Snowflakes, Pseudo Science, Grievance Studies? Situating Critical Scholarship and Progressive Politics in the Context of Far-Right Ascendancy

Interviews with Akanksha Mehta, Gurminder K. Bhambra, and Alison Phipps

Interview 2/3: Gurminder K. Bhambra

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Progressive politics and critical scholarship are under attack. While this is neither new nor unusual, these attacks have reached a new pitch and intensity in the current context of the global rise of the (far) right. They target individual scholars, as seen in the public hounding of Judith Butler and Kimberlé Crenshaw, purge degree programmes from universities, as witnessed by the exiling of the Gender Studies MA from the Central European University, and seek to humiliate entire branches of scholarship by decrying them as 'constructivist sophistry', as the 'Grievance Studies' hoax article has done.

The charge raised against this scholarship – usually in gender, queer, post-colonial, and critical race studies – is that it is not 'proper' science. According to its critics, it lacks objectivity and rigour, fails to produce independently verifiable results, uses incomprehensible jargon, and is ultimately rooted in the subjective political commitments of its authors instead of 'simply' researching and theorizing social and political reality 'out there'.

This espousal of positivist principles of 'proper' science can also be found in reactionary scholarly efforts to re-appraise Empire. Prominent examples of this approach include the 'Ethics and Empire' project at Oxford University, as well as a 2018 article in Third World Quarterly. Both stake the validity of their undertaking on the objectivity of their approach and the universality of their methods, which proceed by 'test[ing] the critiques against the historical facts of empire' (Ethics and Empire) and using 'simple epistemic virtues' to conduct an 'objective cost/benefit analysis' of colonialism (TWQ).

What are the politics of knowledge at work in these confrontations? How should progressive, critical scholarship respond to charges of lack of scientific integrity and rigour? What kinds of politics of knowledge are necessary to produce scholarship that is both valid and emancipatory? I conducted interviews with three scholars in gender, critical race, and post-colonial studies who are actively involved in movements to decolonize the university and end sexual violence on campus: Dr Akanksha Mehta (Lecturer in Gender, Sexuality, and Cultural Studies and co-director of the Centre for Feminist Research at Goldsmiths), Prof Gurminder K. Bhambra (Professor of Postcolonial and Decolonial Studies at the University of Sussex), and Prof Alison Phipps (Professor of Gender Studies at the University of Sussex). The interviews were conducted separately in April 2019, and appear here in the order in which they took place.

The following interview with Gurminder K. Bhambra is the second of three interviews. The other interviews in this series can be found on the Sentio website.

L: There have been a number of projects in recent years that have sought to re-evaluate the history of empire, often mobilizing epistemic notions like universality and objectivity to make their claims. Could you discuss the role of historical fact and the empirical method in this context?

GKB: History is always for some purpose, or the writing of history is always for some purpose. So, if we know what that purpose is, that will also give us some measure by which to understand how valid and correct or accountable those histories are. I wouldn't wish to argue against notions of objectivity or of rigour or of method. I think those things are fundamentally important to how we develop our understandings across the social sciences, let alone about history itself. But then we also need to think about how that knowledge isn't produced in a vacuum. It's produced both in a context of histories that have gone before it and it's also produced in a context of other conversations that are happening. This means that the questions of legitimacy and the standards against which those narratives need to be judged are not just in terms of rigour in relation to evidence, but also in terms of other accounts that are being produced, which might call into question our central precepts. In that sense, people produce the history that they do, and to the extent that they're doing it in good faith, they produce what they hope to be accurate, adequate accounts. If somebody comes up and says, 'well you haven't taken this other aspect into consideration', then I think it's incumbent upon all of us as researchers to take those critiques seriously, and think about whether the narratives we're producing are able to account for the questions that are being raised.

L: I wanted to discuss the different ways in which grievance is discussed in the current moment – on the one hand, there is the 'Grievance Studies' hoax article, which situates it as something that is the property of a decadent and easily hurt science, whereas in your article 'Brexit, Trump, and "Methodological Whiteness"', grievance is something that is used to construct a legitimate object of racialized identity politics. Could you talk about this tension?

GKB: What I say in that piece is that the way in which some claims are argued to be legitimate, or some grievances are argued to be legitimate, is part of a broader politics that situates some people as legitimate in making grievances. So the issue is not about the grievance.

L: But how is this legitimacy produced? In your article, you argue that this legitimate subject of grievance is fabricated through shoddy methodology.

