



ON DECOLONIZING SOCIOLOGY

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Abstract: There is a growing interest in decolonizing Sociology. Yet, there is no agreed upon definition of what this entails. In this essay I address two questions related to the decolonizing sociology effort. The first one is whether sociology has a mainstream and, if so, how can we describe it? In discussing this question, I also address the relationship between sociology and science. The second question is how do we go about decolonizing the discipline? I present the outlines of a proposal to decolonize sociology's methodologies and practices and I also discuss the differences between alternative approaches and the question of what labels should we use. I don't presume to have definitive answers to these questions. I offer these reflections as a contribution to the effort of rethinking sociology, a process that needs to be a collective endeavor.

Keywords: sociology, decolonization, racialized modernity, W.E.B. Du Bois, mainstream sociology.

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There is a growing interest in Sociology in decolonizing the discipline. Yet, there is no agreed upon definition of what this entails. Many of us have started to walk a critical path, but we lack a shared understanding of where we want to go, a compass of sorts. In this essay I want to address two questions that are often posed as we walk the decolonizing path. First, does sociology have a mainstream and, if so, how can we describe it? Critics of the decolonization approach point to the diversity of methods and approaches in Sociology and argue that we can't really talk about a mainstream. The first task of decolonizing, then, is identifying what is that we want to decolonize and why. Second, how do we go about decolonizing the discipline? One often encounters the argument that the critiques of the discipline don't articulate a clear alternative. To be sure, there have been important critiques of the discipline and attempts to articulate alternative ways of practicing sociology. The proposal presented here builds on these previous efforts. I offer these reflections as a contribution to the effort of rethinking sociology, a process that needs to be a collective endeavor.

Does sociology have a mainstream?

I often encounter the argument that sociology is a broad and plural discipline, that it does not have a mainstream,

and therefore there is nothing to decolonize. Yet, I believe there is a mainstream that those that are outside of it can clearly see. The mainstream is composed by those epistemological and methodological approaches that: a) are likely to be present in graduate training programs; b) are likely to inform papers that are published in the top journals (the *American Sociological Review* and the *American Journal of Sociology*); and c) their belonging in the discipline is not questioned.

From this perspective the mainstream of the discipline is composed by two broad epistemological/methodological approaches:

1. Positivism: positivists in the social sciences assert that we know the social world directly through empirical measurement and that we can model and predict the relationship between different aspects of our social reality (operationalized as variables), even if that relationship is probabilistic and not deterministic. Things that we can't measure or propositions that we can assess empirically are not the object of the social science. Furthermore, positivists believe that the researcher is external to the object of research and that lived experience does not affect knowledge production. The key to objectivity is having reliable and valid measures and the right models. There is an affinity between positivists and quantitative methods (although not all the positivists engage in quantitative studies and not all those who engage in

quantitative sociology are positivists). Quantitative methods are central to all graduate programs, and the work of positivist sociologists represent a large percentage of the papers published in the top journals. Furthermore, positivists are never told that what they do is not sociology.

2. Postpositivist sociologies: a large number of sociologists embrace postpositivist epistemologies—either constructivist or realist.² Constructivists assert that social reality is the product of social interaction and communication and therefore not external to us. The task of sociology is to interpret meanings, not to establish regularities. Constructivists often embrace “grounded theory,” that is, they let their empirical findings guide their theoretical constructions—which assumes that they do not bring with them a preestablished viewpoint through which they see the field. Realists—or critical realist—sociologists assert that the social world is external to us and that we can know it. But different from positivism, realism emphasizes that knowledge is always perspectival; we know the world only through our theoretical lens. Our theoretical perspectives inform the questions we pose and the aspects of the world we pay attention to and try to understand. Furthermore, postpositivists argue that not all that is relevant in the social world is observable or measurable.

Constructivists engage mostly—though not only—in qualitative studies. Qualitative methods have been part of the discipline from its beginning. Many, though not all, of realist sociologists engage in comparative historical sociology. Some of them—those that follow the path set by Theda Skocpol and Jim Mahoney³—try to emulate the quantitative logic of research, looking for ways to assess the effects of isolated variables (albeit using small n samples). Others—those that follow the work of scholars such as Margaret Sommers or William Sewell⁴—are more anchored in historical methodologies and try to analyze their cases from within their own logic.

Urban ethnography and historical sociology were central to the discipline from before the rise to hegemony of quantitative methods. Qualitative courses are likely to be present in most graduate programs. Historical sociology courses are sometimes present in graduate training, although not as much as quantitative and qualitative courses, but students are likely to encounter the work of realist sociologists in theory courses too—the epistemological premises of constructivism and critical realism, however, are seldom discussed. The work of constructivist and realist (and critical realist) scholars is regularly published in the top journals, and the belonging of postpositivist scholars in the discipline is unlikely to be challenged, though sometimes quantitative scholars consider qualitative and historical methods “soft methods,” or “not really scientific.”

These are then the components of the mainstream. The positivist mostly quantitative scholars, the

constructivist mostly qualitative scholars, and the critical realist mostly historical sociologists. This is indeed quite a heterogeneous mainstream. It includes different methodologies and different epistemologies. It is particularly heterogeneous when compared to the other social sciences that are much more centered around theoretical paradigms, epistemologies, and methods. It is understandable that anyone who is part of this variegated mainstream would be puzzled if told that the discipline has a mainstream and will tend to question this notion.

