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Rethinking Historical Sociology

Learning from W. E. B. Du Bois and the Black Radical Tradition

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Abstract

For too long, questions of racism and colonialism have not been part of historical sociology's understanding of modernity. Yet, a new generation of scholars has begun to address this, placing racism and empire at the center of their inquiries. This new generation looks to previously marginalized scholars for guidelines and inspiration. In line with this shift in historical sociology, this paper brings the work of W.E.B. Du Bois and other writers in the Black Radical Tradition to bear on longer-standing analytic and methodological debates: How do these authors allow us to think about theory-building and comparison? What is the goal of explanation? How should we approach archives and sources? Building on these insights, this paper explains how the work of Du Bois and the Black Radical Tradition provides a model for a new historical sociology, and a framework that allows us to see the connections between racism, colonialism, and modernity.

Keywords: Du Bois; Black Radical Tradition; Historical Sociology; Colonialism; Racism

Introduction

Historical sociology is at a critical conjuncture. For too long, questions of racism and colonialism have either not been part of historical sociology or have remained divorced from its historical understanding of modernity (Magubane 2005; 2016a). Also, all too often, historical sociologists have examined processes in Europe or the United States without accounting for the fact that these developments took place not within nation states, but within imperial formations (Bhambra 2011; Go and Lawson, 2017). Throughout the last decade, a new generation of scholars has begun to expand historical sociology's traditional questions and approaches, placing racism and empire at the center of our understanding of the modern world. The current changes in historical sociology promise to be a threshold of enormous theoretical innovation. What is at stake, to invoke Stuart Hall (2021 [1988]), is nothing less than a shift in the terms within which we think.

This generation of scholars looks to previously marginalized scholars for inspiration. They turn to the work of W. E. B. Du Bois, but also more broadly to scholars from the Black Radical Tradition (BRT)—a tradition of which Du Bois is part. Other scholars in this tradition include Anthony Bogues, Aimé Césaire, Anna Julia Cooper, Frantz Fanon, C. L. R. James, Stuart Hall, Saidiya Hartman, Achille Mbembe, Walter Rodney, Michel-Rolph

Troulliot, and Sylvia Wynter to name a few. These writers offer a "counter discourse about the nature of Western modernity" (Bogues 2003, p. 9), one that provides a distinctive understanding of modernity as founded on colonialism and the global color line.

Inspired by the current moment in historical sociology, this paper examines how the work of Black Radical writers helps us rethink existing methodological debates in the field. If we were to think with Du Bois and the Black Radical Tradition, how would historical sociology approach empirical cases? How should we think about theory-building, explanation, and comparison? How would we engage with archives and sources? Most centrally, which objectives might historical sociology pursue that would build on this lineage? This paper argues that the works of the BRT allow us to see the constitutive role of racism and colonialism in modernity and give us analytic and methodological tools to rethink the relationship between sociology and history, the goal of explanation and comparison, and our approach to archives. Taking the work of Du Bois and the Black Radical Tradition seriously helps us rearticulate key foundational methodological debates of our subfield.

We proceed in four steps. First, we sketch historical sociology's development and methodological conventions. Second, we explain how Du Bois and Black Radical writers urge us to rethink the historical period in which we live as an epoch that still carries the effects of the colonial encounter in 1492, the Atlantic slave trade, racial and colonial capitalism, and the global color line (Itzigsohn and Brown, 2020). This perspective has important implications for the questions we ask, and how we consider empirical cases. Third, we discuss three methodological insights: (1) the move to root theory in history, (2) the move to embrace conjunctural analysis and explanation, and (3) the move to compare within an entangled world. We end with a discussion on how to approach archival practices and empirical evidence.

Historical Sociology Across Four Waves

In the words of the Haitian historian and anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995), historical production includes "that which has happened" and "that which is said to have happened"—and European colonizers influenced both. Europeans held a dual form of power: A power of shaping social processes and the power to then narrate this history. European colonialism shaped the post-1492 world and simultaneously, it also conceptualized this world. In this process, it also defined who could legitimately produce knowledge about the world and about others, and whose knowledge was legitimate.

A number of postcolonial interventions have shown how this historical process has shaped the discipline of sociology (Bhambra 2007; Boatcă 2016; Connell 1997; Go 2016; Magubane 2016b; Meghji 2021; Moosavi 2023; Patil 2022). In only ever asking questions that arose from the heart of empires, sociology has reproduced what Julian Go (2016, 2020) referred to as the "imperial episteme"; it has viewed the world from this metropolitan perspective and then studied all parts of the world through these lenses. Theorists came from Europe, while the rest of the world supplied data; and even if non-European writers were considered theorists, their insights could only ever be particular, pertaining to their own lifeworlds (Go 2020).

