly unsettled land, based on colonial misrepresentations of Indigenous societies in the Americas (Bhambra and Holmwood, 2021: 30). What is more, Locke’s conceptualization of a right to private property not only included but even encouraged the appropriation of land. As a right to self-possession of the reasonable and self-determined subject, it applied neither to Indigenous people whose lands could be dispossessed nor to people of African descent who could be enslaved and exploited by reason of having supposedly remained in state of nature. Bhambra and Holmwood’s (2021) reconstruction of Locke’s conception of individual freedom powerfully situates it at the two ends of colonial modernity in both his legitimization of colonial dispossession and enslavement as well as his justification of the punishment of unpropertied and impoverished subjects in England (p. 34). This is one of the precious moments where the authors’ reading of the classics illuminates our understanding of the colonial present by allowing for a more complex and nuanced analysis of contemporary forms of criminalization, policing, and incarceration in the liberal (i.e. the capitalist and property-owning) democracies of the West. A particularly compelling argument is that the metaphor of slavery, which serves as the background for the idea of freedom in social contract theories, reverberates as the fiction of free waged labor in the classics to this day.

Although Karl Marx acknowledged the enormous role of racialised enslavement for capital accumulation to a much greater extent than his interpreters, it is true that European social theory has placed modern enslavement “outside the theoretical framework,” primarily due to an uncritical attachment to the modern notion of freedom and due to the failure to theorize race as one of the most significant inventions and structures of modernity (Bhambra and Holmwood, 2021: 46). By contrast, the fact that racial difference was exploited for unfree labor in regimes of enslavement and other forms of unwaged labor, which formed an integral part of modern capitalism and existed hand in hand with regimes of wage labor, was fully elaborated by key thinkers in the Black Radical Tradition, most notably in Cedric J. Robinson’s notion of racial capitalism.

This tour d’horizon of the history of political ideas is illuminating, inspiring, and even eye-opening in providing a new angle on the familiar faces of the early
Enlightenment. As convinced as I am by the importance of this intervention, I would like to raise two points for reflection and clarification. First, I wonder how the picture would change if we were to widen its geographical focus beyond the corpus of Anglophone liberalism to take in the Iberian Peninsula and metropolitan France with their humanist and republican traditions of thought. A juxtaposition of Hobbes and Locke with the thinkers of the School of Salamanca could be instructive with a view to highlighting the ambivalences and ambiguities of the philosophical treatments of the legitimacy of conquest that accompanied the early colonization of the Americas. I am thinking particularly of Francisco de Vitoria, the theologian and jurist considered one of the founding figures of modern international law, who in his lecture *De indis* (1539) recognizes both the humanity as well as the political organization of Indigenous societies against a notion of the state of nature and against the common sense of his time. Even if Vitoria’s universalist rationale in the name of natural law comes to the conclusion that the colonial subjection of the Indigenous is justified, giving room to the tensions and contradictions within the text could provide a more sophisticated account of the colonial unconscious in these first philosophical treatments of the colonial encounter. Similarly, reading Francophone philosophers from Michel de Montaigne to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose romantic misrepresentations of the Indigenous societies of the Americas as “noble savages” are no less problematic than Hobbes’ and Locke’s negative ones, might raise different questions regarding the possibility of critique: why does Europe need the representation of the colonized Other in the first place—not only in terms of a justification for domination and exploitation, but also for its self-understanding, self-consciousness, and self-constitution?

My second point is related and refers to the possibility of a critical reconstruction. Are these philosophies no more than covert agendas, with the will to colonize hidden in plain sight? While the chapter acknowledges that early liberal political theory overturns traditional and patriarchal justifications of political authority by following the doctrine of natural law (Bhambra and Holmwood, 2021: 27), I wonder how Bhambra and Holmwood’s reconstruction assesses this emancipatory impulse. If we follow Sylvia Wynter in her reading of early European humanism as an intellectual revolution that both engendered the emancipation from traditional knowledge and authority while inscribing the human with racial difference and thereby dehumanizing the colonial Other, the crucial point becomes the question how, if at all, the emancipatory impulse of early modern European thought can be retained without reproducing “the coloniality of being/power/truth/freedom” (Wynter, 2003). The work of Charles W. Mills (1999) is particularly important here. While his seminal *Racial Contract* exposes the colonial and racialised dimensions of political liberalism, his late notion of a “black radical liberalism” (Mills, 2017) as a corrective to an anti-universalist and anti-egalitarian white liberalism offers a critical reconstruction of the emancipatory promises of liberalism, universalism, and egalitarianism without the invention and reproduction of subject positions deemed as “subpersons.” I wonder if Bhambra and Holmwood see a potential for this kind of critical reconstruction in the writings of Hobbes and Locke.