But the positivists and postpositivists in the mainstream have several things in common. They construct their arguments mostly through middle range theories that rely on hypotheses and/or causal mechanisms. These middle range theories are drawn mainly from Eurocentric theoretical frameworks. Also, most middle range theoretical approaches are built on methodological nationalism and analytical bifurcation.⁵ Realists and constructivists recognize that the practice of the social sciences has an effect on society that needs to be accounted for, and that society’s dominant ideas and norms affect the social scientist. But, like positivists, they believe that social scientists can transcend their positionality and be detached observers of social life. Also, whereas there is considerable work in the mainstream measuring racial gaps and inequalities, most of this work is not critical of racism and coloniality as constitutive elements of modernity. The mainstream is also not critical of the way the discipline and the university work.

The mainstream then is diverse and contentious, but it is clearly visible to those of us who do not share its epistemological and methodological premises. Those who are not part of the mainstream are mostly critical scholars—critical of racism, colonialism, and patriarchy. These scholars make the critique of the existing structures of oppression and exclusion the center of their scholarship. They also criticize the racism and colonialism embedded in the discipline’s theories, methods, and methodologies.⁶ And they are also often critical of the way the university works. Still, there is also a great variety of positions outside the mainstream.

The World System perspective, for example, started by presenting itself as an alternative to the existing disciplines and proposing a historical social science.⁷ Today the people who work within the World System perspective have their own section (PEWS – Political Economy of the World System)—and their own journal (*The Journal of World System Research*) within the American Sociological Association (ASA). What started as a holistic challenge to the disciplines has been institutionalized as an accepted part of sociology. Yet, it is not part of the mainstream because it is not a regular part of graduate programs, and it doesn’t have a strong presence in top journals.



Another set of perspectives that are not part of the mainstream are critical race approaches (CRT, racial formations, systemic racism, racialized social systems, Black Feminism). Today many sociologists working on questions of race and racism do so from one of these perspectives. People working on race have two sections in the ASA (the Racial and Ethnic Minorities section and the Race, Gender and Class section) and also an ASA sponsored journal (*Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*), which in my opinion is the best journal in American sociology. Still, these approaches are ignored by the mainstream. They are not a central part of graduate training (not all the programs have courses on race and ethnicity and when they have them, they are electives) and they don't appear regularly in top journals (even though the top journals are a little bit more receptive than in the past). Most fields in sociology still manage to avoid addressing race and racism.

Within critical race perspectives there are a range of approaches with different degrees of distance from the mainstream. On the one hand, there is an emerging quantcrit approach that embraces critical race theory and uses quantitative methods to analyze systemic racism.⁸ The quantcrit approach has one foot on the mainstream by virtue of its analytical methods that are those of the core of the mainstream. And one foot outside the mainstream by virtue of its critical race perspective. On the other hand, Black Feminism, particularly in Patricia Hill Collins's⁹ version, poses a strong challenge to the mainstream's epistemologies and methodologies by grounding knowledge production in lived experience and rejecting claims about the detachment of the social scientist.

What about scholars who want to decolonize sociology? Until recently these scholars found themselves outside of the discipline, in other interdisciplinary fields such as Ethnic Studies or Africana Studies, or on the very outer edges of the discipline. The decolonizing critique is not part of the training of graduate students, and it is not represented in top journals. Of late, calls for decolonizing sociology have become more visible and there have been several panels in conferences on this question. But these calls are still rejected by most of the mainstream that would rather keep the decolonizing approach in the margins. The reason for that is that the decolonizing push represents a challenge to the hegemonic understandings and practices of the discipline. A challenge meant to expand the boundaries of what is recognized as legitimate forms of knowledge in sociology in order to make the discipline more habitable to people who look at the world from its margins and have a commitment to use sociology for liberatory change.

Is sociology science? And if so, so what?

One argument often posed by mainstream sociologists is that what defines the mainstream of the discipline is the scientific method. There are three related claims

here. The first one is that science is what defines the mainstream of the discipline. A second, implicit claim is about the positive value of science. And finally, there is the claim that the critical approaches are normative and not scientific.

Let's examine these claims. First, is science what defines the mainstream? In order to answer this, we first need to define science.¹⁰ I'd suggest that science is a way of looking at the natural and social world based on systematic observation and gathering of information and the checking of our assertions against the evidence we encounter. If we accept this definition, can we say that sociology is a science? Yes, absolutely. Perhaps some quantitative sociologists will have issues with the scientific character of qualitative or historical methods, but I would argue that all forms of sociology try to gather information systematically and try to check their claims in relation to what they found. Of course, it is more complicated than that, and there are many debates about how our ways of understanding the world and our experiences influence what we see, and how what we see is fully or in part constructed by us. These are long standing debates between positivists, realists, and constructivists, between those that favor the detachment of science and those that assert the need for critical approaches. But following the definition I proposed, I'd argue that sociology is indeed a scientific discipline.

But is science an unquestioned good? We've known since Durkheim¹¹ that in the modern world science has a quasi-religious status, that it enjoys a great deal of respect, and it generates a strong sense of almost unquestioned identification. It is, in fact, a form of civic religion. But is this unquestioned positive assessment of science granted? On the one hand, the applications of science have given us many of the things that we enjoy: medicines and vaccines, the internet, and the ability to travel to distant places. They have allowed us to live in ways unthinkable to previous generations. Science has given us the computer in which I write and the opportunity to be in almost immediate contact across distances. But, at the same time, science has been used to justify racism. Scientists have told us that harmful things are not harmful. Science has helped create terrifying weapons. Science has made possible very scary forms of social control. Science has given us tools to change our energy matrix and also the industries that have polluted the world.

