Refining Colonialism and Modernity: An Endeavour through Sociology and Literature

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In a recent interview on the occasion of the publication of his edited volume, Colonialism, Modernity and Literature: A View from India, Satya P. Mohanty made the following statement: “Read through the lens of alternative modernities, literary texts open up new historical archives and suggest tantalising perspectives on a past we thought we knew well“ (2012: 91). With this, Mohanty aligns the political project of the volume with the “alternative modernities” literature, exemplified by the work of Dilip Gaonkar, “to trace the provenance of such [modern] values and ideas in ... non-European contexts and to examine the alternative institutions and cultural forms that supported them“ (2011: 3). Further, Mohanty makes a strong case for the novel to be understood as a form of social theory and political engagement where its political relevance concerns both past and present. Through the process of literary analysis, the essays in the volume discuss and reframe the generally accepted understandings of the relationship between colonialism and modernity and make a powerful contribution to rethinking modernity in the light of experiences other than those of Western subjects. In this piece, I take up their provocation to think this relationship differently and to examine the implications of this for standard sociological understandings of modernity and colonialism. As a historical sociologist long concerned with the debates around modernity, multiple modernities, and alternative modernities (Bhambra 2007), I am interested also in thinking through the particular role that literature may have to play in these reconceptualisations.

The relationship between colonialism and modernity is a contested one. The standard interpretation is that colonialism is the vehicle that brings modern values and institutions to the colonised world. Indeed, historians such as Niall Ferguson (2004) continue to promote the idea that Britain not only “made“ the modern world, but has no reason to apologise for the world that was made. Others, such as William McNeill, reinforce such sentiments by suggesting that we must “admire those who pioneered the [modern] enterprise and treat the human adventure on earth as an amazing success story, despite all the suffering entailed“ (1990: 3, my emphasis). Questions consisting of who this “we“ and whether “we“ must celebrate the successes (of some) despite the suffering (of others) form the nub of postcolonial, and other, criticisms. As Nandy (1987) argues, there is continuity between not being recognized as a subject in historical narratives, and subjection in the present. Indeed, the importance of rectifying silences in scholarly and mainstream historical narratives is related to the rectification of injustices in the present. The use of literature is both an important aspect of recovering silenced voices and important in its own terms as the articulation of new voices. From this
perspective, what is required is an account of the production of particular silences, how (and where) those silenced histories and stories have been remembered, and the conversion of these processes into a politics for the present – concerns foreign to Ferguson and McNeill.

As Mohanty argues in the Introduction, the pre-colonised world is typically represented as the repository of all that is traditional and the colonised world – either in positive or negative terms – is seen to embody (or have the potential to come to embody) the modern. The basic assumption, he continues, is that the world that “colonialism replaced or destroyed belongs to the irretrievable past and is irrelevant for our [modern] purposes“ (2011: 2). Further, the focus in much of the standard historical and sociological literature has primarily been on the presumed unidirectional nature of the relationship whereby colonial powers take “modernity” – as expressed in the modern institutions of the state, market-economy and bureaucracy – to the colonised. The evidentiary base, together with the normative presuppositions, of such claims (and many more) have been seriously called into questions by historians, sociologists, anthropologists and others over the last few decades. This has been in large part as a consequence of increasingly available research from around the globe that contests and contradicts many complacent assumptions about the origin, nature, and spread of what we have come to understand as modernity. There has also been significant research addressing the multitude of ways in which the modern was created in the colonial context – the work of Cohen and Dirks (1988) for example, details the invention of fingerprinting and other modes of governmentality within the colonies before being imported “back“ to the metropole.