I would like to expand on this point in light of their engagement with Hegel’s philosophy as the climax of a theory of stadial progress, revolving around the *Weltgeist* as an ideal type of “white mythology” (Derrida, 1974). Bringing together different aspects of
Hegel’s philosophy, which are mostly treated separately, they show that it is the very notion of universal history and the incorporation of the colonial Other into a universal ontology that opens the door for a Eurocentric philosophy of history. Exposing Hegel’s undoubtedly racist assumptions, we are once again confronted with the question of what to do with his thought. Is it possible or even desirable to dismiss Hegel if, following Spivak (1999), “our sense of critique is too thoroughly determined by Kant, Hegel, and Marx for us to be able to reject them as ‘motivated imperialists’” (pp. 6–7)? Acknowledging their complicity with the colonial project, Spivak’s (1999) “deconstructive politics of reading” of the great European philosophers interprets them in a way to “see if the magisterial texts can now be our servants” (pp. 6–7). I wonder how Bhambra and Holmwood would situate their reconstructive reading of Hegel’s philosophy in relation to Spivak’s deconstructive reading. Does it entail the possibility to “critique it from within, to turn it away from itself” (Spivak, 1999: 49) in order to make it productive for anti- or postcolonial thought—in the manner, perhaps, of Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*?

This question is of particular relevance as philosophy in its institutionalized form still shields itself from postcolonial critique, expelling colonialism from the realm of pure reason as a “merely empirical” phenomenon. The missing reception of the connection between Hegel and Haiti (Buck-Morss, 2000) has confirmed this politics of immunization, which has been accompanied by a deeply problematic and racialised politics of citation: the important work of the philosopher Pierre Franklin Tavares (1990) was erased in an instance of white philosophers who neither cite beyond the “color line,” as Bhambra and Holmwood (2021: 23) importantly point out, nor give credit to black philosophers’ thoughts. As Hegel scholars who are committed to postcolonial and Black critique begin to engage in the debate on Hegel’s colonial and racist dimensions, particularly in the recent work of James and Knappik (2022), Bhambra and Holmwood’s thoughts on these questions would surely be of interest.

**Transforming the canon: Within, beyond or against the canon?**

The idea of modernity as an unfinished project which is inextricably linked to European colonialism’s civilizing mission is one of the foundational fictions of European social and political thought (Bhambra and Holmwood, 2021: 212). If we take seriously Bhambra and Holmwood’s exposure of the fictions and myths of European thought, which I would strongly support, what role can and should the classics play in social and political theory today? How does a reconstructive reading that is attentive to colonialism change the repertoire of sociology and political science and the way we refer to and teach the canon? While I find Bhambra and Holmwood’s method for decolonizing the canon much more intriguing than Mignolo and Walsh’s (2018: 453) project of delinking from European modern social theory and shifting toward non-Western epistemologies supposedly uncontaminated by colonialism, some questions remain to be clarified. If the authors understand their project as transformative, I find myself wondering about its practical implications: as social and political theorists, why, how and where should we transform the canon? To be more precise, why should we keep the canon intact if the aim is a transformation through a dialog with different genealogies of social and political thought?
I would like to highlight one aspect of Bhambra and Holmwood’s reconstructive method that seems to me to be of central importance for their project and which I take to extend beyond the self-sustaining project of an immanent critique. Rather than adhering to the canon, their critical engagement with the canon, as I read it, is informed by a plurality of voices that cannot easily be attributed to the canon of European thought. It is this rather hidden dialog with Indigenous Critique, Black Critical Thought, anticolonial and postcolonial theories as the critical repertoire that allows the authors to expose and confront the canon’s colonial unconscious. When Bhambra and Holmwood (2021) argue for a “transformation of our own perspectives as a result of learning from Others” and for “learning through dialog with those represented as ‘Other’” (p. 214), I take it that this dialogic approach has to include authors as well as concepts from the manifold anticolonial and antiracist movements against European dominance. I would argue that taking this dialogic approach further alters the canon fundamentally. Following Dussel’s (2013) “counter-discourse of modernity,” we would have to teach the Quechua philosopher Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala as a critical intervention into the discourse of modernity from the position of radical alterity. We would have to retrace how the writings of Anton Wilhelm Amo, the Black philosopher in the early German-language Enlightenment, have been violently erased from the archive of European thought and how his critique of enslavement from the position of an enslaved person fundamentally changes the terms of the debate when juxtaposed with the political thought of Hobbes and Locke, who happened to be shareholders in colonial trade companies (Ette, 2014). Bringing in these voices who have been represented as the Other of universal reason will transform the canon significantly. They confront the canon from within, but also move beyond and sometimes bear witness against it. If we follow Bhambra and Holmwood to their conclusion, the failure and weakness of European thought cannot be repaired and redressed if we stay within what counts as the canon. If we understand canonization as a historically recent phenomenon that invented a tradition of thought only after World War II—as Bhambra and Holmwood elucidate with regard to sociology and Sanjay Seth (2021: 181) for political theory—why should we subscribe to this canon instead of creating a new one and eventually moving beyond the idea of a canon altogether? If decolonizing social and political theory means interrogating academic conventions, epistemological and methodological assumptions, and disciplinary practices in order to move beyond myths and metaphors, fictions, and false universals (Bhambra and Holmwood, 2021: 214), should we not rethink the canon and the idea of a canon altogether? By encouraging these questions, Colonialism and Modern Social Theory has made itself indispensable to any introduction to European social and political thought.

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