Perhaps the defenders of the unquestioned good of science can argue that the bad uses are distortions of science, but are they? If science is a method of looking at the world, then that method can be applied and has been applied for all sorts of purposes. Science has been part and parcel of the forms of oppression and exclusion of racial and colonial modernity and it has silenced alternative ways of relating to the world. The decolonial critique of science focuses on it being a part

of the colonial matrix of power. Does that mean that we need to reject science? I don't think so, at least I am not willing to take the critique to that extreme. But asserting that something is scientific does not exempt it from scrutiny. Perhaps, in a pragmatic way, we need to assess different forms of science and their applications by their consequences.

I did my undergraduate studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem (my family went to exile in Israel in the 1970s, during the last military dictatorship in Argentina, and I lived there until I came to the U.S. for graduate studies in 1990). During my studies, I had the opportunity to take a seminar with Shmuel Eisenstadt, who was one of the most impressive professors I studied with. He was able to present ideas in ways that led you to think in new directions, whether you agreed with him or not. I was always puzzled by how someone could be so rambling, convoluted, and jargonistic while writing and so exciting while speaking. Most of the time I didn't agree with him, but the one thing that I took away from that seminar was the justification Eisenstadt offered for the value of sociology. For him sociology was the quintessential democratic discipline. He asserted that authoritarian regimes could deal with philosophy and political theory because those fields were abstract and did not address everyday realities. But sociology, with its empirical focus on concrete social relations provides tools for society's reflexivity; that is its value. And because of this empirical focus on concrete social relations, he argued, sociology could only thrive in democratic societies. I don't know if that claim holds empirically, but I remembered being impressed by the argument.

In that seminar at least, Eisenstadt was careful to frame his justification in terms of the contribution of sociology to the reflexivity of the public sphere and not to public policy. He knew well the potential bad effects of sociology on public policy, since in the 1950s he conducted research that justified and legitimized the policies of the Israeli government towards Jewish immigrants from North Africa and the Middle East, policies that cemented durable forms of inequality. In any case, if we accept Eisenstadt's justification for sociology, then we need to assess the good of the discipline by its contributions to social reflexivity (and we could have asked Eisenstadt about the role of the Israeli social sciences in legitimizing settler colonialism).

What can we say then about sociology in the United States? Rooted in pragmatism, mainstream American sociology has been the science of moderate technocratic reform. It has a salutary desire to address "social problems," but it fails to understand what those problems are. American sociology has produced lots of works about racial and gender gaps—and it is indeed important to document existing inequalities—but at the same time the discipline has failed to address racism, patriarchy, and colonialism. While sociology has

advocated for reforms to address racial gaps, at the same time it has legitimized the racialized order of things. Of course, the discipline is broad, and anyone can come up with examples of sociologists that have been critical of existing social structures. This is true, and in particular in the field of race and ethnicity we have recently seen a lot of very good critical work. But I am talking about the mainstream of the discipline as I defined it above.

And if you doubt me, I invite you to check how many articles in the main sociology journals are critical of colonialism or settler colonialism, how many papers were published in sociology journals about the ways in which racism and colonialism constructed and still construct our world—which is not the same as talking about racial disparities or putting a race variable in a regression. The discipline has started to analyze its colonial origins, but it has been reluctant to address its colonial present. The discipline has a preference for apolitical and technocratic policy recommendations to address social problems—a preference not corresponded by policy makers and technocrats who prefer to listen to economists—but it does not question the fundamental global and local structures of inequality or analyzes the forms of subjectivity and practice they generate.

And this is why in spite of the fact that many years ago I was truly impressed by Eisenstadt's justification of sociology, today I prefer Du Bois' take on the social sciences.¹² In his youth, Du Bois saw the role of science along reformist pragmatic lines. When he wrote *The Philadelphia Negro*, he thought that he would document with massive amounts of data the work of the color line and that that would lead the city elites to change their ways and undo the racist barriers to opportunity that the Black population of the city faced. Of course, that was not the case. Eventually, his experiences in Philadelphia and Atlanta trying to undo racism through the scientific documentation of its consequences led him to a more critical view. He came to realize that history and the social sciences had been constructed to justify racism and colonialism. This did not lead him to give up on the social sciences but to embrace a critical approach, seeing the social sciences as a tool for documenting the ways in which racism and colonialism work and for informing and guiding the work of people struggling against racism and colonialism. For Du Bois' the social sciences were a tool for knowing society for the purpose of changing it (this he had in common with Marx).¹³ This is how I understand a Du Bois inspired decolonial sociology.

Towards a decolonized sociology

For me the impulse to decolonize sociology is a continuation of the Du Boisian sociology I wrote about with Karida Brown.¹⁴ Bringing Du Bois back into Sociology never meant adding him to the Eurocentric canon. Rather, I always saw this as a first step in bringing



into the discipline a large number of thinkers that have been writing about the world from the margins, thinkers such as Anna Julia Cooper, Ida. B. Wells, Franz Fanon, Walter Rodney, Claudia Jones, Anibal Quijano and many others. I am currently writing a book together with Zophia Edwards and Ricarda Hammer on decolonizing sociology, trying to present a theoretical/methodological approach for rethinking the discipline's practices, understanding that decolonizing is a constant process, not an end goal. I provisionally call this approach a decolonial sociology, though at the end of this essay I discuss the problems with this and other labels.

Decolonial sociology puts racism and colonialism at the center of the discipline's enquiry. The goal of decolonial sociology is to study, on the one hand, the historical and present forms of racial and colonial capitalism to unveil its structures of oppression and, on the other hand, to study the forms in which people have lived in it, resisted it, and tried to build a more just world. It poses Du Bois' question concerning the hypothesis of law and the presence of chance: To what extent can people shape their world under the constraints in which they live? And it asks this not only for the sake of knowledge but with the hope of contributing to people's liberatory efforts.