GKB: Well it's not the subject of grievance, it's the claim; and the claim is produced in a particular way, usually without sufficient attention to history. If people don't know their history, they don't know why society is configured in the way it is, and if they don't know that, then they assume particular ways in which it's supposed to be configured. If you imagine Britain to be a nation, and if you imagine it historically having been a nation, then it would be quite plausible to imagine it as always having been white. To think that that's what Britain is, to think that Britain historically was white, would be the legitimation for why it ought to be white in the present. But if you were to understand that Britain hasn't been a nation, and has, instead, always been an empire, therefore it's never been white, it's always been multicultural, then that claim to whiteness no longer has any historical legitimacy.

L: Would you say that we can draw a parallel with the construction of the social sciences? That their formation as colonial and imperialist disciplines has largely been forgotten, and for that reason they can more easily present themselves as universal sciences?

GKB: Disciplines emerge out of particular histories. If we don't understand the histories out of which the disciplines emerge, we think of them as universal. For me, having a historical understanding, in terms of being able to think better about how the present is configured, is central, and that is as much for the social sciences and disciplines as it is for societies, and other phenomena.

L: But then, why do you think it is so difficult to produce these counter-histories and have them accepted – specifically those that foreground colonial violences?

GKB: I don't think of them as counter-histories; these are shared, or connected, histories. But people often don't wish to account for the shared histories that produce the present because that would require a rethinking of politics that has thus far been based on disaggregated histories.

L: The interests, reasons, are to defend entrenched positions of power.

GKB: Richard Drayton wrote an article about this quite a few years ago, looking at the writing of the history of empire in Britain. One of the things that he discovered is that, at the point of writing, no white British historian of empire had made violence central to their narrative of empire. I think it's quite extraordinary that you have a whole tradition of history writing by white British historians which fails to recognize the constitutive aspect of violence in their accounts of empire. That, to me, points to a very particular political purpose that these histories serve, which is precisely to justify empire, to justify the past, and to justify present configurations of inequality in relation to that past. So, to challenge that, and to open up the writing of that history, on the basis of a different understanding, it isn't just another perspective, it would have material consequences.

L: Can you think of or identify instances in which either specific historians or movements of historical sociological scholarship have intervened in collective memories in a way to change them in the way that you are describing? I'm thinking of the case of German historical scholarship, which so massively foregrounds the genocidal violence of the Holocaust. But this, of course, has also been used to elevate the concept of what German statehood is now, as very much a reformed and repentant state.

GKB: I think that was useful in the sense that it worked to a certain degree; however, the consensus around this now seems to be breaking down. There are political parties saying, 'why should we apologize for this aspect of our history?' So, to the extent that there was a political commitment to repair what had happened, this allowed for an openness and the construction of an understanding of the past that produced positive social-democratic political possibilities. These are now under threat. We do also need to consider the general failure of scholars to address the genocide of the Herero and Nama people, which happened only forty years earlier. As such, there is a failure to broaden the scope by way of which we could understand the development of the state, and to think about how lives in other places matter as much lives in this place. Not necessarily in terms of comparing the events, but thinking about how they connect and relate.

L: I'm wondering about the potential for historical scholarship. In the German case, this was made possible through the end of one state and the beginning of another. In Britain, this state has been continuous. What is the potential for historical scholarship to intervene in collective consciousness without a break in the form of state?

GKB: Well, maybe Brexit produces such a break?

L: So there's a sense of optimism there.

GKB: Britain has never had to confront the end of empire because at the high point of decolonization, Britain ended up joining the European Economic Community, and so went from having been a global empire and Commonwealth to being part of another powerful transnational federation. Therefore, it's never had to deal with what it means to become a small state. Now, through Brexit, and if Britain actually leaves, and even if it doesn't, it's having to confront itself; and its immediate conceptualization, at least in some quarters, was to go back to Empire, this time conceptualized as Empire 2.0. Once it became clear that this wasn't a possibility, the idea of CANZUK was floated, but even this disappeared quite quickly as Canada, New Zealand, and Australia have other interests and they are no longer as caught up in the relationship with Britain as they might have been under the Commonwealth. So the question is: what next for Britain?

L: This would be a future opportunity. What impacts have you seen this scholarship have so far?

GKB: None whatsoever. Most political and media commentators, as well as many academics, refuse to recognize that Britain was an empire and to think through the implications of that past on the present political configurations. This is especially the case in relation to issues of citizenship.