The first wave of historical sociology were the writers whom we today consider the classical sociological canon. Karl Marx theorized European transformations in terms of the mode of production and class struggle, Max Weber in terms of rationalization and bureaucratization, and Émile Durkheim in terms of the changing division of labor and forms of solidarity. Though deeply worried and critical about these processes, the classical theorists looked at the European experience as the epitome of social development. They were aware that the world at the time was one of empires and thus global, colonial, and racialized, but they transformed the colonial geography of empire into a linear

temporality towards progress (Bhambra 2007; Bhambra and Holmwood, 2021; Boatcǎ 2013; Connell 1997; Zimmerman 2006). There were of course many other contemporary writers, grappling with the transformations of modernity at that time—most centrally W. E. B. Du Bois—but his work was ignored by the discipline and the social sciences at large (Itzigsohn and Brown, 2020; Morris 2015; Rabaka 2010; Wright 2017).

The 1970s saw the rise of a second wave of historical sociology. This was the foundational moment for contemporary historical sociology, and it established the basic elements of its methodology. Questions of democracy (Moore 1993; Rueschemeyer et al., 1992), revolutions (Goldstone 1986; Skocpol 1979), and nation state formation (Brubaker 1998; Tilly 1992) became the focus of the second wave. These studies relied on methodological nationalism, and naturalized nation states as units of analysis, isolating them from broader global relations (Bhambra 2014; Go and Lawson, 2017; Goswami 2002; Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002). This mode of analysis detached theoretical categories from specific historical contexts in the pursuit of identifying comparable mechanisms and naming formal processes (Mahoney and Rueschemeyer, 2003; Skocpol and Somers, 1980). The study of the role of colonialism, racism, and empire in the making of modernity were not a central concern.

The 1990s and early 2000s saw a third wave of historical sociology. This wave brought much greater attention to studies of patriarchy and gender (Adams 2005; Adams et al., 2005; Glenn 1992; Gordon 2012; Orloff 1993; Ray 2000) and it widened the focus on European social transformations to analyses of historical processes in the Global South (Centeno 2002; Deyo 1989; Foran 1993; Kurzman 2004; Mahoney 2010; Paige 1998). These studies importantly expanded the geographical concerns of the subfield, but the central theoretical concerns continued to emanate from the European and North American experiences.

The third wave also generated a significant body of work on race, which analyzed how racial hierarchies get mobilized to reinforce social and political orders and how people on the ground organize to change racial hierarchies (Fox 2012; Loveman 2014; Marx 1997; Parham 2017; Paschel 2016). These studies importantly demonstrated how racial formations and racism structure political, social, and cultural lives in different places at different points in time, though they did not focus on the links between race and colonialism, and other historical processes, such as conquest, indigenous dispossession, displacement, genocide, and racial enslavement (Hesse 2016).

This is indicative of a broader trend: Studies of race have developed somewhat conceptually separately from studies of empire and colonialism. Historical sociologists have taught us much about the social organization, functioning, and governance of empires (Adams 2005; Barkey 2008; Go 2008; Kumar 2019; Steinmetz 2008; Wilson 2011; Wyrtzen 2016). But this scholarship has paid less attention to how empires transformed not just the colonies but also the metropole, how they shaped the global color line and its local forms, and how the project of colonial rule fundamentally defined what it means to be modern (Quijano 2007; Wynter 1995, 2003).

Somewhat in parallel, World Systems analysis formulated a theoretical and methodological approach for understanding modern capitalism through a global lens. These scholars made the case that the goal of sociology is to understand the dynamic of the world system as the unit of analysis (Arrighi 1994; Wallerstein 2004). World Systems analysis built on a different tradition of historical analysis, one that started with Marxist analyses of imperialism (Hobson 1902; Lenin 1982 [1917]) and continued with dependency theory (Dos Santos 2000; Cardoso and Faletto, 1979; Evans 1979; Gunder Frank 1967). These theoretical approaches are important because they emphasized the global character of historical capitalism and the centrality of relations of power, exploitation, and extraction between different areas of the world economy. However, the role of racism and the

production of colonial difference in modernity were not central to Marxist theories of imperialism, dependency theorists, or World Systems analysis. The founders of the World Systems approach were familiar with the writings from BRT writers, but they positioned racism as an effect of the global division of labor and the world political system (Balibar and Wallerstein, 1991). They did not make it a structuring dimension of the world system (Go and Lawson, 2017; Bhambra 2011).[1] Later scholars, writing from a decolonial perspective, rectified this and put racism and colonialism at the center of their understanding of the world system (Boatça 2016; Grosfoguel 2002).

