Colonial Modernity in Historical Sociology

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Abstract. Racism is central to colonial modernity, a global historical project tied to colonialism and imperial governance. Racism and its diverse historical manifestations should in theory be key areas of study for historical sociology: the displacement of populations, the dispossession of lands, genocide, slavery, the coercive exploitation of workers of color, and the creation of a way of seeing people through race. Yet, historical sociological scholarship has to date failed to address how racism and colonialism have structured the modern world. This, we argue, is the result of two problems: First, historical sociology's ontology and vision of modernity does not see colonialism as central to and constituting the modern world. Second, historical sociology's Weberian roots produced a methodological approach that detaches theoretical categories from specific historical contexts in the pursuit of generalization. This approach cannot capture the historicity of theory and thus address the subfield's racial structures of knowledge. As an alternative, we propose that previously silenced anticolonial sociologists provide a different model for historical sociology, one that emphasizes the centrality of colonialism and empire in the constitution of modernity and locates theoretical categories in this historical context. We argue that to overcome the racial underpinning of its knowledge structures, historical sociology has to rebuild itself in this anticolonial mode.

HISTORICAL SOCIOLOGY AND ITS SILENCES

Historical sociology is at the foundation of the sociological canon. Sociology, as a discipline, emerged to explain the historical changes of the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century in Europe and the United States. The theorists whom we consider “classical” provided explanations for the rise of European modernity: Karl Marx theorized transformations in terms of the mode of production and class struggle, Max Weber in terms of rationalization and bureaucratization, and Durkheim in terms of the changing division of labor. In the United States, Robert Park proposed a transition from societies held together by culture to societies held together by markets. Albeit deeply worried and critical about the transformations they were witnessing, these writers looked at the European and American experience as the epitome of social development and analyzed it as detached from other regions of the world (Bhambra 2007; Boatcă 2013; Connell 1997; Zimmerman 2006). Imposing a linear temporality towards progress, they considered Europe as the model to follow for those very regions they did not consider part of the modern world. While classical theorists aimed to explain modernity through distilling processes endogenous to Europe, the world at the time was one of empires and thus global, colonial and racialized (Connell 1997; Go and Lawson 2017).

From the point of view of modernity’s others, modernity came about through a very different set of social processes, including the imposition of the global color line and racialization, the dispossession of land, the slave trade and colonial plantation slavery, racialized labor regimes, violence and genocide. In fact, these processes were the underside of European transformations—often their condition of possibility—and as such, central to the amassing of wealth in Europe

(Williams 1994) and deeply entangled with important European events at the time (James 2001). While Marx, Weber and Durkheim did not see the structuring power of the global color line, there were other visions of modernity at the dawn of the discipline. For instance, W. E. B. Du Bois (1998; 1979, 2007) conceptualized modernity in terms of racism and colonialism, and Anna Julia Cooper (2006) in terms of the intersections of gendered and racial hierarchies. Du Bois and Cooper proposed to look at Europe and the United States as part of a global system structured around racism and colonialism.

But these writers were exiled from sociology:¹ Non-white and non-male voices were excluded from the discipline and the centrality of racism, colonialism, and patriarchy were for a long time not part of the sociological story of modernity. In fact, in addition to silencing these voices as *theorists* of modernity, the experiences of the colonized and racialized often became the *objects* of study for social scientists. Conversely, European writers positioned themselves as observers of the modern world and attempted to analyze their environment without acknowledging or understanding their own fundamental predicament (Go 2016, 2020): that they themselves were the product of colonial modernity and that their own theories of the world was shaped by a particular position in the global, imperial order (Connell 1997; Hammer 2020; Itzigsohn and Brown 2020; Magubane 2017).

As the discipline professionalized starting in the 1920s, historical sociology lost its central role to other fields, such as urban and community sociology or organizational studies—and the

¹ To be sure, the second and third waves of historical sociology included many good studies of cases in the global south (Deyo 1989; Mahoney 2001, 2010; Paige 1978). But the issue of the racial and colonial structures of knowledge is not a lack of studies on the global south, nor the lack of studies on race. The issue at stake is how we approach these issues. A global perspective that examines the co-constitution of the colonial and the modern, the primitive and the civilized, the racialized and the supposedly non-racialized is necessary to capture the dynamics of racism and colonialism and their centrality to modernity. The cultural categories and social formations of the global south and the global north are not separated from each other.

study of historical change was replaced with increasingly more presentist analyses (Adams, Clemens, and Orloff 2005). However, the 1970s saw a resurgence of a new historical sociology, this time with a focus on the analysis of political processes and the state: The newer waves of historical sociology did not take broad epochal changes as their object of study but rather focused on the comparison of specific processes in specific places. Questions of democracy (Moore 1993; Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992), revolutions (Goldstone 1986; Skocpol 1979), nation state formation (Brubaker 1998; Gellner 2008; Giddens 1987; Mann 2012; Tilly 1992; Tilly and Ardant 1975) became central to these analyses. Historical sociology moreover diversified its focus on European social transformations to an analysis of processes of change, rupture and reproduction in the developing world (Centeno 2002; Eckstein 1982; Evans 2018; Foran 2019; Foran and Goodwin 1993; Goodwin 2001; Paige 1978, 1998). The 1990s and early 2000s, in turn, brought the start of a third wave which aimed to bring in new issues to historical sociological studies, including greater attention to gender (Adams 2005; Fraser 1989; Glenn 1992; Gordon 2012; Orloff 1993; Ray 2000). Yet, even with these changes, there was little attention to race.