We start the book with the well-established critique of the Eurocentricity and coloniality of social theory, and we go beyond it in three ways. First, we develop a margins epistemology based on Du Bois' idea of second sight. Second, we reflect on the implications of this epistemology for our methodology and methods. And third, we reflect on how embracing a decolonial approach ought to change the way we relate among ourselves: among colleagues, between professors and students, between scholars in the global north and the global south, and between academics and social movements and communities.

In terms of our epistemology, we argue that lived experience and positionality matter for knowledge production. This argument is, of course, not new; it is at the base of Patricia Hill Collins' Black Feminist epistemology and Julian Go's perspectival realism among others.¹⁵ But we believe that rooting our epistemology in Du Bois' second sight helps us to address better how a margins epistemology works. Du Bois was clear that our experiences matter for how we understand the world. He asserted that from the margins you can see the world of the dominant whereas from the positionality of the dominant it is difficult to see beyond the color line.¹⁶ But at the same time he argued that not everyone who is in a subaltern position will develop a critical view of the world, and that not everyone who develops a critical vision will see the world in the same way. Furthermore, he also asserted that it is difficult but not impossible to develop a critical perspective while looking at the world from a dominant position—this is the point of his biography of John Brown.¹⁷

A perspective from the margins, then, is not about identity, and not fully about positionality: not everyone who is a member of racialized or colonized groups will develop second sight or a critical view. Positionality matters because the experiences it generates make it easier for people to see and understand the structures that produce those experiences. And if anyone doubts that, they can turn their sociological eye to the discipline and ask themselves who are the people who bring questions of racism into sociology? Who are the people who address questions of patriarchy? Among whom the idea of intersectionality originated? Or simply look at the demographics of the different ASA sections. But looking at the world from subaltern social positions may generate a multiplicity of perspectives, some critical and some not. Furthermore, critical outlooks can be developed by people in dominant social positions, or contradictory social positions that include subaltern and dominant components. So, our epistemology relies on a subaltern standpoint, but specify it as a critical perspective from the margins (or critical subaltern perspective).

We first show how our epistemology works by looking at how we would rethink our basic concepts (such as humanity, rights, and citizenship), our temporalities, and our units of analysis, if we looked at modernity from the perspective of Haiti rather than France, England, or the United States. And we proceed to argue that the same exercise ought to be done by looking at concepts and categories from different margins. Truth may emerge not from the slow accumulation of knowledge following the mainstream scientific method, as this usually represents the view of the dominant groups, but from the conversation between different perspectives from the margins, each of which has a relative epistemic privilege in regard to the specific issue that they confront (but not in regard to all issues). And understanding also that each positionality can generate different and sometimes contending understandings of the world.

Concerning methodology—that is, how we approach research—we argue for: a) the need to rethink the fields of the discipline by centering colonialism, racism and patriarchy in our analyses; b) historicizing sociology, that is, rooting our analysis in the understanding of histories and historical structures, c) theorizing within history, that is, analyzing cases within their own logic and focusing our theories on the complexities of specific historical moments rather than building theories and concepts that apply across place and time; d) privileging messy narratives that emphasize conjunctural contingencies and complexities over elegant causal models or mechanisms, and e) analyzing the specificities of local cases while linking them to the global trends and structures of racial and colonial capitalism.

We aim to study the different geographical and temporal forms of racial and colonial capitalism, understanding that it changes constantly as a result of

different and contradictory forms of human agency and that the local is never a unit of analysis detached from global processes. We don't abandon the goal of saying things that apply across cases, what we usually refer to as generalization, but we do so by contrasting specific cases and their global entanglements and exploring the commonalities and the limits of what we can assert.

In terms of methods—that is, techniques of collection and analysis of information—we embrace the use of all the methods, but we emphasize the importance of embedding them in the methodology described above. In terms of quantitative methods, we argue that they have to specify the social relations behind the variables they use (e.g., we are not speaking of race as an individual characteristic, but we are analyzing structural racism) and historicize their cases. In terms of qualitative methods, we emphasize the importance of understanding the broader structural contexts of cases and their local/global historical connections. In terms of historical methods, we emphasize the importance of theorizing within history and reading archives against the grain. Also, we emphasize that the analysis of experiences for understanding the structures of the world need to be incorporated into the discipline—e.g., books such as Du Bois' *Dusk of Dawn* or Fanon's *Black Skin White Masks* are examples of this method.¹⁸ For all methods, we emphasize the importance of embedding our studies in the understanding of historical structures and linking the local and the global.

To be sure, there are people in the discipline that do some of these things. For example, Sewell's eventful sociology has similarities with our messy narratives, Somers has argued in favor of theorizing from history, and Go and Lawson's global historical sociology and Bhambra's connected sociologies center relationality as a key methodology to overcome analytical bifurcation.¹⁹ These are just a few examples, not an exhaustive list. As a result, we often encounter the argument that "someone has already done this" and that "there is nothing new in our proposal." But none of the works mentioned includes all the elements of the methodology we are proposing; and what we argue for is a comprehensive approach, not isolated methods.

There are a few works, though, that use methodologies that are close to the one presented here. One such work is Karida Brown's *Gone Home*,²⁰ another one is Anca Parvulescu and Manuela Boatca's *Creolizing the Modern*.²¹ These two books historicize sociology, theorize within history, use messy narratives and connect local histories to global processes. The similarity with our method is the result of Brown using a Du Boisian approach and Boatca and Parvulescu relying in part on decolonial analysis.

Finally, we also argue for rethinking our daily practices and relations. We argue that currently the academic field is structured along individualist, hierarchical, and competitive lines and we call for rethinking it based on

an ethic of cooperation, solidarity, and mutual care. That means rethinking how we relate to each other, how we engage each other's work, how we train our students, how we relate to the struggles and demands of scholars in other parts of the world. And it also means to make the academy more accountable to civil society and the communities we work with.

