

# PLENARY

## GURMINDER K BHAMBRA

WEDNESDAY, 14 APRIL 2021  
16:00 - 16:40

### THE FICTIONS OF MODERN SOCIAL THEORY

The consolidation of modern social theory, in the writings of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, coincided with the height of European empires and global war between them. Yet, empire lay outside the purview of mainstream social theory except as a phenomenon associated with earlier historical periods and civilisations. Even in the work of Du Bois – a theorist excluded from the canon until recently – the issue of colonialism was not immediately evident, but something worked towards from an initial address of the seeming particularities of race relations in the US. As social theory developed into sociology in the mid-twentieth century, most European countries were confronted by anti-colonial movements and challenges to their global dominance. However, these challenges to the political structures of European modernity, similarly, seemed not to impinge on what sociology came to see as its 'jurisdiction' – namely, issues of class, gender, and sexuality. The issue is not simply to add colonialism to sociology's repertoire of topics, but to show how that repertoire must change and the concepts and methodologies with which it is associated be transformed. What does it mean to 'decolonise' a curriculum in which colonialism is unrecognised? My argument here is for a renewal of social theory and sociology, not their rejection. Central to this renewal is to recognise and address five fictions that currently organise the conceptual framework of modern social theory and sociology: the fiction of stages of social development; the fiction of modern subjectivity; the fiction of the nation-state; the fiction of class and formally free labour; and, finally, the fiction of sociological reason.

**Gurminder K Bhambra** is Professor of Postcolonial and Decolonial Studies in the School of Global Studies, University of Sussex and is a Fellow of the British Academy. She is author of the award-winning *Rethinking Modernity: Postcolonialism and the Sociological Imagination* (Palgrave, 2007), *Connected Sociologies* (Bloomsbury, 2014), and is co-editor of *Decolonising the University* (Pluto Press, 2018). She set up the *Global Social Theory* website, is co-editor of the social research magazine, *Discover Society*, and also directs the *Connected Sociologies Curriculum Project*.