One notable early exception is Anthony Marx's (1997) *Making Race and Nation*, an excellent comparison of the role of race in nation formation in the US, Brazil, and South Africa. Marx made an important intervention in showing how racial constructions are historically contingent and context specific, thus producing differing racial projects and distinct configurations of white hegemonic blocks. Yet, Marx's analysis is not so much an explanation of the *production* of race, but rather a cogent study of how race, particularly whiteness, structures nation-making projects. His analysis does not explain how, when and where racial classifications and hierarchies arise, but rather focuses on their use in these different contexts.

Of late there has been more attention to race, including excellent works such as Tianna S. Paschel's (2016) *Becoming Black Subjects: Movements and Ethno-Racial Rights in Colombia and Brazil*, Cybelle Fox's (2012) *Three Worlds of Welfare Relief: Race, Immigration, and the American State from the Progressive Era to the New Deal*, Mara Loveman's (2014) *National Colors: Racial Classification* and Angel Parham's (2017) *American Routes: Racial Palimpsests and the Transformation of Race*. These studies are powerful examples of how racial hierarchies get mobilized to reinforce a certain social and political order, often with linkages between the domestic and the global realm, and how people on the ground work to combat them. Paschel (2016), for instance, traces changes in national racial politics and policies and the consequences for Black mobilizations and activism while Fox (2012) shows how immigration and welfare became racialized and lodged in place. Parham (2017), through the lens of generations of Caribbean immigrants in Louisiana, demonstrates how immigration and racial formation are imbricated processes. Loveman (2014), in turn, analyzes the production of race out of the colonial project and then shows how race gets made and remade through tools of modern statecraft. Her focus on the census, first and foremost, shines a light on how racial classifications do not solely describe, but in fact produce reality.

These studies have greatly contributed to our understanding of how racial formations and racism structure our political, social and cultural lives, and as such they constitute undeniable progress in historical sociological studies of race. Still, we argue that while more studies of race in different places and different fields are important, they do not address the fundamental problem of the field. The problem of historical sociology lies not so much with the degree of attention to questions of race—although this is an issue—but with the conceptualization of race and its role in modernity, as well as our subsequent methodological choices. While historical studies of race have

taught us much about how racial categories come to be utilized, modified and reproduced in different places and times, most studies have tended to focus on the discursive making of race: the production and reproduction of symbolic categories which then have a powerful impact on the social world and the lenses through which we view them.

But this approach has often focused on signification as divorced from the sociality of imperial rule, conquest, dispossession, displacement, slavery and the extraction of value (Hesse 2016). Modern categories of race are the result of governance practices of European empires and come out of a need to justify projects of extraction, exploitation, dispossession and genocide through dehumanization. Yet, these histories and social processes that are at the heart of colonial modernity have not been prominent in historical sociology. This means that the field has focused on studying the categorization of race and their effects, while eliding the violent colonial and imperial processes underlying it. At the same time, it analytically separated the study of modernity from the simultaneous and ongoing construction of difference, thus erasing how colonial modernity is at the root of its analytical categories. The active construction of racial difference has been central to the European and North American ideas of modernity, rationality, and rights—processes that had to be made compatible with the colonial project.

Of course, the study of empire and colonialism has by now become an indispensable pillar of historical sociology (Adams 2005; Barkey 2008; Go 2008; Kumar 2019; Steinmetz 2008; Wilson 2011; Wyrzten 2016). This literature has made important inroads in how we understand different forms of imperial rule, and the functioning and governance of empires across the world. However, while offering important insights into empires as state-building projects, this literature is less concerned with how empire and colonialism shaped modern epistemes, structures of

racialization and modernity itself.² Rather, this tradition has focused on “outward” processes of colonial rule and its social, political, cultural and economic changes and transformations. It has paid less attention to how empires shaped not just the colonies but also the metropole and it tends to not see colonization as an epistemic project. In short, it does not answer the question of how the project of colonial rule also fundamentally constituted what it means to be modern and how we think about the world.

Despite the many important historical sociological studies of race and empires, only very few interventions have attempted to deal with the problem of racialized knowledge structures in historical sociology (Bhambra 2011b, 2011a; Magubane 2005, 2016b, 2016a). As a result, increasing the amount of research that “brings race back in” is not enough to undo the racialized knowledge structures of historical sociology. Rather, we need to query how the subfield theorizes the past and the ongoing relationship between modernity, racism and empire; and how we think about the relationship between sociology and history. Fortunately, to chart a new approach to a global historical sociology that is attentive to these racial and colonial structures, we do not have to reinvent the wheel. Anticolonial writers have long diagnosed these predicaments and sought to address colonial structures of knowledge. Prominent in this tradition is the work of W. E. B. Du Bois, but it includes many others, such as Anna Julia Cooper (2006), Oliver Cox (2018), Franz Fanon (2007, 2008), Stuart Hall (1992, 2017), CLR James (1953, 2001), Anibal Quijano (2000, 2007), Walter Rodney (1981), Ida B. Wells (2014), Sylvia Wynter (2003), and more. These writers laid out the centrality of colonial material and cultural processes to both, the production of race and the making of the modern world.