This is then how I understand decolonial sociology. Is it science? It is a form of science in that it follows the definition I offered in this essay: it gathers information in a systematic way, and it assesses its claims against this information. It is different from mainstream sociology in that it recognizes the importance of lived-experience and the situatedness of knowledge, it is rooted in critical perspectives from the margins, and it sees science as a tool for liberation.

Is it possible then to decolonize the discipline? Walter Mignolo, one of the key decolonial thinkers, argues that the disciplines are too embedded in the colonial matrix of power and that it is impossible to decolonize them.²² For him, decolonization is about delinking from the colonial matrix of power. On this issue I follow Du Bois rather than Mignolo. Du Bois grew very critical of the role of history and the social sciences in legitimizing the racist and colonial order, but he believed that they could also be used as tools for liberation. That is, they could be used to increase society's reflexivity (Eisenstadt justification) for the purpose of undoing social structures of oppression and increasing the ability of people to shape the world in which they live. To be sure, completely replacing the current disciplinary common sense with a different one is not feasible without a major change in existing social relations and the structure of the academy. But destabilizing the existing forms of hegemonic knowledge and practices and broadening the boundaries of what is possible to do within the discipline is feasible.

Why decolonial sociology?

When I started working on rethinking the way I practice the discipline I did so in terms of developing a Du Boisian sociology. But for me this was never only about Du Bois but about rebuilding sociology based on the ideas of Du Bois' and also those of a large number of thinkers from the margins. That led me to look for a different label. One option is anticolonial sociology. And there is a lot to argue for this label as much of what I think needs to be done is to bring into the discipline the thought and insights of anticolonial thinkers and rebuild our theories and methodologies from an anticolonial perspective. But the anticolonial label is linked to the 20th century project of decolonization based on national independence and various forms of developmentalism. This project led to the creation of new global structures of inequality, characterized by neocolonial forms of insertion in the global economy, the development of local elites



that perpetuate social exclusion, and the continuation of colonial forms of knowledge. The potential of this happening was seen clearly by anticolonial thinkers such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Franz Fanon. In fact, we could already see in the Haitian revolution the problems that were going to affect the later decolonizing efforts.²³

The appeal of the decolonial perspective, in its initial formulation by Anibal Quijano, is that it proposed the concept of coloniality of power to articulate the critique of the neocolonial structures of inequality and the continuation of colonial modes of knowledge.²⁴ This is very similar to Du Bois' critique, and Ramon Grosfoguel has argued that Quijano developed his approach as a result of his encounter with the works of Du Bois and other thinkers of the Black Radical Tradition.²⁵ It is true that in the latest work of Quijano and particularly in the work of Mignolo, the decolonial critique focuses almost exclusively on the cultural and knowledge forms of the colonial matrix of power, but in its origins, the decolonial approach was closer to Du Bois' critique of the structural and cultural forms of exclusion of our times.²⁶

If the anticolonial label is associated to the national independence developmentalist project, the decolonial perspective is attached to Mignolo's option for delinking. The model that Mignolo returns to is the Zapatistas in Chiapas. The Zapatistas are an exemplary case, an example of an exit strategy that was always present, but its success is based on the fact that they are an isolated case. I don't see how delinking can become an option for all the oppressed and marginalized. I think that we don't have an alternative but to try to work within the world in which we live, not to delink from it. I believe we need to work to deepen democracy and to democratize the economy, put it under the control of society (which is not necessarily the state).

The emancipatory projects of the 20th century (socialism and developmentalism) were all predicated on instrumental rationality and gave a central role to science, whether in production or management. Here is where I think the decolonial critique of science is on point. Science should be one of the tools we use in imagining a different world, but it cannot be the leading one because it is indeed part of Western instrumental rationality. We need different epistemic paradigms to think about relationships between people, between people and their environment, and about what constitutes a good life. So, whereas I don't share the option for delinking, the decolonial critique of the colonial matrix of power and its emphasis on the pluriverse—that is, the existence of multiple logics and modes of organizing relations between people and between people and their environment—is key for rethinking what democratizing society and the economy may mean.

What about the postcolonial label then? In sociology the postcolonial approach was articulated most systematically by Julian Go. My thinking has many

coincidences with Go's postcolonial approach but also important differences. The first difference is about the purpose of the critique and of the social sciences. I see Go's proposal as an internal critique of the discipline. A very powerful and well-articulated critique aimed to create a better social science. And if the discipline adopted Go's vision it would indeed be a better social science. But, to my knowledge, Go has not written about the liberatory possibilities of the social sciences, the need to link the academy to communities, or the need to change the practices of the academy. And those points are central to decolonial sociology, as well as to the anticolonial tradition. I don't know what Go's position on these questions is. A liberatory sociology is not contradictory to postcolonial sociology as he articulates it, but he has not made questions of liberation central to his articulation of a postcolonial sociology.

A second set of differences concern the epistemological stands of postcolonial and decolonial sociology. Here there are important coincidences but also relevant differences. Go proposes perspectival realism as an epistemic approach to rebuild sociology.²⁷ Go relies on feminist approaches to make the case that knowledge is situated and advocate for a subaltern standpoint. He is not the first to make the case for the situatedness of knowledge in sociology. That argument is present in Du Bois' work, and it is also part of Patricia Hill Collins' Black Feminist epistemology; it is present in Boaventura de Sousa Santos epistemologies of the south and in Raewyn Connell's call for southern theories. But none of them developed the argument as thoroughly and systematically as Go does, addressing potential critiques and making the compelling case that it makes a better social science.