Concurrent with the third wave, a small group of scholars pursued research highlighting the intersections of modernity, colonialism, and racism. These scholars theorized how the emergence of modern categories of race was tied to the transatlantic slave trade and the European colonial project (Hesse 2000; Winant 2002; Zimmerman 2012). Others have traced how ideas of race and gender were consolidated and traveled within the imperial sphere (Magubane 2003; Mawani 2009; Patil 2022); or explained how the social sciences came about through colonial ways of knowing the world (Cooper and Stoler, 1997; Go 2016; Lazreg 2016; Quijano 2000). Moreover, a set of historical sociological works analyzed the historical intersections of class, race, and gender through the analytical framework of settler colonialism and the colonial racial project (Glenn 2015; 2009; Go 2007; Itzigsohn 2013; Jung 2015). These seminal works provide the context for a paradigmatic shift.

A contemporary generation of scholars—a fourth wave of historical sociologists—has raised a new set of questions and pointed to new directions for the field. These scholars highlight settler colonialism and the erasure of indigenous peoples (Murphy 2018; Nicholls 2021; Sabbagh-Khoury 2022a, b), center the effects of conquest (Schwartzman 2021), racial capitalism's subject-making (Matlon 2022) and anticolonial solidarities and resistance (Al-Hardan 2022; Eddins 2022). They link the formation of state bureaucracies to colonial discourses (Bohrt 2021), analyze the making of global health regimes through the colonial gaze (White 2023), seek to understand labor struggles through their emergence in racial capitalism (Edwards 2020; Khan 2021), or trouble the histories of rights formation through the contrapuntal demands of colonial subjects (Hammer 2020; Quisumbing King 2023). These scholars shed light on how European colonialism has shaped global structures of power, and how imperial subject populations resisted this onslaught (Hammer and White, 2019). Refusing to situate these studies as "particular" or self-contained studies of "empire" or "race," this emergent wave of scholars has formulated a different approach to historical sociology (Quisumbing King and White, 2021). Aiming to contribute to these developments in historical sociology, we turn to W. E. B Du Bois and the Black Radical Tradition to provide analytic and methodological underpinnings for this shift.

Rethinking Modernity from Its Margins

Scholars in the Black Radical tradition are united by an epistemic starting point, which is to look at the modern world from the perspective of the historical experience of the Africana diaspora. Du Bois (2007 [1903]) theorized the potential of this epistemic position as second sight. Viewing the world from behind the veil, these writers were keenly aware of the presence and effects of racism and colonialism. Their lived experience of racialization and colonization informs a view of modernity that is hidden from dominant accounts. This does not mean that social position or identity *determines* how they see the world—in fact, given the many different positions among Black Radical writers, this point would not be sustainable. Rather, the encounter with racism and colonialism made them more likely to center these structures in their theorizing (Bogues 2003; Go 2016; Itzigsohn and Brown, 2020).

What makes the Black Radical Tradition radical is, in the words of Anthony Bogues, an attempt to grapple with the "categories of thought by which they have learned to live" (2003, p. 12). Writers in the Black Radical Tradition often do this by inserting into world historical narratives the agency of enslaved and colonized people. Du Bois (1992 [1935]) begins with the revolutionary agency of the enslaved during Reconstruction, and out of this, develops an early analysis of the state as the racial state and of the racial and colonial character of historical capitalism (Itzigsohn and Brown, 2020). Anna Julia Cooper (2006) highlights the demands of Haitian Revolutionaries and in so doing, demonstrates the limits of conceptions of citizenship if they do not include the demands of the enslaved and colonized. C. L. R. James (2023 [1938]) and Walter Rodney (1972) highlight the centrality of workers in the colonies and hence make clear the metropolitan-colonial entanglements of capitalism. Aimé Césaire (1950) points to the centrality of racism and colonialism in European humanism and hence questions its universality, and Frantz Fanon (2007 [1961]) generates an analysis of colonial subjectivity and anticolonial revolution, while questioning European political futures.

The Atlantic world holds theoretical relevance for this tradition of thought because it provides the context which gave rise to theoretical categories such as "democracy," "citizenship," "revolutions," "the nation," and "modernity" itself. Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) calls these concepts "North Atlantic universals," suggesting that while these categories purport to describe the world, they also hide a particular colonial and racist history. What is more, these categories are not just descriptors, but they have operated as emotional prescriptions of *desired* political futures. Because of the narrative power of European colonialism, the Atlantic world shaped not only our current world order, but also the categories through which we still understand the world. Aware of the limitations of European categories, Black Radical writers then strive for categories that aim to imagine a more universal humanity and they do this by centering the agency of the enslaved and colonized.