² For exceptions, see Marnia Lazreg’s (2016) excellent *Torture and the Twilight of Empire*.

This tradition has also left its mark in a series of more recent books that ground examinations of race in colonial history and seek to overcome disciplinary blindspots. Evelyn Nakano-Glenn's (2009) *Unequal Freedom*, for example, explains how citizenship and free labor categories were invented in the same process as designations of difference that racialized and gendered populations in the drive to maintain a settler colonial extractive project. Zine Magubane's (2003) *Bringing the Empire Home: Race, Class, and Gender in Britain and Colonial South Africa* takes a connected sociologies approach to show how imperial relations co-constituted racial meanings between metropole and colony. Moon-Kie Jung's (2015) *Beneath the Surface of White Supremacy* positions the empire state at the center of his analysis of the US racial project, to explain how racial hierarchies are not imperfections in an egalitarian racial liberalism, but rather a logical outcome of the empire state's differential construction of populations. And Howard Winant's (2002) *The World is a Ghetto* explains how racial categories come out of an Atlantic colonial project organized on the basis of the slave trade and racialized coerced labor—slavery and peonage.

These works are grounded in the materiality of colonial power relations and in the structuring power of its cultural categorizations, thus linking race to colonialism and coloniality (Go 2018; Magubane 2013). Analyses of race cannot be taken out of the context that invented racial difference to begin with: as a legitimation to justify the extractive and violent relationships of colonial governance. These kinds of analyses need to overcome the methodological nationalism of much sociology of race (Magubane 2016b; Quisumbing King 2019) to instead begin from an understanding of the color line as a global racial project. And this means that the study of racialization must come hand in hand with a rethinking of the dominant categories of modernity, and shifting our project from one of inclusion into institutions of modernity to one of

decolonization (Hammer and White 2019; Hesse 2007; Lowe 1996). It is this approach which we seek to develop further in this chapter.

This article proceeds as follows. First, we highlight how the racialization of modernity is entwined with knowledge production; specifically, the relationship between theory and history and history-writing. Next, we outline modernity's constitution through the colonial project. Then we offer some reflections on the construction of the archive—often the main research locus for historical sociologists—and its silences. Finally, we lay out how historical sociology can forge a new path forward by drawing on insights from the anticolonial tradition. Throughout, we aim to make the case that the problem in historical sociology is not that we have too few studies on race, but rather that we must pay more attention to how colonialism and racism have structured modernity, and our knowledge thereof.

RETHINKING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIOLOGY AND HISTORY

Central to historical sociology has been the way it conceptualizes the relationship between sociology and history. The late Max Weber, the one who was in the process of writing *Economy and Society* (1978), defined this relationship by building a historical sociology based on ideal types; stylized concepts that would help to analyze and compare historical situations across geography and across time, abstracting from the specificities of historical situations. This methodological approach informed most of the second wave of historical sociology and it remains central to the field today (Mahoney and Rueschemeyer 2003; Skocpol and Somers 1980). What matters to scholars following this approach is to devise abstract concepts (ideal types) and patterns

and paths of causal relations (mechanisms) to apply to different cases across history and geography. This, for example, is the goal of Skocpol's (1979) Millsian comparative method. History, then, is the field to which this comparative method is applied, as it could be to organizations, stratification or any other field. The particular historical specificities of the cases are less important, the relationality between local and global actors is simplified to the influence of external forces on endogenous processes, and the subjectivities and meanings of actors are reduced to ideal types (think here, for example of instrumental rationality, substantive rationality, etc.). As a result, theory-production in historical sociology was divorced from history and has very little to say about the worlds in which people live and human action takes place.

This strand of historical sociology abstracts from historical specificities, focusing on the effects of isolated variables in causal explanations or universal, ahistorical social mechanisms, mostly through the lens of the nation. This approach generated many interesting studies, including comparative studies of race in different places. However, it does not allow us to capture the centrality of race, colonialism, and empire in structuring—historically and in the present—the modern world. This is so because the search for abstract universal mechanisms obscures the specific characteristics of historical colonial modernity. It also cannot capture the relationality between Europe and North America and the colonial and post-colonial world. For example, following these methodological choices, scholars begin to see race as a form of group formation akin to other processes of group formation, such as that of ethnicity. Studies of race focus on differential outcomes between racialized groups, or on racialization as an isolated social process that is either apart from or even contradictory to the modern world. This approach fails to question the structures of power at the heart of the creation of race—from colonialism and slavery, to settler colonialism and genocide—but only ever sees some of its most visible effects.

As a result of its Weberian roots, historical sociology's approach to sociology and history also came attached to an impulse for methodological nationalism; that is, seeing the nation state as the unquestioned unit of analysis to explain a certain social process. Studies in this vein offer explanations that are necessarily endogenous to national societies, at the expense of these societies' connections to the wider global and colonial context (Bhambra 2014; Goswami 2002; Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). These approaches isolate its objects of study from the broader global and historical context (Go 2016). This is problematic because the modern world was of course deeply global from its inception, but sociological accounts of these developments have tended to focus on endogenous explanations, pretending that colonial ties are irrelevant for the process in question.

