then at least at life. We might be especially able to live if we could recognize the logic of the system that emerges, and not only applaud the virtuous resisting the spaces of the expelled.

Sassen focuses on the deep structure generating expulsions across different spheres and places of our world. Her account, like many that get to deep structures, could be powerfully dispiriting, but I do not believe that is a necessary outcome. It is, however, a rallying call to craft a different intellectual and institutional responsibility, one that works across knowledge cultures to find connections in order to develop a praxis dedicated to the extension of survival. And here, we cannot rely on those expelled from the system to save us. Those not yet beyond that system need to find the path back to an incorporation of people and biosphere into our systemic logic. Otherwise the “generalization of extreme conditions” (p. 29) that began on the edge will consume us all.

Beyond the Nation State and the Comparative Method? Decolonizing the Sociological Imagination

George Steinmetz’ edited volume, Sociology and Empire: The Imperial Entanglements of a Discipline, is a massive tome. Six hundred and ten pages with seventeen chapters, it really amounts to three very satisfying books in one, each of which takes on the question of sociology’s imperial “entanglements” in a different way. If the book simply consisted of Parts II and III, Current Sociological Theories of Empire and Historical Studies of Colonialism and Empire, it would be fairly uncontroversial: an insightful addition to a growing list of studies being done under the general umbrella of “sociology of globalization” or “transnational and global sociology.” The book’s contributors aim to go far beyond simply providing additional theoretical accounts of colonial and imperial social formations and processes, however. Their mission is to arrive at something much more profound and potentially destabilizing for the discipline as a whole. The authors’ reflections on the “latent and manifest colonial assumptions and imperial ideologies informing current sociological theory and research” are undertaken with the aim of fundamentally altering sociology’s current theoretical, methodological, and conceptual apparatus (p. xi). Therein lies the immense value of this edited collection.

The stage is set for this in Part I: National Sociological Fields and The Study of Empire.

References


This section, made up of five chapters, examines the historical development of sociology in Russia, the United States, Italy, Germany, and France. These essays question how we think about the relationship between social context (in this case the imperial context) and the content of sociological work. Since at least the 1950s, historians of sociology have been trying to understand the social origins of sociology, its objects of study, and its legitimate research practices. Having never developed a grand, overarching theory of social processes and having an unwieldy and ill-defined object of study (“society”), we sociologists have relied, perhaps more heavily than other disciplines, on constructing a history of who we were and where we have been in order to tell us who we are and where we are going. Attempts at writing (and rewriting) the history of sociology have been motivated by a desire to secure “the discipline’s grasp of its own past and trajectory” (Calhoun 2007:x). Practitioners of what Turner and Turner (1990) call the “impossible science” have used this shared view of their history to overcome our lack of a common theoretical and methodological ground, the fuzziness of our boundaries with other disciplines, the questionable relationship of “general sociology” to its subfields, and the status of sociology as the “undefined residual category in the social sciences” (Turner and Turner 1990:23). That shared view of our history, the authors of a number of essays in this volume point out, has until now tended to “elide sociology’s imperial orientation” (p. 101). In making clear the “depth to which sociological thought has been shaped by its location in empire,” these histories of sociology’s development in the various metropoles demonstrate how urgent the need is for us to revisit and question our core beliefs about the abstract universality of our foundational terms and concepts (p. 490).

One thing sociologists have been able to agree upon is that our intellectual task has been to “establish parameters for defining modernity both spatially and temporally” (Bhambra 2007:3). The foundational myth that has been our foundation story’s conjoined twin is the myth of the “European miracle” or the idea that “the economic and social modernization of Europe is fundamentally a result of Europe’s internal qualities, not of interaction with the societies of Africa, Asia, and America after 1492” (Blaut 1993:3). The idea that modernity developed endogenously in Europe is a critical, if rarely acknowledged, part of sociology’s conceptual architecture. The comparative method requires and assumes the analytical bifurcation of distinct domains—the “inside” and “outside” of nations; the “nation-state” and “empire”; the “domestic” and the “foreign” (Go 2013). The opening chapters constitute a profound challenge to received sociological wisdom because they show that “European/American modernity” was, in many ways, a product of “events, processes, and structures in the peripheries” (p. 2). Andrew Zimmerman’s essay on Max Weber, for example, demonstrates how Weber’s comparative studies of the economic ethics of Protestantism, Confucianism, Hinduism, and Islam, which attributed the failure of most regions of the world to achieve the rational, capitalist, economies of Protestant civilizations to a “cultural explanation of economic behavior,” elided Germany’s imperial entanglements (p. 181). Weber’s argument that the “Protestant Ethic” was the motive force behind the development of rational capitalism in the West can only cohere if the existence of Germany’s overseas empire in tropical Africa and lead role played by Germany in promoting the “internal colonization” of Prussia are ignored. Only through the analytical bifurcation of “East” and “West” can we compare the development of “the East” with “the West” (and find “the East” lacking) without acknowledging the dependence of “the West” on “the East” for its own development.