As a result, this tradition forces us to ask questions about racial enslavement, displacement, genocide, colonial difference, racial and colonial capitalism, limited forms of citizenship and sovereignty, colonial subjectivities, knowledge production, and the archive. Beginning from these histories does not simply mean an exploration into new topics, but rather, it produces a rethinking of the modern world and the structures that constituted it. In that vein, Stuart Hall (2019 [1992]) and Sylvia Wynter (2003) begin with the histories of conquest and hence make clear that Europeans only recognized their own sense of self in relationship to the indigenous populations of the Americas, while then erasing their humanity (Hall 2019 [1992]; Wynter 1995). Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) and Saidiya Hartman (1997), in turn, came face to face with colonial silences in the archive and hence rethink the archive as an instrument of knowledge production.

One may wonder how to work with a framework that centers the Americas and the Atlantic world in sociological studies of the rest of the world (Walcott 2021). First, writers in this tradition make clear that this system expands beyond the Atlantic world. Du Bois (1992), for instance, links the Atlantic world to an analysis of colonialism globally. In *Black Reconstruction* he states,

> "Out of the exploitation of the dark proletariat comes the Surplus Value filched from human beasts which, in cultured lands, the Machine and harnessed Power veil and conceal. The emancipation of man is the emancipation of labor and the emancipation of labor is the freeing of that basic majority of workers who are yellow, brown and black" (Du Bois 1992, p. 16).

Du Bois saw capitalism as a global system based on the exploitation of workers of color throughout the world. The color line is global, and it generated different political and social formations throughout the world. What the different historical experiences of the color line have in common is that they are the result of European expansion and colonialism.

Other modern empires, ethnonational formations, or conflicts may have different dynamics that historical sociologists will want to explore. But these cases unfold within the overall dynamic of European colonial empires that have shaped the hegemonic colonial episteme from 1492 onwards (Wynter 1995). Contemporary works already demonstrate how to conduct this work. Mishal Khan (2021) explains how Britain's abolition of enslavement centered in the Caribbean world shaped debates over forced labor in British India. Anca Parvulescu and Manuela Boatcă (2022) show how to link regional and global histories: They analyze the key social processes in Transylvania, including questions of land, patriarchy, and Roma enslavement, which unfolded differently to Atlantic history. But at the same time, they situate Transylvania within the larger history of colonial modernity. Based on Laura Doyle's (2014) "inter-imperiality," Parvulescu and Boatcă (2022) model an approach that examines different imperial formations, while never losing sight of how Atlantic empires produced the central categories of modernity.

Atlantic dynamics also shape the social worlds of the Pacific and Indian oceans, and, in fact, colonialism intimately connected these different oceanic regions (Lowe 2015; Quisumbing King 2019; Shilliam 2015). Veda Kim (2023) uses the framework of "subimperialism" to trace the foundational violence of the Jeju genocide for the South Korean nation, within the context of U.S. imperial power. Kazuki Suzuki (2021) shows how Japan developed a form of racial imperialism rooted in a racial formation project that, on the one hand, was not centered around White supremacy, but, on the other hand, emerged in the context of Japan's engagement with Western empires and racial formations. These studies conduct careful analyses of local histories while maintaining the relationship to the global processes that have shaped racial and colonial modernity. To be clear, this historical sociology centers empire, but it is not a comparative sociology of empires. The focus of this sociology is the historical period that starts with the European conquest of the Americas, with many different local variations and nested power structures. As this framework is concerned with the post-1492 world, it does not speak to concerns that precede this historical period.

Finally, while beginning from a different historical and experiential starting point, indigenous scholars have also raised important questions about settler colonialism, highlighting land dispossession as central to the modern world. It is important to note the epistemic similarities, but also divergences between these traditions: Scholars, such as Jodi Byrd (2011), Glen Sean Coulthard (2014), Elizabeth Povinelli (2002), Areej Sabbagh-Khoury (2023), Audra Simpson (2014), Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2013), and Patrick Wolfe (2016) and many more, make visible how processes of attempted indigenous genocide, land dispossession, and settler ways of relating to nature shaped the modern world. Indigenous thinkers thereby add a different perspective to the concerns of the Black Radical Tradition, and these two traditions cannot be collapsed into one. Yet, in thinking across the different experiences of racial enslavement, colonization, *and* settler colonialism, scholars have found productive ways of explaining the interlocking historical processes of different forms of colonialism (King 2019; Murphy 2018). In allowing for these different starting points, historical sociology greatly widens the scope of its concerns, and with it, its narrative of modernity.