Even in light of important calls for more global scholarship (Adams et al 2005; Go and Lawson 2017), historical sociologists often been reluctant to move from a focus on bounded entities to focusing their unit of analysis on the relation between cases. Relational analyses would view different countries and regions as part of global historical processes, with historical particularities that need to be studied and explained empirically, but that are part of a larger process. As Go and Lawson (2017) have proposed, even scholarship that claims to bring in global analyses has treated the global as mere context, as opposed to conceptualizing cases as global "all the way down" (Lawson 2017:18). And yet, we deal with societies that are fundamentally historically constructed and deeply shaped through the global, colonial context.

There have been a series of exceptions to methodologically nationalist and detached histories. A central one has been world systems analysis, which focuses on the patterned economic and political relations between different regions of the world as a framework for analysis (Arrighi 1994; Wallerstein and Wallerstein 2004). But even world-system analysis looks at the world from the perspective of the expansion of its European core (Grosfoguel 2002; Mignolo 1999, 2002). It

theorizes racism as a mechanism to segment and divide world labor, but not as a constitutive and structuring element of the system it analyzes. Winant's (2002) *The World is a Ghetto* provides a corrective to this tradition by pointing out how race has structured the politics, economic, and culture of the world-system and by tracing the changes in the forms of racialization across time and place.

To understand the power of race then, we need to change our analytical approach. This requires an understanding of colonialism in the modern world, but also a refusal to detach theoretical categories from their historical context. To do so, we can build on the work of cultural and interpretivist historical sociologists (Calhoun 1995, 1996; Glaeser 2011; Reed 2011; Sewell Jr 2005; Somers 1994, 1996; Steinmetz 1999; Suny and Kennedy 2001): If universalisation requires an abstraction from context, the cultural turn in historical sociology charted a different path. This strand of sociology is closer to the Weber who wrote *The Protestant Ethic* (2002) rather than the Weber that wrote *Economy and Society* (1978).³ As opposed to abstracting beyond context in the search for universal explanations, cultural historical sociologists argue that all social action is embedded in peoples' interpretations of reality. This approach emphasizes that theoretical categories are never outside their social and historical context, and at the same time, makes the point that we always already bring a certain theoretical understanding to how we read history. Somers (1996) convincingly argued that we must embrace the historicity of theory: What are the histories that gave meaning to our theories, and what are the contestations within these histories? Theory and history cannot be detached from one another, as one informs the other—they exist in the same social space (Barkawi and Lawson 2017; Go and Lawson 2017; Reed 2011; Zimmerman 2017).

³ In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (2002), Weber argued that changes in religious doctrine could only lead to inner world ascetism under very particular historical and social conditions.

Yet, while the theorists of the cultural turn offer important insights into the historicity of theory, they have failed to see the centrality of racism and empire in colonial modernity and our analytical categories. This is because their theoretization of the modern is still embedded in the history of the European Enlightenment. To grasp the meanings, forms, and effects of race we need place racism and empire at the center of its analysis of modernity. Thus, a sociology based on anticolonial traditions embraces the historicity of theory but furthermore gives us an ontology that explains how modernity and the creation of colonial difference and racialization have been entangled from the start. We turn to this rethinking of the past next.

COLONIAL MODERNITY AND THE PRODUCTION OF RACE

A key limitation of historical sociology is its understanding of modernity and the modern. Traditional explanations associate modernity with a set of important economic, political and scientific transformations in the 17th and 18th century—e.g., urbanization, industrialization, rationalization, the widespread use of science, the rise of nation states and inchoate forms of democracy. Disconnected in these narratives, however, is the colonial context in which these European developments came about. Historical sociology has tended to sever the linkages between the modern and the colonial through imposing spatial and temporal separations (Bhambra 2007; Boatcă 2015; Connell 1997): The colonial project was deemed entirely separate from “modern” and “European” processes or pertained to a long-gone past with little relevance to the modern world. Dynamics of empire and colonialism were erased in theoretical explanations.

To understand the making of the global color line and how it lies at the heart of modernity, we need to grapple with colonialism and its epistemic effects. Colonialism not only involves a set of material practices of extraction, violence and domination, but these practices are always entangled with ways of narrating this history. The invention of colonial difference came in 1492 (Wynter 2003): As part of the conquest of the Americas, colonizers constructed colonial populations as “other,” while beginning to identify themselves as “modern.” While the encounter with indigenous populations was not the first time Europeans came in contact with peoples with different histories, cultures and customs, the moment is distinctive because of how Europeans signified this encounter: They aimed to make sense of indigenous peoples through the lens of enslavement. Within the settlers’ Christian cosmology, the question they had to answer was whether indigenous peoples had souls, which would mean that they could be brought into Christianity and potentially be members of God’s family. As such enslaving them would be illegitimate. This is perhaps best epitomized through the mid-sixteenth century Debate at Valladolid, where Bartholome de las Casas and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda debated if indigenous enslavement was a sin before God. To them, the question was whether indigenous peoples had natural rights by virtue of having souls or if they were barbaric, and therefore settlers were justified in using violence to subdue them and “civilize” them. Whereas settlers argued over whether the indigenous populations could in fact be brought into the Christian community, they became increasingly convinced that another population was radically different and could thus be legitimately enslaved—Sub-Saharan Africans (Boatcă 2015; Grosfoguel 2002).