In the book Zophia Edwards, Ricarda Hammer and I are writing, we argue for a margins' epistemology based on Du Bois' idea of second sight. This is in many ways similar to perspectival realism, but the justification is different. Go's chapter on perspectival realism in *Postcolonial Thought and Social Theory* is compelling, but he builds his case on the philosophy of science while he sidelines the question of politics: what is knowledge production for? Go asserts that "indigenous sociology justifies itself on the grounds of justice... But more can be had..." (p.173). Adding that the subaltern standpoint can help provincialize categories, produce better sociological accounts, build new theories and redirect our attention to hidden concerns.

Go endorses the argument for justice but emphasizes the contribution of the subaltern standpoint to social science knowledge—and to his credit, Go has introduced the work of excluded authors into the discipline in a consistent way. Yet, I believe that the argument for justice matters more than Go allows for. Building on authors that write from the margins is, on the one hand, a question of epistemic justice, and, on the other hand,

it poses the question of the injustice of the existing social order. The work of subaltern thinkers brings perspectives and insights that we need to recuperate for the sake of making the discipline relevant to liberation struggles.

This emphasis on the question of justice—in fact, on the importance of building a critical sociology—affects also how we relate to mainstream social theory. In his article “For a Postcolonial Sociology,” Go elaborates on the question of redeploying social theory arguing that

“Still, skeptics might wonder whether the use of relational theories and especially European theories like ANT or field theory is counter-productive. Would not a true postcolonial sociology look elsewhere, beyond the West? As noted, the project of localizing or ‘indigenizing’ sociology meets this challenge. Yet one of the goals of this article has been to show that a postcolonial sociology might also redeploy theory for its own ends—assuming, that is, that the theory deployed does not fall into the trap of substantialist ontologies. Regardless of their geographical origins or their abstractions, relational theories like ANT or field theory—when used to analyze transnational, interimperial, or intra-imperial dynamics or processes—permit a transcendence of metrocentrism and can help us meet the postcolonial challenge.”²⁸

From a decolonial perspective we need to examine whether redeploying a theorist or a theory contributes to the decolonizing of knowledge. If we are to redeploy mainstream theory, we need to assess it by whether the theorist is taking a critical position from the margins or if we can use the theory for that purpose. This is so because the purpose of decolonial sociology is not only overcoming metrocentrism but also linking the practice of the social sciences to struggles for justice.

Take for example the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Go sees him as an early theorist of colonialism (and also relies on field theory to build his argument for relationality). I read Bourdieu’s writings on Algeria, and my interpretation of these texts is different from Go’s interpretation. In my view, Bourdieu’s writings on colonialism were incidental, he was in Algeria in the middle of a liberation war, and he wrote about what he was seeing, but he did not develop a theory of colonialism, much less anticolonial theory. To me his writings on Algeria resemble the contemporaneous writings of modernization theorists on and in Latin American—the texts are available, and anyone can read them and decide for themselves.²⁹

In any case, after his return to France the question of colonialism disappears from Bourdieu’s writings. The only text that Bourdieu writes after leaving Algeria that invokes imperialism, *On the Cunning of Imperialist Reason*, co-authored with Loic Wacquant, is not a critique of eurocentrism or empire, but a critique of the influence of American social science on European

social science, that is, an argument between Eurocentric traditions.³⁰ But in order to make that argument broader, Bourdieu and Wacquant criticize the work that American social scientists did to support Afro-Brazilian activists in their efforts to argue that race and racism are prevalent in Brazil. They see this collaboration as an imposition by U.S. scholars of U.S. definitions of race. In fact, this it is one of the few actually positive interventions of American social science, which was to contribute to the analysis of racial inequality and racism in Brazil and provide international academic legitimacy to Afro-Brazilian (and Afro Latin American) social movements in their struggle against nation making projects that are as racist as the U.S. but deny that they are racist or the existence of race itself.

Bourdieu and Wacquant criticize those efforts, and in doing so they defend the Brazilian racial democracy view, essentializing as a different cultural model of race what was in fact a racist nation making project. Moreover, the work of Bourdieu is constantly invoked by those in American sociology that argue that race is a folk category and that social scientists should focus instead on group formation and group boundaries, or that social scientists should focus on social difference in general rather than on race and racism. From the point of view of decolonial sociology, there is no reason for redeploying Bourdieu’s theories.

There are also important differences in what decolonial and postcolonial sociology aim to do. In his paper “For a Postcolonial Sociology,” Go argues that the postcolonial approach “is not defined by whether it focuses upon non-Western societies. Nor is it defined by whether it studies colonialism or imperialism, or whether it originates in the postcolony. It is defined by its relational assumptions and its attempt to apply relational thinking to apprehend social relations around the globe.”³¹ Postcolonial sociology aims to change sociology’s theorizing and methodology by applying relational thinking combined with a subaltern standpoint. Go makes a compelling case for this.

But the goal of decolonial sociology is different. The purpose of decolonial sociology is to look at the historical and present forms of racial colonial capitalism and the ways in which people have tried, with different degrees of success, to shape their own world within their historical constraints. Both approaches use a different language to talk about the modern world. Go consistently talks about empire and its legacies. I talk about racial and colonial capitalism as a historical system. Probably we will agree on many of the concrete things we have in mind, but those are different ways of defining and describing the world.