L: In this very pessimistic assessment of the role and impact of scholarship, how do you situate your own work and your own teaching?

GKB: It's not pessimistic, it's just a recognition that the structures of knowledge within which we operate have been in place for at least the last 500 years and dismantling them won't happen in the blink of an eye. It will take work. I see the scholarship that I do, in collaboration with a lot of other people, as deconstructing and then reconstructing other, more adequate, ways of thinking about the world in which we live.

L: Could you speak in more detail about how this happens in your classroom? Could you give a concrete example of forms of knowledge that are deconstructed to then be reassembled differently?

GKB: When I first started teaching, I was asked to deliver a module on Modernity, and the first book that I had written was *Rethinking Modernity*. The module outline was basically everything I had critiqued in my book. I thought, well I can't really just teach this module in the way that it's been given to me to teach, but it was also my first year in a new job and I wasn't able to do a wholesale revision of the module. In my first year, I taught the standard narratives in the first half of the module, and taught the critiques in the second half. All the student essays came back basically on the first half of the module. In the second year, I tried to intersperse the critique with the standard account – the French Revolution followed by the Haitian Revolution; industrialization, and then colonialism. Still, all the essays came back on the standard topics, none on the critique. Eventually, after a few years of teaching this module and trying to figure out different ways of doing it, I decided to rewrite the module as if it started with the knowledge that I had gained through the research that I had done on the topic. This became 'Race and the Making of the Modern World', which started with dispossession, enslavement, expropriation, extraction, and went on from there. The essays for this module were much more varied and engaged with the broader material of the module.

L: I wanted to also talk about your involvement in writing about, and participating in, processes of decolonizing the university. This term refers to a number of different practices – reading lists, hiring practices, removing symbols of empire from campuses, etc. – but it is also specifically about addressing colonial relations that are produced through scholarly practice. What kind of work needs to be done in this context?

GKB: There are two specific issues for me. One is to transform the concepts and categories that we use within the social sciences. Second, in more practical terms, is addressing the BAME marking gap which means that BAME students who enter university on the same grades as white students, leave with a 20–50% less chance of getting a good degree. This is something that will follow them through the rest of their lives and will have an impact on their ability to get graduate level jobs and earn equivalent to their white peers. There is no gender gap and there is no socio-economic gap, but there is a race gap. This is not simply a reflection of broader injustices and inequalities within society; it's produced by our institutions. Given that I work in this institution, I have a responsibility to take that seriously and to work to eliminate it.

L: Could you speak in more detail about the concepts you addressed?

GKB: One of the things I've been looking at recently is the way that citizenship is standardly understood in the literature as something that is the property of those within the nation. However, when Britain established citizenship, it gave citizenship to everybody who was within Britain and within all its colonies. This was a single shared citizenship, and it also gave citizenship to everyone who had ever been in a former colony and was now in the Commonwealth. In this way, British citizenship, when it was first established in 1948, was given to over 800 million people. Its political practice since that time has been to take citizenship away from people. In the words of Rieko Karatani, Britain has turned citizens into immigrants, as opposed to it being the other way around. If we don't understand that citizenship within Britain has been established on the basis of processes of purification, then we don't understand what citizenship is actually about, we don't understand why Shamima Begum has been stripped of her citizenship, or why Commonwealth citizens have been stripped of their citizenship, in what has been commonly termed the Windrush scandal. Or even what's happening with Brexit, so the fact that now non-UK EU citizens are being deprived of their full citizenship rights. This is not new or distinct; Britain did this to its Commonwealth citizens in the 1960s and '70s. So, to transform our social-scientific understanding of the concept of citizenship would be to take seriously its history in terms of when it emerged, how it emerged, what it emerged in relation to, and how it's been transformed over the last few decades.

L: In closing, I wanted to return to the notion of objectivity and universality, which are often contested in critical scholarship.

GKB: Much of postmodernism has been about deconstruction, about deconstructing grand narratives. But if you simply deconstruct a grand narrative, it remains in place as the implicit common sense, it's still there in the background. For me, the problem is not the grand narrative in general, it's the particular form of grand narrative that is currently being used. I think grand narratives are necessary, it's just that the ones we currently have in place are inadequate. Instead there is a need for reconstructed and reformed grand narratives, which take into account the connected histories of different peoples in different parts of the world, and provide a different frame through which to look at these issues. I'm not against grand narratives.