The encounter is significant for modernity because it not only created the image of a colonial other, but in that same process, it allowed for a recognition of the European self as “human” (Bogues 2006, 2012; Wynter 2003). In other words, in defining the colonial other,

Europeans at the same time created a measuring stick against which they could measure their own progress, achievements and civilizational levels (Du Bois 1979; Hall 1992; Mignolo 2002). In short, modernity gained meaning through first determining the standard for progress and then measuring Europe's own progress against those who it constructed as different. With the emergence of the Enlightenment, racial logics shifted from a Christian worldview to a secular, biological one. Biological racism later left its place to cultural understandings of difference, but colonial racial difference never relinquished its centrality to modernity.

The creation of colonial difference also came with an understanding of who can create knowledge about the world, a relationship Anibal Quijano (2000, 2007) described as coloniality/modernity. The Enlightenment gave rise to the idea of the Cartesian knower, which positioned the European as able to create objective knowledge through continually refining it based on his capacities for reason. As a result, the European was able to access a universal standpoint seemingly untethered from social context; a view from nowhere—what Donna Haraway (1988) referred to as “the God-trick.” At the same time, colonizers constructed the colonial other as barbaric, mad, uncivilized, non-modern, and hence as incapable for reason. The European standpoint emerged as the only legitimate basis for knowledge, while the colonized were seen as irrational, and—more recently—as only ever subjective, biased, and unable to abstract beyond their lived experiences (Go 2020).

Dipesh Chakrabarty's (2009) has pointed out how this legacy of universalisation shaped the social sciences. The social sciences adopted theoretical categories that were all modelled after deeply parochial European histories but deemed to be universally applicable. Categories central to modernity—those of the state, the nation, the citizen, democracy, progress, and modernity itself—came out of Europe, but they were dislodged from this context. At the same time, the rest of the

world was constructed as temporally lagging behind, in the “waiting room of history,” waiting to enter the path towards progress. As such, the goals and experiences of those that had not yet caught up with Europe had to be explained through the concepts that had already been defined for them. Seemingly, theory and analytical categories emerged in Europe, while the rest of the world provided data and empirical context.⁴ Thus, even if historical sociologists addressed other parts of the world, they analyzed these non-European histories through the lens of Eurocentric normativity.

Historical sociology inherited and incorporated this construction of modernity and colonial difference, even if it did so unintentionally. In accepting the Eurocentric viewpoint on modernity, historical sociology separated the histories of Europe from its colonial and racial project. It conceptualized modernity, democracy, revolution, or the emergence of rights as endogenous processes to European nation states. This way of looking at modernity erases the histories and experiences of colonial others, and precludes historical sociologists from seeing the connection between the emergence of freedom and the continuation of bondage, between the coetaneous emergence of citizenship and tutelage, between the rise of democracy and rights and the denial of rights, as intrinsically connected processes. Hence comparative historical sociology can compare forms of race and racialization between places, but it cannot see how those different forms are manifestations of a common historical process and formative of a historical epoch.

Yet, there has always been a different take on modernity: One that sees racism and colonialism as central to modernity. This view was spearheaded early on by W. E. B Du Bois and Anna Julia Cooper, but these writers are part of a rich and varied anticolonial tradition. Today postcolonial and Du Boisian sociologists draw from these early writers and from Indigenous

⁴ Chakrabarty emphasizes that the point is not to get rid of modern European categories, because they have deeply shaped the world, but rather to continually test the limit to which these categories can and cannot capture non-European experiences.

theorists of settler colonialism. The historical sociology that emerges from these traditions sees the forms of racism and colonialism not as isolated phenomena, contained to various nation states, but as constitutive of a historical epoch. This tradition also offers a different method. Its goal is not to try to find causes for or interpret separated events, but to understand their historical formation, their connections, and the possibilities of undoing them. To begin to draw these connections, however, we need to learn read history differently, and question how we engage with the past. Therefore, in the next section, we examine the interactions of colonialism, racism and knowledge production and the very locus at the heart of historical sociological scholarship—the archive.

ARCHIVES

Throughout the three waves of historical sociology, we have seen many methodological debates about analytical modes, theory-building, case selection, comparison and strategies for establishing causation. While second wave scholarship was often based on the synthesis of large numbers of secondary materials, recent years have brought a focus on primary archival work. However, as opposed to the field of History (Blouin and Rosenberg 2011; Decker 2013; Fuentes 2016; Mbembe 2002, 2015; Schwartz and Cook 2002; Weld 2014), historical sociologists have only recently made important interventions in our approach to the archive as a repertoire of knowledge production (Brown 2018; Lara-Millán, Sargent, and Kim 2020; Mayrl and Wilson 2020; Skarpelis 2020). In fact, for decades, historical sociologists have noted the possibility of bias in the use of secondary sources, but primary archival research has been held up as a gold standard for its ability to “cut out the intermediary” and to get us closer to history itself. Of course, historical sociologists have been

aware that historical data is limited because a lot of the historical record is lost, but nevertheless, an examination of the social construction of historical documents, archives, and facts has not been a central part of the subfield's methodological debates. If "memory" was seen as subjective, openly constructed and pertaining to the public domain, history was seen as pertaining to "scientific truth," to be articulated by the detached researcher, produced within the tower of the officially sanctioned archives far from the politics of social life. Yet, far from objective historical artefacts, primary documents come to fruition through a social process that involves important choices: whose perspective describes the event? Who archives the event? Who imbues it with significance?