Historicity, Conjunctures, and Entanglements

Building on Du Bois and the Black Radical Tradition gives us a different understanding of modernity—but this is just the first step. The Black Radical Tradition also provides a set of answers to longer-standing methodological questions: These writers offer a different way (1) to build theory, (2) to think about explanation, and (3) to situate our cases in an entangled world while still allowing for comparison. The first methodological insight is that writers in this tradition theorize their own historical experiences. Looking at the world not with an abstract and universalizing gaze, theirs is a gaze that is shaped by the problems they confronted. As a result, these writers do not search for general explanations of abstract social processes but develop concepts and explanations that are rooted in the specific historical situations they seek to explain. Their concepts and arguments refer to concrete historical situations and historical actors. Their theories aim to illuminate these situations with the purpose to act upon them. Their sociology is rooted in an understanding of the historical epoch and the historical moment and, as such, they bring together sociological theory and historical analysis.

Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction* is a model for this type of scholarship. As Cedric Robinson interpreted it in *Black Marxism* (2020 [1983]):

> Du Bois committed himself to the development of a theory of history, which by its emphasis on mass action was both a critique of the ideologies of American socialist movements and a revision of Marx's theory of revolution and class struggle (p. 196).

Black Reconstruction is a work of history, but its goal is not just to establish what happened during that period but to build social theory—a theory that uses conceptual tools from Du Bois' own sociological perspective.

Following Weber's (1978 [1921]) guidelines, comparative historical sociology developed in a different way. It conceived history as the field to which sociological analysis is applied, as it could be to organizations, stratification, or any other social phenomena. The historical specificities of the cases are less important, and the subjectivities of actors are reduced to ideal types (think here, for example, of instrumental rationality, substantive rationality, etc.). As a result, theory building is divorced from the historically concrete embeddedness of cases and analysts have tended to look at history as a dataset, rather than viewing history as shaping theoretical concepts.

To be sure, not all historical sociologists accepted this methodology. Writers after the cultural turn have critiqued this form of theorizing. Cultural historical sociologists emphasize that concepts cannot be detached from context (Calhoun 1995, 1996; Göçek 2014; Glaeser 2011; Reed 2011; Sewell 2005; Somers 1996; Steinmetz 1999; Suny and Kennedy, 2001; Zubrzycki 2009). They argue that all social action is embedded in peoples' interpretations of reality. Margaret Somers (1996), in particular, highlights how 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; Reed 2011; Zimmerman 2012). The theorists of the cultural turn were critical of the second wave's methodological advances and offered important insights into the historicity of theory. But they did not extend these insights to the domain of racism and empire in structuring knowledge production and social relations. This again highlights the importance of the Black Radical Tradition: Looking at the world from the margins means that the processes of colonialism and racist dehumanization could not but be central to the modern world.

The second methodological insight of Black Radical writers concerns their modes of explanation. Black Radical writers do not propose ahistorical, generalizable hypotheses and mechanisms nor use counterfactual logics. How then does the Black Radical Tradition think about explanation? Here, Stuart Hall's use of Gramscian conjunctural analysis provides a useful framework. The point is to understand the interplay of structure and change in concrete historical moments (Hall 2021 [1988]; Hall et al., 1978). Conjunctures are moments of historical rupture—much like Sewell's (2005) theorizations of events. Conjunctures are particularly advantageous windows to understand the structures of power and the ruptures in the social order. While conjunctures give rise to new possibilities of social relations and new practices of sociability, Hall also shows that historical legacies continue, existing structures attempt to reassert themselves and reestablish the previous order. Often the previous order is present in a different form in the practices that emerge from conjunctures. The task of the historical sociologist is to highlight when and how new political possibilities emerge and to then analyze the various constellations within this historical moment. It is up to the analyst to make the case for what might constitute a conjuncture, and these choices must be theoretically informed.

The methodology developed by the second wave of historical sociology was the opposite of this. It aimed to devise abstract concepts (ideal types), patterns and paths of causal relations (mechanisms) to then apply them to different cases across history and geography. Second wave historical sociologists aimed to identify variables, or combinations of variables, that could explain specific outcomes; thus, trying to replicate the hypothesis-testing logic of multivariate causal analysis using a small number of cases. This, for example, is the goal of Theda Skocpol's (1979) Millsian analysis, James Mahoney's work on causal models and process tracing (Mahoney 2016, 2015, 2012, 2008) or Charles Ragin's comparative method (Ragin 1987, 2008).