For the decolonial approach, historical capitalism has been constructed and centered around colonialism and racism. Patriarchy is central too, and although it has a longer history, it has specific forms of articulation



within this historical system. So, colonialism, racism, and patriarchy are the three structuring elements of “modernity.” This is the historical system that emerges after the Europeans stumbled upon the American continent in 1492 and this is the historical system in which we still live.³²

Go has recently published an article on the concept of racial capitalism.³³ He highlights three tensions in relation to this concept. First, he asks whether “race” as opposed to other forms of difference is the primary mode of differentiation in capitalism? Go responds that “we can arrive at a resolution only through careful research that more clearly defines “race.””³⁴ Second, Go asks whether deficiencies in existing theory warrant the new concept “racial capitalism?” He answers that “because Marx’s theory of capital does not center race, the racial capitalism concept and the research and theorizing that go under its banner can fill the void. The concept may provide the basis for an alternative theory not only of racial capitalism but also of racialized capital.”³⁵ The third question that Julian poses to the concept is whether the connection between race and capitalism a contingent or logical necessity is. Here he answers that a “possibly more productive route would be to reframe the issue as one of social difference rather than race.”³⁶ He concludes the article as follows:

“There are tensions but these are productive tensions. This counsels that we should embrace rather than overthrow the racial capitalism concept. Precisely because the racial capitalism literature contains these tensions, it connects with various existing theoretical debates in sociology while raising important new questions for further theorizing and research.”³⁷

From a decolonial perspective I don’t see the tensions that Go poses as real tensions for the analysis of racial capitalism. Decolonial sociology aims to analyze coloniality and racism, not race. Therefore, what we need is more studies of how racism and coloniality operate in different places and different times, rather than clearer definitions of race. Furthermore, I disagree with Go’s suggestion of reframing the issue “as one of social difference rather than race.” Can we imagine a capitalism not tied to racism, or tied to other forms of difference? Yes, of course we can, but the decolonial approach takes as the starting point the study not of abstract theoretical possibilities but of a concrete historical system that has been racist and colonial from its beginning until our days. This does not mean that there aren’t other important bases of social differentiation. It means that racism, coloniality and patriarchy have been the key structural axes around which the period we know as modernity has been constructed. Ultimately, Go’s article makes clear that the concept of racial capitalism does not have in postcolonial sociology the central place that racial and

colonial capitalism has in decolonial sociology.

Finally, there are methodological agreements and differences. I have already addressed the question of standpoint, one of the methodological bases of Go’s postcolonial sociology. The other one is relationality. Go sees relationality as the way to overcome analytical bifurcation in the discipline. I agree with this goal, but Decolonial Sociology uses relationality as a method to study the historical and contemporary articulations of racial and colonial capitalism and its transformations. The method is similar, but in decolonial sociology, it is tied to the study of a concrete historical system.

A final methodological difference is in how we articulate our research and arguments. In *Postcolonial Thought and Social Theory* Go asserts that the subaltern standpoint “can lead to new middle range theories of entirely new things—‘new’ as in previously hidden, subjugated, or elided. Not only, then, can we generate new objects, we also can produce new theories and concepts for studying them.” And he endorses the injunction that “Southern theory should produce new mechanisms or models, new definitions or classifications, a set of semi-general propositions, or a reconstructed theory.”³⁸ Postcolonial theory then is a theoretical paradigm that aims to generate middle range theories based on causal mechanisms and propositions. That is, postcolonial sociology aims to operate within the parameters of the discipline, just that it does this better.

Decolonial sociology, on the other hand, is not interested in generating middle-range theories, mechanisms, or propositions, but rather in what I called messy narratives. Narratives that are aimed to throw light on the complexity of historical situations, on contextual interactions between law and chance, and on the ways in which the local and the global are connected and the contingent interacts with the structural in specific places and times. The messy narratives we propose are closer to Connell’s “dirty theories,” than to Go’s postcolonial approach. As Connell writes in *Southern Theories* “the goal of dirty theories is not to subsume, but to clarify; not to classify from outside, but to illuminate a situation in its concreteness.”³⁹ Messy narratives, like any narrative, includes causal arguments, but their goal is not to generate general mechanisms or models, but, as Connell asserts, to explain concrete situations.

Postcolonial sociology is a theoretical/methodological approach that aims to practice sociology as we practice it today but changing some of its methodological elements to make it better (and it would indeed make sociology better). Decolonial sociology is aimed to change how we practice sociology and how we engage in theorizing. It is also an approach that aims to be liberatory and that challenges the structures of the academy.

What's in a label?

Labels are important because they synthesize key elements of an approach, and they capture the imagination of people. But at the same time, they carry baggage, they are attached to particular visions and ideas. What appeals to me in the decolonial approach is the powerful critique of the colonial matrix of power, the effort to link between academic critique and social movements, and, in the early version of it, the articulation of coloniality as a critique of our forms of knowledge and of structural forms of oppression. Although I disagree with the delinking option that Mignolo makes the center of the approach, I think that the decolonial emphasis on the critique of the colonial matrix of power can help us rethink liberatory projects to go beyond the problems that characterized 20th century developmentalism and socialism.

But here I face the criticism of my co-author and friend Ricarda Hammer. She argues that there is a tension in my reliance on Mignolo because of the strong emphasis in his work on cultural critique to the detriment of a critique of the material structures of oppression and exclusion. Instead, she argues that the anticolonial canon and the Black Radical Tradition engage both with the epistemic critique in the work of Sylvia Wynter, Franz Fanon and Anthony Bogues and with the anticapitalistic critique in the work of thinkers such as Du Bois and Walter Rodney. I think she is right in her critique of my argument. There is indeed a tension in my argument and may be some decolonial scholars will not recognize it as decolonial. But I think that there is a tension in her argument too because I don't think that Wynter is part of the anticolonial tradition in the same way that Du Bois and Rodney were. Du Bois and Rodney embraced the 20th century socialist project from

an anticolonial perspective. Wynter's position is one that focuses on the cultural aspects of domination and resistance. In fact, I see many parallels between Wynter's and Mignolo's arguments.