Inherent in the making of archives are strategic colonial silences, mirroring the silences of colonial knowledge production: As colonizers delegitimated the knowledges of indigenous and colonized peoples, they also instituted the European point of view as the sole legitimate source of knowledge. An important mechanism for this move was the construction of the archive and the constructions of which sources count as legitimate. The historian and anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) most poignantly invites us to reflect on these questions: Whose voices get included in the archive? Whose sources do archivists see as legitimate documentation? How should we work with histories that did not produce written documents? Which sources get considered biased and subjective, while others get seen as official and objective? Archiving is an inherently political process, replete with choices that then come to shape historical narratives and public memory. This of course does not mean that we should dismiss archives as hopelessly biased. Rather, the point is to learn to consider archives as repositories of partial knowledge; as institutions that give us insight into how knowledge, reality, and specifically, the colonial world, gets created.

Take state archives. State archives often get seen as institutionalized versions of history. Yet, these archives are partial. They may contain policy debates and different opinions, but they

represent merely one epistemic viewpoint: that of the state. What is more, state archives also leverage institutional power. They do not simply hold the *documentary* evidence describing past actions, debates and contestations surrounding the state's actions onto the social world. Rather, they give us an insight into how the state constructs reality; it tells us how it conceptualizes the population in order to govern it; and whom it considers "a problem" to be dealt with and to combat. State archives are not outside of history, but in themselves produced by it. Reading its documents thus requires us to, as Ann Stoler (2002, 2010) puts it, "read against the grain." Here also, it is not about discarding state archives as inherently colonialist, but rather to treat these archives as an important trace that allows us to reconstruct how colonialism created knowledge about the world.

The archive not only determines how history is recorded; its physical organization even shapes how we analyze it. For instance, it often determines which histories we connect, and which histories remain separate analytical processes: Colonial records tend to be in separate boxes, separate floors, separate buildings from metropolitan events, leading us to preserve the sterile narratives of Western development as analytically separate from colonial actions (Buck-Morss 2009). Even though the same political elites steered the colonial project or benefitted from slavery and resource extraction often overseas, it is possible for historical sociologists to tell stories of these political elites while failing to locate them in their colonial context. Reconnecting colonial relations requires working beyond—or perhaps against—the organization of the archive and the easy categorization of nation states as units of analysis.

In other words, the point is to question processes of making and maintaining of the archive itself (Stoler 2010). We need to take note of why history is organized in one way and not another; why access to the institution is cumbersome and enveloped in a cloud of official and bureaucratic narrative; why we get asked to approach historical materials with respect—not just to preserve

brittle historical materials, but also to preserve a state-sanctioned historical narrative; how archives at once produce historical knowledge and at the same time erase other knowledges; why we lack the language to describe certain historical actions or why some historical events are simply “unthinkable.” Thus, to study the racialization of the modern world and our knowledge structures, we need to question the archive, the institution at the center of history-making.

Reading archives against the grain is one option to deal with the imperial legacies in historical knowledge production, but questioning the archive altogether is another. History is not solely recorded in the institutions we commonly imagine when we consider archives. Yet, while official archives count as objective institutions of knowledge, other forms of transmitting historical evidence get dismissed as biased and subjective. But since all archives are necessarily partial, it becomes clear that drawing on different knowledge producers can offer important historical insights. History also lives in the memories of communities, oral traditions, and in subjugated knowledges that often do not align with state-sanctioned narratives. Indeed, as Saidya Hartman (2008, 2019) reminds us, how are we to describe and analyze those experiences that only left barely visible threads? How can we weave together histories and experiences which were not recorded, but we know existed because of in-passing mentions, or because they are the conditions of possibility for the histories that did get recorded? While the historical sociological impulse may be to lament this “lack” as a problem of data (un)availability, this silence in itself is instructive: It is an account of how certain subjects cannot speak in a colonial regime of knowledge production (Spivak 1988). Documenting and understanding these silences is important interpretative work in understanding power structures and the unspeakabilities of the modern world (Sarkar 2001).⁵

⁵ We can see an example of how the archive affects our work in C. L. R. James’ discussion of his book *The Black Jacobins* (2001) in relation to Du Bois’ (1998) *Black Reconstruction*. CLR James, when reflecting on the writing of *The Black Jacobins*, recognized that his description of the Haitian revolution was limited by the use of the colonial archive. That led him, he recalled, to use colonial categories in his analysis. Comparing his work with Du Bois’s *Black*

Just as much as the colonial archive produces silences, it also produces a lack of significance: At times, historical violence is all too obvious, but we invest resources in deliberately denying significance to these facts, which suggests that there are regimes that deliberately produce this ignorance (Mueller 2020). We could unearth these subjugated knowledges in markers all around us: Buildings, street signs, statues, plazas, nature, institutions, names, markers, symbols and more. Physical markers often recount these violent stories of the past, but we are socialized into imbuing these markers with little significance. Conversely, tracing these “ruins” gives us one way to make visible the colonial violence enshrined all around us (Stoler 2013), and to shift the sterile narratives of modernity we tell ourselves. This strategy also helps us see how history is never truly of the past but embedded in our daily lives. Taking account of these processes, scholars have often referred to a whole set of metaphors, such as “hauntings,” “ghosts,” “afterlives,” “the imperial unconscious,” and “legacies,” to express the fact that this history is all around us, but solely as ghost-like figures, while never truly given the voice to speak (Gordon 2008).