Conjunctural analysis, instead, is attentive to context and contingency, while at the same time allowing us to place these moments in the larger context of colonial modernity. This means that historical sociological explanation is multi-causal: Rather than seeking to identify monolithic causal relationships, the point is to gain a complex understanding of why and how power gets reproduced, and how rupture is possible (Decoteau 2018). In this mode of analysis, the goal is not to look for explanatory variables or mechanisms that apply across cases, but to study and contrast different cases to understand how racism, coloniality, and power developed in each of them. This way, seemingly universal and abstract concepts acquire local and concrete textures, and we can see their different forms and the relations between them.

Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction* provides an example of conjunctural analysis. During the Reconstruction period, Du Bois writes, "the slave went free; stood a moment in the sun; and then moved back again toward slavery" (Du Bois 1992 p. 30), representing a moment when the newly freed attained political rights. Reconstruction is a historical opening with political possibilities after the Civil War, followed by denials and the reproduction of an existing power structure. Du Bois's conjunctural analysis is at once local and global: While deeply grounded in the historical specificities of the American South, the story of the American South is a manifestation of a larger global colonial project. Du Bois's 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.

The third methodological insight of the Black Radical Tradition concerns the unit of analysis and how to contrast cases. For Black Radical writers, the particularity and specificity of different historical moments and places is important, as is the embedding and connecting of cases to the global trends of colonialism and capitalism. The links and interactions between the local and the global are a key focus of the analyses. For example,

Du Bois's historical sociology contrasted 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. All forms of racism are linked to colonialism, but they developed differently due to distinct local historical contingencies. For him, the task of historical sociology is to document and contrast these different forms of racism and their link to the overall historical process of racial and colonial modernity (Du Bois 1979 [1947]).

Methodologically, the Black Radical Tradition avoids the attachment to isolated, methodologically nationalist cases of the second wave, in favor of embedding cases in a larger post-1492 world. If we accept that our cases are embedded in larger historical contexts, then we cannot think about them as separated from the global systems of power and inequality of which they are part. As a result, we must jettison the idea that nation states are necessarily the most appropriate unit of analysis. Again, this is the opposite of the methodology of the second wave historical sociologists (Burawoy 1989). For example, Skocpol (1979) analyzed the French revolution within the boundaries of metropolitan France. Even when she accounted for the effects of war on the French Revolution, she thought of war as an external factor influencing the internal situation of France—she never theorized the fact that France was an empire and that its wars were imperial wars (see also Go and Lawson, 2017).

Black Radical writers show us how to transcend this attachment to the nation state. C. L. R. James' (2023 [1938]) classical account of the Haitian Revolution, published thirty-one years before Skocpol's seminal book, had already shown that we cannot think of revolutions in the metropole and the colony as separate events. James shows how the French and the Haitian revolution were linked and influenced each other. Furthermore, James teaches us how the enslaved rose in revolt and won a battle against three empires, and thereby shaped the course of world history. Even before James, Anna Julia Cooper (2006) in her dissertation defended at the Sorbonne in 1925, demonstrates how we cannot understand the debates over citizenship and rights in metropolitan France without accounting for the demands of the Haitian revolutionaries. Haiti was then part of imperial France, and the Haitian revolutionaries demanded that the same rights that the assembly was conferring on White French citizens apply throughout the empire. It was the denial of these rights and Napoleon's reinstatement of enslavement in the Caribbean that led to war and eventually to Haitian independence. Cooper's account makes clear the limits of Eurocentric understandings of the development of individual and political rights. Citizenship and democracy have been historically racialized, and to understand these entanglements, we need to position the seemingly abstract language of rights in its global colonial context (Hammer 2020).

Frantz Fanon perhaps best lays out the deceit of analyzing cases separately, thus making the power relationships between them invisible. He writes,

> This European opulence is literally a scandal, for it was built on the backs of slaves, it fed on the blood of slaves and owes its very existence to the soil and subsoil of the underdeveloped world. Europe's well-being and progress were built with the sweat and corpses of blacks, Arabs, Indians, and Asians (Fanon 2007 [1961], p. 53).

It is hence impossible to understand the social and economic conditions in one locality outside of the colonial system within which it came about. Du Bois makes a similar point in *Black Reconstruction*. The story of enslavement and emancipation, of Reconstruction and its end is at once a local story that developed in the American South, but also always at the center of the much larger global structure.