Ricarda Hammer and I agree that the question is how to unlink the anticolonial imagination from the 20th century political project of national independence and developmentalism, but we come to the same point from different angles, that are the result of the intellectual roads we took to get there. I got to my position by engaging the works of Du Bois, Quijano and Mignolo, so the tension in my argument is one that I can live with. She got to her position by engaging the works of Fanon, Wynter and Hall, so she can live with the tensions in the anticolonial position.

Our argument draws heavily from the anticolonial tradition and decolonial analysis, but it does not correspond fully to either of these approaches. I don't know what label we will end up using in our book. If we end up using the decolonial label we may find ourselves explaining how what we propose is different from what Mignolo argues. Similarly, if we embrace the anticolonial label, we may find ourselves explaining how our project is different from the 20th century project of national independence and development. Should we propose a new label? We would rather avoid the proliferation of labels if possible. In any case, we agree that what is really important is, as Ricarda Hammer put it, that we want to change the rules of the game: it's not just about better knowledge, it's about knowledge and the world.

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Notes

1. Gurinder Bhambra, *Connected Sociologies* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014); Raewyn Connell, *Southern Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007); Julian Go, *Postcolonial Thought and Social Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Jose Itzigsohn and Karida Brown, *The Sociology of W. E. B. Du Bois* (New York: New York University Press 2001); Ali Meghji, *Decolonizing Sociology* (Cambridge: Polity, 2021) Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South* (New York & London: Routledge, 2014).
2. For an excellent discussion of realism and constructivism in sociology see Isaac Reed, *Interpretation and Social Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).
3. Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); James Mahoney and Dietrick Rueschemeyer, eds., *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003).
4. Margaret Somers, *Genealogies of Citizenship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); William Sewell Jr., *Logics of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2005).
5. For a critique of metrocentrism and analytical bifurcation in Sociology see Go, *Postcolonial Thought*
6. For a critique of the racism embedded in sociology's methods see Tukufu Zuberi and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, eds., *White Logic, White Methods* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008).



7. Immanuel Wallerstein, *Unthinking Social Science* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).
8. See Jenna R. Sablan, "Can You Really Measure That? Combining Critical Race Theory and Quantitative Methods," *American Educational Research Journal* 56, no. 1 (2019): 178–203; and Nichole M. Garcia, Nancy López, and Verónica N. Vélez, "QuantCrit: Rectifying Quantitative Methods Through Critical Race Theory," *Race Ethnicity and Education* 21, no. 2 (2018): 149–157.
9. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (London & New York: Routledge, 1990).
10. For a discussion of what is science and the arguments made to justify it see Peter Galison and David J. Stump, eds., *The Disunity of Science* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996); Karin Knorr Cetina, *Epistemic Cultures* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); Mark Solovey *Social Science for What?* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2020).
11. Emile Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* [1912] (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2008).
12. See the discussion on the position of W. E. B. Du Bois and "mainstream sociology" in José Itzigsohn, "On W.E.B. Du Bois, Double Consciousness, and Racialized Modernity. An Interview with José Itzigsohn," by Ștefan Baghiu and Vlad Pojoga, *Transilvania*, no. 2 (2021): 1–10.
13. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro* [1899] (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995); *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* [1935] (New York: Free Press, 1997); *Dusk of Dawn* [1940] (London and New York: Routledge 2017); *The World and Africa and Color and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2014).
14. Itzigsohn and Brown, *The Sociology of W. E. B. Du Bois*.
15. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*; Go, *Postcolonial Thought and Social Theory*.
16. See Itzigsohn and Brown, *The Sociology of W. E. B. Du Bois*.
17. W. E. B. Du Bois, *John Brown* [1909] (New York: International Publishers, 1996).
18. W. E. B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*; Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (Greenwich Village: Grove Press, 2008).
19. Margaret R. Somers, "Where Is Sociology after the Historic Turn? Knowledge Cultures, Narrativity, and Historical Epistemologies," in *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences*, ed. Terence McDonald (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 53–89; Julian Go and George Lawson, *Global Historical Sociology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2017); Sewell, *Logics of History*; Bhambra, *Connected Sociologies*.
20. Karida Brown, *Gone Home* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021).
21. Anca Parvulescu and Manuela Boatcă, *Creolizing the Modern* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022).
22. Walter Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality* (Druham: Duke University Press, 2018).
23. See Jean Casimir, *The Haitians* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020).
24. Anibal Quijano, "Coloniality of Power and Eurocentrism in Latin America," *International Sociology* 15, no. 2 (2000): 215–232.
25. Ramon Grosfoguel, "¿Negros marxistas o marxismos negros?: una mirada descolonial," *Tabula Rasa* 28 (2018): 11–22.
26. Anibal Quijano, "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2007): 168–178; Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*.
27. See Go, *Postcolonial Thought and Social Theory*.
28. Julian Go, "For a Postcolonial Sociology," *Theory and Society* 42 (2013): 49.
29. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Algerians* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962); *Algerian Sketches* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).
30. Pierre Bourdieu and Loic Wacquant "On the Cunning of Imperialist Reason," *Theory, Culture and Society* 16, no. 1 (1999): 41–58.
31. Go, "For a Postcolonial Sociology," 50.
32. Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, after Man, its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *CR: The new centennial review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337.
33. Julian Go, "Three Tensions in the Theory of Racial Capitalism," *Sociological Theory* 39, no. 1 (2021): 38–47.
34. Go "Three Tensions," 41.
35. *Ibid.*, 43.
36. *Ibid.*, 44.
37. *Ibid.*, 44.
38. Go, *Postcolonial Thought*, 181.
39. Connell, *Southern Theories*, 207.

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