Finally, it is important to note that subjugated knowledges are never analytically separate from histories of modernity. They do not simply offer a lens into their lived experiences or lifeworlds of oppressed peoples. Rather, drawing on subjugated archives allows us to reconstitute the world from marginalized perspectives and allows one window into the larger social structures definitive of the modern world. It does not mean that historical sociology needs to abandon its macro-sociological analyses—certainly Du Bois put the macro global institutions of racial and

Reconstruction, he asserts that Du Bois went beyond that archive, to try to understand the subjectivity of the enslaved, and for that reason he considered Du Bois’ book better than his (James 2000). Du Bois did not have access to many archives in writing *Black Reconstruction*, but he was embedded in the histories of those who lived through reconstruction, and who remembered slavery. He used this wealth of community memory and community conversations to bring to the fore of the analysis the subjectivity of the actors of the civil war and reconstruction. We need to go beyond the existing archives to capture the historical subjectivities of racialized people (Brown 2018; Hartman 2019).

colonial modernity at the center of his analysis—but rather, that these untapped archives offer explanations of other macro-processes we have so far not seen as definitive of the modern world. In critically engaging the archive and opening previously silenced archives, we may thus be able to reconstitute what we understand modernity to be.

ACCOUNTING FOR RACISM AND COLONIALISM IN HISTORICAL SOCIOLOGY

More than five centuries of colonialism structured the modern world, most importantly and lastingly through the global colorline. Since racial structures have long and deep historical linkages, we need a historical sociological approach that tackles these structures and the forms of knowledge they generated in order to understand questions of racism today. Such an approach necessarily goes against common but fraught approaches that attempt to analyze race while ignoring the processes of historical, cultural, social and political construction underlying it. That means that historical sociology—and its focus on processes, historical roots, change and continuation—could in fact be uniquely well positioned to better understand contemporary racism. After all, tracing historical processes allows for a de-naturalization of the fixity and stability of “race” to instead focus on its production and institution. However, without understanding how the institutions of modernity interact with a long history of colonialism and racial formation, we run into dangers of extrapolating studies of race as a question of studying racial groups, as opposed to studying the institutions and history at the heart of racism. To be able to capture racism and the legacies and presence of colonialism, historical sociology needs to decolonize its own knowledge structures. In what follows, we lay out a series of starting points to address these issues.

First, to capture the historical processes at the heart of racialized modernity, we need to rely on a different ontology of the modern. Thinking beyond the parochial conceptions of European and North American modernity, we need to reconceptualize how the modern world formed with racism, empire and colonialism at its center. These structures are not solely in the past, but equally constitutive of the present. Most prominently for our purposes, colonial structures operate in knowledge production where these colonial entanglements continue to be silenced and analytically bifurcated from the modern story. If we do not start by reconceptualizing modernity, we will not know what race is, how we have come to create and live in this racialized world, and how it may be changed.

The work of Du Bois is a good starting point. He saw modernity as global and structured around the color line. The color line took different forms in different places and times but was the central structuring force of modernity and capitalism (Itzigsohn and Brown 2020). With that, the structures of knowledge of modernity were also organized around race and geared to legitimize or maintain racism and colonialism. In contrast to the established standard of his day, the goal of his historical sociology was to contrast the different forms and processes of change in the color line among regions and countries, that are nevertheless linked by historically constructed relations of power. Through Du Bois' work and the work of many other thinkers in the anticolonial tradition, we can begin to reconstitute modernity in a way that centers racialization and makes it visible for analysis.

Second, a better understanding of racism and racialized structures of knowledge requires a change in the way sociology relates to history. Reconstituting comparative historical sociology in an anticolonial mode means that we are not looking for abstract ahistorical concepts or mechanisms. Rather, our concepts are bound to historical times and we need to understand cases

in their concrete historical contexts.⁶ Theoretical categories are never ahistorical and universally applicable, but rather tethered to concrete historical situations and meanings. This does not mean that our analyses cannot identify social structures or can't compare processes across time and space. But these analytical moves cannot be assumed as a default but must be carried out with hesitation and attention to context. For example, citizenship does not mean the same everywhere, neither does democracy. And citizenship and democracy have been historically racialized, and to understand these entanglements, we need to understand seemingly abstract language in its colonial context (Hammer 2020).

Historical knowledge production is just as much part of the social world and a product of the social context that has given it rise. What this means though is to let go of the understanding of the modern world and the relations between sociology and history that have for so long shaped this sociological subfield. Some sociologists have already advocated variations of this (Calhoun 1996; Reed 2011; Sewell Jr 2005; Somers 1996; Somers and Gibson 1993), but they have not conceptualized modernity with racism and colonialism at its heart. Building on the anticolonial tradition then may allow historical sociology to build an understanding of the historical constitution of race. It shifts our focus to the central role of colonial exploitation, dehumanization, dispossession and extraction and racialized forms of exclusion.

