

## BOOK REVIEWS

VENKATESAN, SOUMHYA. *Decolonizing Anthropology: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Polity. 2025. Pp. 252. ISBN: 9781509540600 (softcover), 9781509540594 (hardcover); 9781509540617 (E-book).

In the book *Decolonizing Anthropology: An Introduction*, Soumhya Venkatesan offers a highly introspective and positioned critique of anthropology as an academic discipline and a sociopolitical practice. The author focuses on the conceptual landscapes of disenclosure, epistemic justice, and the fraught legacies of colonialism, transparently writing from the perspective of British colonialism. Based on the book's conclusion, anthropology should become a metaphorical house with many rooms. In this metaphorical house, Venkatesan invites readers to question the walls, doors, and windows from within the field and explore where the house fits within the world (p. 212). This invitation seems to resonate far beyond the discipline of anthropology, stretching to the possibilities of cohabitation in a fractured world.

From the very beginning of the book, the author deconstructs and analyses the web of concepts and meanings around decolonisation. Chapter 2 dives into the definitions, positions, and meanings of decolonisation, dissecting its semantic overload and the multiplicity of interpretations. Drawing from Achille Mbembe's (2021) notion of 'disenclosure' (p. 56) and Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui's (2020) concept of the 'motley' (p. 57), Venkatesan deftly demonstrates that decolonisation is not a singular act of liberation, but a continuous, often contradictory, reimagining of relationships. Thus, decolonisation as described in this book is a dynamic tension that can be understood as a deliberate motley of perspectives refusing

to collapse into essentialist or exclusionary narratives.

This ethos of complexity extends into Chapter 3, where Venkatesan traces the entangled histories of anthropology and colonialism through case studies. She points out that the discipline's complicity in colonial projects was not always overt. Rather, it remained embedded in the structures of knowledge production based on decisions regarding what was studied, who was deemed worthy of study, and the methodological tools employed to document the Other. The author is careful not to lapse into simplistic binaries of oppressor and oppressed, but, instead, she presents anthropology as a site of constant friction.

Her analysis continues in Chapters 4 and 5, which function as a dialogical pair examining epistemological justice and the role of ignorance. In these chapters, Venkatesan draws on feminist philosophy, critical race studies, and agnotology, arguing that 'ignorance is not simply the absence of knowledge; it can be an active modality of occupying the world, and it forms the basis for domination or, at the very least, the masking of privilege' (p. 128). As such, the concepts of whiteness and white ignorance emerge in the book as blind spots and structures of power. Some of the questions posed here include the following: What does it mean to 'know' in a world shaped by colonial legacies? And can anthropology ever fully extricate itself from the logic of the coloniser?

Perhaps the book's most practical Chapters are 6 and 7, which turn an ethnographic lens toward the modern university and teaching anthropology. Venkatesan positions the university as a laboratory of decolonial thought, basing her exploration of how to reshape curricula on the South African context in the aftermath of apartheid. She understands decolonisation not as a magic solution, but as offering a series of iterative practices demanding humility, critical engagement, and a willingness to fail. Venkatesan holds that the classroom is not just a place for the transmission of knowledge, but a space wherein the very boundaries of the discipline can be contested and redrawn (p. 170). Anthropology, therefore, becomes a living and breathing practice (MacIntyre 1981; p. 30).

At its core, *Decolonizing Anthropology* is less about providing answers and more about posing questions and suggesting crossroads for change. Venkatesan's exploration of decoloniality resists the temptation to prescribe universal solutions. Instead, she highlights the multiplicity of colonial forms and their uneven impacts across different geographies. Her reflections on her own position as an Indian scholar in the United Kingdom add yet another layer of ethical reflexivity. She acknowledges that the term 'colonial legacies' is itself fraught with 'poisoned gifts' (p. 207), to borrow a phrase from Benoît de L'Estoile (2008). Yet, rather than discarding them, she invites readers to grapple with their complexities. Thus, decolonisation as understood in this book is a deeply contested and context-dependent process.

Venkatesan's background and academic journey offer a context within which to understand her approach. Born and raised in India in an upper-caste, upper-middle-class family, she pursued undergraduate and postgraduate studies in history and art before being drawn to anthropology (p. 16).

Her formative fieldwork in Tamilnadu, India supported development, commodification, and cultural transformation, sparking her enduring interest in the discipline (p. 17). Currently a professor at the University of Manchester, Venkatesan has spent more than two decades critically engaging with anthropology's colonial legacies (p. 16). Her reflections are deeply informed by her positionality as an Indian academic navigating the UK's academic landscape, marked by historical privilege and marginalisation.

A particularly notable element of this book is its collaborative approach. Venkatesan invited 25 undergraduate anthropology students from the University of Manchester to join her writing process by actively soliciting their feedback on drafts of the book (p. 22). This shines through in the text, demonstrating that the author is committed to equity and epistemic justice, strengthened by the company of student voices contributing to and affecting the already vulnerable writing process.

Venkatesan's writing is accessible without being reductive, making use of metaphors to support readers and allow them to understand the theories and examples she provides. She highlights that the text she delivers is academic, yet anthropologically infused and, therefore, reflective and deeply human. The threshold of this book is low—Venkatesan includes definitions and case studies to illustrate concepts and render the text more accessible, almost taking the form of a handbook. Overall, it invites readers to think with, rather than simply about, the ideas presented.

To conclude, *Decolonizing Anthropology: An Introduction* is a call to action for anthropologists to rethink the discipline as a living practice with the potential to shape more than just the future of academia, as well as the future beyond it. Venkatesan's anthropological house is under

construction, with multiple metaphorical spaces yet to be reimagined and rebuilt with care. The emphasis on the motley, the analysis of ignorance, and the reflections on the university and its meeting points as sites of possibility all come together into a powerful argument for the importance of anthropology's practice and process in decolonisation. This book will resonate not only with students, anthropologists, and practitioners, but with anyone committed to the ongoing, unfinished work of decolonisation. As such, it may also serve as a toolbox for teaching about decolonisation and a starting point for discussions about the positions of anthropologists, whiteness in academia, and the role of underprivileged voices in education. To borrow a phrase from the book itself, 'We (whoever "we" are) chose to be anthropologists and, if the reasons for that choice continue to hold, it is worth fighting to shape a better practice both for ourselves as participants in the practice and as students of and actors in the world' (p. 195).

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