



Conversations in postcolonial thought

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In many ways, *The Children of Immigrants at School* would have benefitted from the integration of an intercultural perspective rather than a more or less explicitly sustained preoccupation with 'successful' (assimilationist) integration into the prevailing sociocultural mainstream. Tellingly, however, the book's body text includes – on over 250 pages – no more than two mentions of the term 'intercultural' and not any real engagement with the prospects (and limitations) of intercultural educational programmes and initiatives at all. For a transatlantic comparative research project that claims to have studied various European educational systems and practices over a four-year-period, to virtually disregard the status of *intercultural education* on the 'Old Continent' cannot but leave the critical reader with a sense of bewildered astonishment.

In a similar vein, those familiar with major traditions in the sociology of education may find themselves wondering how a book that assembles compelling evidence on the (re)production of educational inequalities, that repeatedly identifies familial interventions as decisive factors, and which includes references to notions of cultural and social capital, manages to entirely ignore the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Then again, the incorporation of Bourdieu's insights would imply a willingness to unveil long-established (and often taken-for-granted) ideologies of assimilationist integration and to consider the possibility of a more radical challenge to unequal distributions of (symbolic) power – within and beyond fields of formal education.

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Conversations in postcolonial thought, edited by Katy P. Sian, New York, NY, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 218 pp., £57.50 (hardback), ISBN 978-1137465658

Postcolonial theory has emerged in the past few decades as one of the most promising fields of development to address the consequences of empire. Serving as a major intellectual trend in the disciplines of the humanities, anthropology, and history, just to name a few, postcolonial theory provides new avenues of discourse that seeks to legitimize not just the political and economic ramifications of colonization, but also the personal turmoil, and challenges to the cultural conditions, for those living in societies forced to accept the imposition of foreign values and structures. The consequences and depth of this discourse are far-reaching – transforming our understanding of the world from inside the colonized mind, to inside the walls of the metropole.

Katy Sian's *Conversations in Postcolonial Thought* very eloquently demonstrates the power of postcolonial discourse. Drawing from twelve interviews with leaders

in the field, the edited volume explores the different paths each scholar took in establishing their own unique and valuable contribution to postcolonial theory. Although not all of those interviewed self-identify as postcolonial theorists, their combined body of work highlights questions and concepts now almost indispensable to modern social thought. Sian's ability to bring together such a brilliant collection of thinkers reveals her broad knowledge of the field and ability to identify scholars and scholarship that people from all disciplines should take note of. Furthermore, her decision to focus on race brings to the fore a question that remains integral to all social structures, yet continues to, perhaps in perpetuity, evade clear answers.

What is most fascinating about this compilation is how such a diverse group of individuals can share very similar interests and influences. While many of the scholars interviewed found inspiration in Said, Spivak, and Fanon, many also were inspired by the works of Marx, Malcolm X, and the Black Power Movement in the USA. Perhaps these shared interests and influences may be explained by the fact that almost all of the scholars engaged in activism at an early age, and many of those interviewed could be considered minorities in their home countries.

For instance, Heidi Mirza's poignant story of institutional stigmatization through her school's assumption that she could not have passed her exams without cheating, and the social alienation of being mocked and insulted as a child, perhaps provide a deeper, more personal context to her significant contributions to black feminism. Sara Ahmed, too, shares her personal experiences of being identified as 'strange' or 'different' growing up as a biracial woman in Australia. She also reminds us that while the consequences of such experiences may not be immediate, upon reflection, these experiences of becoming estranged from where you are, or where you think you belong, have long-term effects on one's identity and political consciousness.

While I found the personal stories that shed light on these scholars' activism and scholarship intriguing, another important question this compilation asks is whether such activism and theory have been effective in bringing about change. S. Sayyid raises the important issue of decolonization in the social sciences. Perhaps relating back to Sian's concern that we are moving towards a neoliberal version of the world that purports to be 'post-racial', Sayyid highlights the fact that while Russell Group universities preach 'diversity-as-democracy', implementation of this principle into the core curriculum has yet to be seen. Mirza reminds us that in the UK there are only 85 black professors in contrast to 18,000 white professors, and that when she, as a person of colour, became head of her department, a faculty member responded with 'they are giving Chairs to anyone for anything these days' (138). Lastly, when Paul Gilroy was asked whether postcolonial/black thinking has been acknowledged in the social sciences, he very astutely replies, 'to make someone like Du Bois part of the history of sociology, you'd think people would be keen to do that, but they're not' (189).

Gilroy touches on an issue that I think the book could have explored further: the nature of academia and its ability to silence certain discourses. On *Their Ain't No Black in Union Jack*, Gilroy states, 'When I wrote that book, I didn't have a job – and didn't think I'd ever get one' (189). I wonder how many of the scholars in Sian's edited book had to compromise, change, fight, argue, and lose

against the white, male-dominated, Eurocentric academic institution? Personally, as a young scholar, I believe the hoops we have to jump through to prove our academic ability are different from what the scholars presented in Sian's book experienced. The academic market today only notices publications in peer-reviewed journals, 'reputable' university presses, while teaching heavy loads, and 'playing nice' with our well-established and well-connected colleagues severely limit what we say and how we say it. Ronit Lentin very directly addresses this issue by asking, '... when I look at young scholars, I wonder how many of them are doing the work or allowed to do the work' (173).

Another issue that I wish the book had grappled with more is the Eurocentricity of academia. Much of the scholarship cited in this volume talk about decolonization of the social sciences, yet none of the selected authors are based outside of the UK or USA. Jose Rizal and Ibn Khaldoun have significantly contributed to the transformation of Southeast Asia and the social sciences, respectively, and yet they seem to only be mentioned in passing, or completely ignored in postcolonial discourses (see Alatas and Sinha 2001, 316–331). While theories of whiteness seem to gain traction, other forms of privilege, such as 'Chinese privilege' in Singapore, should also be part of the conversation (see the works of Sangeetha Thanapal and Adeline Loi).

As the world grapples with the consequences of globalization, environmental degradation, 'We are the 99%', and Black Lives Matter movements, one wonders whether postcolonialism has lost relevance, or has more work to do. While Sian's compilation provides us with a thought-provoking look at where some of the most important and cutting-edge debates in postcolonial theory originate, and where they are going, I wonder how younger scholars, particularly those based outside of the increasingly competitive, and consequentially elitist, Eurocentric academe can partake in the postcolonial enterprise.

Reference

Alatas, Syed Farid, and Vineeta Sinha. Jul., 2001. "Teaching Classical Sociological Theory in Singapore: The Context of Eurocentrism." *Teaching Sociology* 29 (3): 316–331.

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Jewish-Israeli national identity and dissidence: the contradictions of Zionism and resistance, by Katie Attwell, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, pp. xii + 229, £65 (hardback), ISBN978-1-137-42901-8

The book opens up with a very pertinent question: 'what could possibly be left to say about a situation [the Israeli-Palestinian conflict] that has been analysed from