A historical sociology based on the anticolonial and antiracist traditions does not aim to construct ideal types and nation-based models, nor does it home in on a mechanism-based methodology. Instead, it is concerned with the task of analyzing colonial modernity and its local manifestations, while at the same time keeping in mind how these cases are embedded in a wider

⁶ Concepts can travel and we do aspire to expand their scope, but in order to do so we need to see to what extent they travel, and what kind of modifications we need to make in our concepts and mechanisms to account for historical and contextual differences. This does not make us historians. As opposed to historians, we are still looking for broad trends and patterns, but we are looking for them in their historical context.

global and historical context. Take Du Bois' (1998) *Black Reconstruction* as an example. In this text, Du Bois aims to analyze the role of the enslaved in the American civil war and the Reconstruction period. He uses a set of Marxist categories to make sense of systems of extraction and oppression but stretches them by explaining how slavery is not as a premodern labor form, but rather an intrinsic part of global racial capitalism. While deeply grounded in the historical specificities of the American South, to Du Bois, the story of the American South is a manifestation of a larger global colonial project. His analysis of racialization, then, is not about abstract group and boundary formations nor about mechanisms of durable inequality, but rather, about the shifting forms of American and global racial and colonial capitalism. Anna Julia Cooper's (2006) *Slavery and the French and Haitian Revolutionists* offers another early example on how to conduct global relational analysis.⁷ Cooper hones in on the centrality of race and empire to the French revolution, a theme that gets erased in analyses of the French Revolution that see it as a bourgeois revolution or as the result of failures of the old regime. Both, Cooper and Du Bois, theorize concrete historical processes and relations, and aim to understand how power operates in specific historical contexts and historically constructed subjectivities.

In many ways, this call to grapple with colonial modernity can build on important advances made in Atlantic History. Historians have offered theoretically-grounded relational work that overcomes methodological nationalism and thinks through the framework of the Black Atlantic (Gilroy 1993; Scott 1986). These analyses have centered the Atlantic slave trade and racial slavery in bringing to life the silenced voices of the enslaved (Brown 2012; Fuentes 2016; Morgan 2004; Owens 2017; Smallwood 2009) but also made clear how these processes are central to the making of the modern world (Beckert 2015; Brown 2012; Rediker 2008; Rosenthal 2019). These works

⁷ This was Anna Julia Cooper's dissertation, defended at the Sorbonne in 1925, when Cooper was 66 years old.

offer insights into how thinking from the perspective of the enslaved allows us to reconstitute modernity (Daut 2019; Dubois 2005, 2012; Joseph-Gabriel 2019) and point to the limits of European epistemic perspectives (Zimmerman 2012).

Finally, it is also important to note that while the anticolonial tradition dating back to Du Bois offers important milestones in how to think of colonization, they do not address another key historical formation of modernity: settler colonialism and the histories and experiences of indigenous people. There are very few works in sociology that think from the perspective of indigenous histories. This is so because the discipline and historical sociology have been oblivious to the analysis of settler colonialism, an analytical framework that emerges out of the experiences of indigeneity. We can recall only three works in sociology that engage with this concept, Evelyn Nakano Glenn's (2009) *Unequal Freedom*, Renisa Mawani's (2009) *Colonial Proximities*, and Moon-Kie Jung (2015) *Beneath the Surface of White Supremacy*. These books analyze historical intersections of class, race, and gender through the analytical framework of settler colonialism and the colonial racial project, which allows the authors to theorize structures of power in the construction of racism, as opposed to seeing only its effects. Frameworks of settler colonialism and dispossession (Byrd 2011; Coulthard 2014; Povinelli 2002; Simpson 2014; Wolfe 2006, 2016) and their entanglements with slavery and colonization (King 2019) should be central to historical sociology.⁸

Anticolonial frameworks offer analytical insights about how to conceptualize the relationship between history and sociology. They begin with an understanding of modernity as racialized and colonial: Instead of analytically bifurcating the colonial project and racial

⁸ There is now a small but growing number of papers in sociology that engage with settler colonialism and indigenous experiences, although not within historical sociology. See Darrah-Okike (2020), McKay, Vinyeta and Norgaard (2020); Norgaard and Reed (2017); Fenelon (2015), Steinman (2016). For two articles that use the concept of settler colonialism as a framework for historical sociologists, see Nakano Glenn (2015) and Murphy (2018).

domination as separate processes to the transformations of modernity, this tradition focuses on its entanglements and linkages; and thus, on the centrality of colonialism to the making of the modern world. This does not mean that race and racism are the same everywhere—there are of course important local histories and variations—but it does mean that all cases are embedded in this historical period, and therefore, we need to start by seeing their position in relation to empire and the global color line. The goal is not to look for explanatory variables or mechanisms that apply across cases, but to contrast different cases and understand how race, racism, coloniality, and power developed in each of them, paying attention to the historical specificity of cases and their embeddedness in colonial modernity. This way, seemingly universal and abstract concepts acquire local and concrete textures, and we can see the scope of their different forms and the relations between them. Learning and thinking from these traditions opens possibilities for thinking of a world beyond racism and coloniality.

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