Saskia Sassen has made the point that sociology needs a “new conceptual architecture” that will help scholars to understand “the structurations of the global inside the national” (pp. 3–4). A key assumption in the social sciences has been that there is a correspondence between national territory, national institutions and the national, “i.e., if a process or condition is located in a national institution or in a national territory it must be national” (Sassen 2010:4). The seven essays that make up the volume’s penultimate section, Historical Studies of Colonialism and Empire, make it clear that
sociologists’ conceptual reliance on the nation state as a “naturalized unit of analysis, understood as a container of social processes” has never been particularly tenable (p. x). These empirical studies seek alternatives to the “analytic closure” that the abstraction “the nation” once provided (Sassen 2010:3). Besnik Pula’s essay, “Urban Planning in the Colonial Cities of Italy’s Fascist Empire” is one example of how to challenge “nation centered” ways of viewing the world. Pula demonstrates that urban planners and architects in Italy “saw in colonial empire the opportunity to demonstrate the social utility and transformative capabilities of their trade” (p. 390). In other words, the development of “national” traditions in architecture and urban planning could only be fully realized in the context of transnational engagements.

The chapters that make up Part III show the extent to which “Western” modernity is a product of what Bhambra (2013:296) calls “the colonial global.” Essays on topics like “Nation and Empire in the French Context” and “State Formation in British Malaya and the American Philippines” not only explode the myth of Europe and America’s endogenous development, they also throw into question the continued efficacy of theoretical and methodological apparatuses that have, until quite recently, un-problematically accepted this notion. Daniel Goh aptly sums up exactly what is at stake for all sociologists, not just sociologists of empire, when he explains why neo-Weberians have “carefully avoided the question of colonial state formation.” The comparison of empires, he explains, “poses theoretical problems, since they involved a complex jostling of states, institutions, and social groups that defies the state-society framework. The comparison of colonial states also poses methodological issues, since these involved the extension of metropolitan sovereignty into colonial territories through subsidiary state [sic], thereby complicating the independence of the neo-Weberian unit of analysis” (p. 465).

Once sociology’s “imperial entanglements” have been un-masked and the “Pandora’s box” of new analytical possibilities has been opened, the question of what this means for the discipline as a whole still remains. Do we finally abandon our quest for “grand theory”? Should we do away with the comparative method given its theoretical and methodological utility in displacing “imperial power over the colonized into an abstract space of difference” (Connell 1997:1530)? The four chapters that make up Part II, Current Sociological Theories of Empire, engage specific empirical questions such as the rise of a new security empire post-9/11 (Kim Scheppele) or China’s imperial thrust into Africa (Albert Bergensen) in ways that seek to avoid the theoretical and methodological traps of previous studies. The purpose of the chapters is not to construct a singular, overarching “grand theory” of empire, however. The essays are more in keeping with Merton’s idea of “middle range” theories, which recognize that any attempt to generate sociological generalizations must account for the fact that all complex systems are also historically variable systems. Michael Mann’s essay, which asks whether the “recent intensification of American economic and military imperialism” are connected or not, concludes that “societies are not systems and states are not cohesive. In fact, they are both a bit of a mess, full of contradictions, muddles, mistakes.” This is not to deny that societies have enduring and powerful social structures. Rather, it emphasizes the fact that “these are plural, with logics that are distinct” (p. 243). Bergensen speculates that we “may be entering a new twenty-first-century phase of neocolonial relations that are qualitatively different from what the world system has seen before” (p. 300). Although he cannot say for certain whether the evidence points to definitive proof of a new economic model or a “momentary instance” he nevertheless maintains that China’s pursuit of economic dominance in Africa via state-owned enterprises may mean that “historical development has outrun the scope of social theory” (p. 311). Scheppele’s essay on the “Terrorism and the New Security Empire After 9/11” likewise suggests that “empires are not what they used to be” (p. 244). Since empires are no longer “predictably universal” theories of empire must also seek to synthesize different schools of thought. “As we rethink this new security empire, we need to recall not just the
analyses of economic globalization but the lessons learned from postcolonial studies” (p. 252).

Sociology and Empire should be seen as an important intervention in a longstanding trend whereby sociologists have charted a new course for the future by rewriting the history of the past. As Gurminder Bhambra pointed out in her reflection on “The Possibilities of, and for, Global Sociology,” our only hope of being able to “understand and address the necessarily postcolonial (and decolonial) present of ‘global sociology’” lies in “reconstruct[ing] backwards” our “historical understandings of modernity and the emergence of sociology” (Bhambra 2013:296–297). For at least two decades sociologists have been worrying about their declining prestige in the academic marketplace. The questions that sociologists have been pondering relating to their “value” in the marketplace have now hit the social sciences and the humanities as a whole. At the same time, the world has grown ever more complex and interdependent and politicians and lay people alike ponder everything from terrorism to “post-racialism.” A century ago sociology emerged in the context of the “political difficulties” and contradictions created by the co-existence of imperialism and liberalism (Connell 1997:1530). Sociology’s theories and models of the world “offered a resolution” (ibid.). Today we find ourselves in a similar position. Sociology stands poised, once again, to provide a level of analysis desperately needed by policymakers and the educated public. As Steinmetz points out in his preface, “today we are confronting two crises that are often experienced as separate but are actually interwoven: ‘the crisis of the universities’ and the ‘crisis of empire’” (p. xiii). With the benefit of hindsight, such as provided by Parts I and III of Sociology and Empire, we can avoid making the mistakes we did in the past. The questions, problems, and theories for understanding the world today, such as provided in Part II, open up the exciting possibility that we can chart a different course for the future.

References

The Re-Appearance of Race and Ethnicity

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This book provides a compelling and comprehensive account of the boundary making approach as it relates to race and ethnicity. It asks and answers key sociological questions: Under what conditions do ethnic groups and communities emerge? When will individuals strongly identify with ethnic or racial categories? How and why are racial