The claims that Mohanty and the other essayists are making, however, go beyond these arguments while also contributing to and building on them. The essays in the volume seek to demonstrate how values that have come to be seen as intimately tied to the emergence of a specific form of capitalist modernity in the West were also articulated in other geographic and historical contexts – that is, in geographic and historical contexts independent of European contact. While recent scholarship on sociological understandings of modernity has also begun to counter the dominant view that it originated in Europe and then was disseminated around the globe, it still often maintains a Eurocentred account of its initial emergence. The dominant view of the 1960s defined by modernization theory was superseded at the end of the twentieth century by that of multiple modernities, and this itself is beginning to give way to postcolonial and decolonial understandings of modernity, understandings that seek to establish the different sources and roots of a variety of what are understood to be indigenous modernities. The shift to the conceptual language of alternative modernities, then, reflects unease with the idea of a singular, uniform trajectory applied to the current diversity of contemporary societies as well as a concern to recover silenced histories from other places.
pertaining to the modern. Mohanty’s edited volume is a significant contribution to this endeavour.

To take one example from the volume: the emergence of the modern subject, both in literature and in history, is the focus of Tilottoma Misra’s problematising of the easy association of modernity with the notion of being progressive and tradition with being retrogressive. She contests the idea that a modern historical consciousness within India was something that came in the wake of British colonialism and argues instead that elements of modernity were present in precolonial Assamese literature and that these elements remained providing a crucial alternate locus for thinking and acting during the colonial period (2011: 115). Misra elaborates on this thesis by examining two literary texts from Orissa and Assam, discussing the different modes of social criticism used within them in their contestation of colonialism. Other chapters within the volume also develop the theme of elaborating an ‘indigenous’ modernity as distinct from the colonial variety more usually discussed. While such critiques are becoming more pronounced, they were not previously absent. They are to be found in the literary endeavours of 19th century Indian writers such as Senapati, Barua, and Apparao, as detailed in the volume under discussion, and were then also to be found in subsequent social scientific discourses.

In the early- to mid-twentieth century, debates on the need to differentiate “indigenous” knowledge production from colonial hegemonic discourses were unsurprisingly linked to wider movements for decolonisation and liberation. The Lucknow School of Economics and Sociology, for example, founded in the 1920s under the leadership of Radhakamal Mukerjee and D P Mukerji, sought to engender “a spirit of self-reliance“ and creativity through the medium of social science that would dovetail with what others such as Tagore were doing in the realm of culture, or Gandhi in the realm of politics, as part of the overarching project for national liberation (Joshi 1986: 1456). They critiqued the use of colonial approaches and concepts to understand social and political issues in India and, instead, argued for the development of “an alternative approach or model which corresponds to Asian conditions as well as traditions“ (Joshi 1986: 1460). They believed that attempts to understand India through “Eurocentric concepts derived from the pre-industrial stage of European socio-economic evolution“ were not only inadequate to the task at hand, but had also had disastrous consequences in the operationalisation of policy based on such understandings (Joshi 1986: 1464). What was needed, as Mukerjee argued in 1922, was to recover alternative values from the history of Indian civilisation that would enable the reconstruction of conceptual frameworks adequate to the reality of contemporary Indian society (Joshi 1986; see also Patel 2010). Mukerjee argued against the “the narrow sectional view of human history which ignores the lives and life-values, the experiences of more than half of the human race“ and strongly urged recognition
of the “social constructions and organisations [of the Asiatic peoples] which are in essence not less real and significant than the Graeco-Romano-Gothic consciousness with its works and experiences” (quoted in Joshi 1986: 1460).

This call for intellectual independence and the development of alternatives has found echoes through the decades and across national and disciplinary boundaries. It is now time for these echoes to become a clarion call for a transformation of knowledge (and its production). Rethinking the relationship between colonialism and modernity through the expanded archives discussed in this article requires us to call into question the legitimacy and validity of the previously accepted parameters of knowledge. It is not sufficient simply to add this new knowledge to standard interpretations, stir, and continue as normal, as Trouillot (1995) warns; rather, the new knowledge should provoke us to rethink and transform our existing understandings to make better sense of this new data. Mohanty’s work, broadly, and specifically in the edited volume discussed here, is particularly pertinent in this aspect of knowing the world and, in knowing the world, seeking to reshape our understandings of it. The intent of his realist and cognitivist project within literature is profound and in its interdisciplinary ambition has the potential for transforming standard sociological understandings of the modern and the relationship of colonialism to the same.

References


