

Prague, Villa Lanna and a changing Europe

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My own academic career tracks two arcs. The first is the rise of neo-liberal globalization in Europe, the USA and elsewhere in the late 1970s and its culmination now in the right-wing authoritarian nationalisms represented by Donald Trump and Marine Le Pen, by the unlikely emergence of the Sweden Democrats with their roots in a neo-Nazi fringe and by the strident Islamophobia of Orbán in Hungary or by Zeman in the Czech Republic. The second – related but more parochial – is the UK's entry into the European Union in 1973 and its determination to exit in 2016.

These arcs represent a challenge to European social theory and philosophy (more importantly, of course, to Europe), and to critical theory in particular. Cosmopolitan modernity looks less like an unfinished project than one that has left its tracks. Perhaps this challenge first became evident in the collapse of communism in 1989 (practically marked for the meetings by their move from Dubrovnik to Prague as a consequence of the conflicts that beset Yugoslavia). Critical theory has always held out an alternative to capitalist modernity and even if no critical theorist believed it to be a true (emancipatory) alternative, it did, nonetheless, point to the non-necessity of capitalism. With its collapse, it became difficult to imagine an alternative except within the broad structures of capitalist modernity. It is this first intellectual crisis that brought the uneasy rapprochement with liberal democracy and 'left-Rawlsianism' that Alessandro Ferrara describes (incidentally, it was this debate between critical theory and liberalism that dominated when I first joined the group in 2005).

But the present crisis is also a crisis in liberal democracy and for 'left-Rawlsianism'. Underlying critical theory is the impulse to unite social and political philosophy with a theory of society, that is, with sociology. Initially, Marxism provided critical theory with its sociology, but that sociology has for a long time been inadequate as an account of the central structures and processes of capitalist modernity. Of course, that is not to say that other sociological accounts prove to be any better. From Habermas to Honneth, critical

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theory has moved away from Marxist sociology to that of Parsons. But contemporary modernity is as much a challenge for Parsons whose own account is a better fit with ‘left-Rawlsianism’, albeit problematic in itself, not least because it describes an economy subordinated to society and overarching values of equality and merit. After all, the new arc of European and North American inequality since the 1970s is described by Piketty as the return of a patrimonial capitalism of inherited wealth and position.

I think that more recent debates have begun to break open these sociologies, to bring colonialism and post-colonialism into view. Villa Lanna is itself a metaphor for European social theory, a late 19th-century evocation of Renaissance glories and (in its frescos) a European pastoral being displaced. But the period being evoked is one of enclosure within Europe, population displacement and settler colonialism and enclosure in the new world. Colonialism and empire are integral to European modernity, yet largely neglected. Recent interventions in the meetings by Gurminder K. Bhambra, Amy Allen, Linda Alcoff and Ina Kerner (the implicit thread to feminism is significant) have provided new angles in the debate that are particularly resonant for present times.

Indeed, the rise of neo-liberalism and widening inequality is correlated with decolonization. As a sociologist, I know correlation is not causation, but why might this be significant and why in our theories of society might it be useful to think of Europe post-colonially? The European Union, as Bhambra argues, was not formed of *nation-states*, but of European states that brought their colonies with them, together with the racialized hierarchies of membership and belonging of their wider political communities. The 1960s and 1970s were also a moment when Europe confronted migration from its non-European citizens and, for the most part, began the process of redefining citizenship to exclude them. Solidarity and inclusion were always structured on hierarchical terms, but, faced with the opportunity to include, the bonds of solidarity were deemed to be too fragile to be extended.

The failure to extend social rights to include others – a failure which is integral to the present refugee crisis in Europe – has two consequences. Social rights restricted are transformed from rights to privileges and, at the same time, the discourses of desert and ‘benefit tourism’ make it easier to reduce social rights overall. From either perspective – ‘strict critical theory’ or ‘left-Rawlsianism’ – there is an urgent need to ensure that our underlying theories of society are fully adequate to understand the fissures that divide Europe and Europeans and acknowledge how those were formed in processes and practices of colonial exploitation and appropriation that have generally been neglected in our theories of modernity.

The meetings at Villa Lanna have been rigorous, critical and generous, and, for intellectuals, that can be a comfort in mean-spirited times. It is urgent that critical theory in its broadest sense be directed again both at the boundaries that separate European populations from others and those that separate our thinking from the realities that confront us.