The work of postcolonial sociologists has greatly contributed to develop this point. For example, Zine Magubane (2005) calls for thinking in terms of overlapping territories and intertwined histories to overcome the methodological nationalism of historical sociology. Gurminder Bhambra's (2014) connected sociologies foregrounds connections as the object for sociological inquiry. In a similar move, Manuela Boatcă (2016) highlights the importance of global entanglements and Go (2016) too has made relationality one of pillars of his postcolonial rethinking of sociology. Furthermore, Go and Lawson (2017) make the case specifically for global historical scholarship, outlining the possibilities of a historical sociology that would take relations as opposed to substantive ontologies as a unit of analysis.

Embracing global entanglements and the idea that theoretical categories are tied to historical contexts means to give up on one kind of comparative method—comparisons that approach units of analysis as if they were independent of one another. But should we jettison comparison altogether? The answer to this question is no. In fact, Black Radical writers model a different form of comparison, which is the in-depth study and contrast of historically specific, yet interconnected situations. This kind of comparison is important because it can help us better understand local and global historical processes and brings insights into the successes and failures of certain actions and choices.

Here, we can turn to the Martinican writer and politician Aimé Césaire for inspiration. Césaire was deeply concerned with the question of whether Martinique should pursue political independence from France or whether Martinique should strive to be an equal département as part of France. Césaire embarked on a study of Haiti and its struggle as a postcolonial nation state amidst the pressures of a neocolonial world. From this comparative analysis, Césaire concluded that Martinique might be better off as a département of France (Césaire 2000). He was aware that Haiti and Martinique would be in a similar structural position in the world order and, given the overarching French (neo-)colonial project, the two cases are not independent of each other. Yet, the comparison gave him important information on the consequences of political choices. One may object that this makes historical sociology too close to history, but situating theory within historical context does not mean abandoning the goal of finding general trends. Césaire shows us a way to look for global trends and patterns that are nevertheless embedded in their local historical contexts.

Taking the Black Radical Tradition's methodological insights seriously means that theory-building is not a quest for generalizability. Rather than aiming for transhistorical generalizations and comparisons, this tradition theorizes from history, and analyzes historical situations in their complexity and contingent character. This implies giving up the search for comparative abstract mechanisms and ideal types in favor of context-bound descriptive and explanatory narratives. The narratives that emerge in this sociology are still causal—indeed, to place colonialism and racism at the center of our analysis is a causal statement—but rather than isolating variables, testing hypotheses, and comparing cases, the point is to explore the complexity, interconnections, and contingencies of events and actions in their concrete local and global dimensions. Explanations aim to analyze the complexity of concrete historical situations with the goal of better understanding systems of domination and the possibilities and limits for ruptures. The aim for knowledge production, then, is to change the world as it is.

Archives, Empirical Evidence, Practice

Historical sociology has for a long time not dealt with the colonial construction of the archive. Second wave scholarship was based on the synthesis of large numbers of secondary materials, before the field transitioned into primary archival work. For decades, historical sociologists had noted the possibility of bias in the use of secondary sources, but primary

archival research had 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 had not been a central part of the subfield's methodological debates. In contrast, historians have long debated the archive as an epistemic institution (Blouin and Rosenberg, 2011; Decker 2013; Fuentes 2016; Mbembe 2002; Schwartz and Cook, 2002; Weld 2014), and, inspired by this work, historical sociologists have more recently also made important interventions in thinking about the archive as a repertoire of knowledge production (Brown 2018; Lara-Millán et al., 2020; Mayrl and Wilson, 2020; Santos 2023; Skarpelis 2020).

The writers of the Black Radical Tradition offer us further guidance to address archival politics. C. L. R. James (2000 [1971]), when reflecting on the writing of *The Black Jacobins*, recognized that his description of the Haitian revolution was limited by his use of the colonial archive. This had led him to use colonial categories in his analysis. Comparing his work with Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction*, James explained that Du Bois went beyond that archive, seeking to understand the subjectivity of the enslaved, and for that reason he considered Du Bois's book better than his. 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 racial enslavement. He used the wealth of community memory and community conversations to bring to the fore the subjectivity of the actors of those who lived through the Civil War (Du Bois 1992 [1935]; James 2000 [1971]).

Writers in the Black Radical Tradition make the case that far from objective historical artifacts, primary documents come to fruition through a social process that involves important choices. Inherent in the making of archives are strategic colonial silences that mirror the silences of colonial knowledge production. 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 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.

State archives, for example, 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 to govern it; and whom it considers "a problem" to be dealt with. State archives are not outside of history, but in themselves produced by it. To account for and make visible this colonial implication requires us, as Ann Stoler (2002, 2010) puts it, to "read along the grain." The point is not to discard state archives as inherently colonial, 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 shapes how we analyze it. For instance, the spatial organization of archives 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; Lowe 2015). Even though the same political elites steered the colonial project or benefitted from enslavement and resource extraction 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, as the Black Radical Tradition shows, requires working beyond—and against— the organization of the archive and the easy categorization of nation states as units of analysis. The point is to question the processes of the making and maintaining of the archive itself.

We must 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" (Mbembe 2002; Trouillot 1995).

History is not solely recorded in the institutions we commonly imagine when we consider archives. 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 (Göçek 2014). Here, Saidiya Hartman (1997, 2019) asks a central question, which is: 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 sociologist's 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 the power involved in the construction of the archive and how some stories cannot be heard in a colonial regime of knowledge production. Documenting and understanding these silences is important interpretative work in understanding power structures and the unspeakabilities of the modern world (Brown 2018; Santos 2023; Sarkar 2001).

Just 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 not trained to recognize and read these markers. 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 1997; James 2000). Tracing these "ruins" gives us one way to make visible the colonial violence enshrined all around us (Habib et al., 2021; Stoler 2013; Tinsley 2021).

Finally, the Black Radical Tradition highlights how subjugated knowledges are never analytically separate from histories of the modern world. Subjugated knowledges do not simply offer a lens into the lived experiences or lifeworlds of oppressed peoples. Rather, drawing on subjugated archives allows us to reconstitute the world from marginalized perspectives and gives us one window into the larger social structures definitive of the modern world. These untapped archives offer windows into macro historical processes we have so far not seen as constitutive of the modern world. In critically engaging the archive

and opening previously silenced archives, we may therefore be able to reconstitute what we understand modernity to be.

Finally, it is important to note that the line between primary and secondary literature is necessarily blurry. Historiography and academic literature also constitutes an archive, so the same attention to the politics of knowledge production applies to this kind of work as well. Just as the turn to primary archives does not allow us to evade the difficult questions of colonial knowledge production; working with secondary sources is subject to the same epistemic concerns. Historical monographs are embedded in existing theoretical and methodological approaches and must therefore be evaluated in and against their social and historical contexts and positionalities. Here again, the question is not one of all together rejecting historiographies as biased, but rather to analyze their viewpoints with an eye towards its silences. The work of Black Radical theorists provides a prism through which we can begin to navigate the world of archives and secondary sources and embark on the difficult work of reinterpreting our world and our lives.

The Road Ahead

Historical sociology is shifting, and a new generation of scholars is forging ahead with new questions and new analytic strategies. To ground this shift, we turned to Black Radical writers to provide answers to existing methodological debates in the field: What is the relation between theory and history? What is the goal of explanation? How should we approach our empirical cases and comparison? How should we approach archives and primary sources? If we take seriously Du Bois and the Black Radical Tradition, we cannot squeeze them into existing sociological conventions; rather, we can learn from these writers different analytic and methodological approaches to know the world.

The Black Radical Tradition has a historicized understanding of theory; theories are rooted in historical context. Explanation is not about finding generalizable causal models and mechanisms, but about understanding the complexities of historically contingent structures of dominance and the possibilities of resistance and change. This means giving up the search for abstract mechanisms and ideal types in favor of conjunctural analysis and context-bound descriptive and explanatory narratives. Furthermore, BRT writers eschew methodological nationalism and ahistorical comparative strategies. Instead, cases have historical particularities, but are not detached from larger epochal historical processes, and hence become lenses into the global power structures of the modern world. As a result, rather than engaging in comparison of seemingly independent "entities," they trace the specificities of the local and its linkages to the global. Finally, the work of Black Radical writers has paved the way to think critically about archives and historical narratives, urging us to ground knowledge production in an understanding of the politics of colonial history.

This shift inevitably involves a lot of unlearning and relearning. We need to engage and familiarize ourselves with these writers, rethink how we understand the relationship between history and sociology, learn to question the archive and read it along the grain. And yet, this major change is worthwhile to avoid the reproduction of current epistemic exclusions. The payoff is overcoming the limitations of the discipline and gaining a more accurate understanding of the mutually constitutive character of racism, colonialism, and modernity—it is for a sociology that is more attuned to the historical experiences of those living in the margins of colonial modernity.

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Notes

[1] To be sure, Fernando Henrique Cardoso's earlier work was about the Black population in Florianopolis, and about enslavement and the development of capitalism in Brazil, but the central role of race in modernity was not central to his later theorizing of dependent development (Cardoso 2000; 2015).

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