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The field of sociology has always had an uncomfortable relationship with the subject of race. The term 'sociology' was first used in the USA by George Fitzhugh in his *Sociology for the South: The Failure of Free Society* (1854), a romantic defence of the slavery system and denunciation of the dawning industrial capitalism in the USA. Since then, the sociology of race has been linked to every major trend in the discipline, notably social Darwinism, Chicago School pragmatism, structural-functionalism, neoconservatism, and the Marxist left, both old and new. This is hardly surprising, since there is nothing more constitutive of American society than the theme of race.[1] Still these 'schools' have all made a hash of race studies to various extents, often because they looked at the subject from one or another lofty ivory tower. William Du Bois's pioneering work on race was dismissed by the sociological mainstream for nearly a century before he was belatedly canonized in the 1990s. Other early pioneers are still waiting for recognition: Monroe Work, Kelly Miller, William Monroe Trotter and Alain Locke among them.

There are other reasons as well for the field's difficulties with race. Like all (yes, *all*) social sciences disciplines and much of the humanities, sociology was imbued with racism from its early days. If Fitzhugh alone does not make that clear, perhaps such other founding fathers as William Graham Sumner or Edward Alsworth Ross can pitch in and help. And looking at our fellow social scientific disciplines, we need only invoke psychology's early interest in the racial dimensions of intelligence, political science's tense encounters with racial exclusion and disenfranchisement (Taylor 1996; Smith 2003), anthropology before Boas, the economics of empire,[2] and so on – the list is a long one.

So, while I am grateful for the opportunity to comment on Emirbayer and Desmond's *Race and Reflexivity* (2012), I want to point out that the paper's principal purpose is to *reframe the discipline of sociology*, not to provide a new sociology of race. The problem of

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race of course receives significant attention here, but that attention is more shaped by the authors' commitment to the vindication of the Bourdieuian sociological perspective than it is by the requirements of an effective account of race.

I have been following this project for some time and have seen previous drafts. Although I have some criticism, I admire this essay in many ways. It flows very directly from Emirbayer's earlier work on reflexivity in sociology and from his engagement with Durkheim and pragmatism.

What is reflexivity? How does this concept apply to race? At the heart of Emirbayer and Desmond's paper is the effort to answer that question *as sociologists*, rather than as political subjects. An extensive series of injunctions is offered, all of them useful for social scientists. Without trying to be comprehensive, here are some of these: be conscious and explicit in your assumptions; recognize your own position and motives (socially, as a scholar, etc.); understand that there is no 'pure' position, as a researcher, as a racially identified subject, or in any other way; grasp the disciplinary context in which you are situated (and its historical context as well);[3] avoid parochialism etc. While many of these guidelines are drawn from Bourdieu, we do not need to accept his elaborate system, his rules of sociological method, to agree with much of this.

Bourdieu was a heroic figure, perhaps the last of the great theoretical holists, an intellectual who engaged in popular struggle in a way that only a French *maître penseur* can. The volume of his work, and his penchant for systematization and scientism, in my view undercut the claims Emirbayer and Desmond make for him as a quasi-pragmatist.[4] By Bourdieu's 'scientism' I mean his insistence on a firm differentiation between 'folk' or 'everyday' knowledge and social scientific understanding. This paradox or perhaps contradiction is visible everywhere in his work: in *Distinction*, in his work on reproduction, and in his theoretical/political essays too (notably *The Weight of the World*). Although fiercely aware of the despotic dimensions of everyday life, he is also quite sceptical about the ability of ordinary folk even to comprehend, much less to act effectively, against their oppression. From what I can tell, much of his political pessimism derives from his experience in the crucible of the Algerian revolution and its ultimate failures (Calhoun 2006; Connell 2007), but whatever its provenance, this orientation has crept into Emirbayer and Desmond's article in a problematic way, as a challenge to the 'politics of identity' or the 'politicization of the social'. 'Identity politics,' they assert (p. 577), 'falls out of fashion, eclipsed by calls for cosmopolitanism or, more directly, by injunctions to move "beyond identity".'

These claims are highlighted in work by Rogers Brubaker, Fred Cooper, Loic Wacquant and others.[5] Those authors in turn take their theoretical inspiration from Bourdieu.

Although space is not available here to engage these positions fully, Emirbayer and Desmond should avoid employing their concept of 'reflexivity' to reject group identity *tout court*. They seem on the verge of doing this by elevating reflexivity to an all-encompassing framework, a sort of universal solvent of all identity, all particularity. I am not certain of their position here: have they adopted the view that reflexive approaches to ethnicity, race and nationality can be more effectively conceived as matters of social psychology than as epistemes of political praxis? Perhaps their treatment of reflexivity as a core component in the sociology of race results from some sort of social scientific frustration that not only racial but also ethnic and national identities are necessarily and permanently contingent and therefore resist definitive specification. That recognition is central to my work with Omi on racial formation (Omi and Winant 1994); we stress the flexibility and instability of race, and look to political conflict as the means through which racial identities and racialized social structures are made and remade over time. This may be a point of disagreement between these authors and me.

To repudiate race (and ethnicity, and nationality) under the derogatory label of 'groupism' is in my view to engage in a form of sociological 'colour-blindness' that undermines the possibility of collective action. Racial, ethnic or national identities are thereby reduced to quite subjective processes: how one (or many) interpret their social location, their differences or similarities with others, and so on. This has the consequence of diminishing the political dimensions of these themes, as well as relegating lived experience, not to mention world historical events and widely distributed beliefs, to little more than commonly held illusions. While the signification of race and the assignment of racial identity is of course central to racial practices, both social scientific and quotidian, it is also always linked to social structures: the distribution of resources, organization, community, and so on. Omi and I developed the concept of *racial projects* as a basic component of racial formation, precisely to emphasize this point (Omi and Winant 1994). We argued that there is no racial identity that is not relational, no racial discourse outside social structure. The converse is equally true: racial policies, laws and practices all must articulate the meaning of race. They must signify upon race; they must represent it. Discrimination along racial lines, lynching, 'profiling', among many racial projects that could be listed, always have racial reasoning at hand, as does 'affirmative action' policy or Dr King's 'beloved community' in its practice of *satyagraha*.

I now leave Bourdieu to discuss pressing issues in racial theory. I mean no disrespect here, but I do not think that Bourdieu provides the tools we need for dealing with race anyway. The radical democratic potentialities in Dewey's work serve us far better – and Dewey was not much of a racial theorist either. In fact I would paraphrase Richard Rorty (who famously said this about Foucault, so maybe we are dealing with a French phenomenon): Dewey is waiting at the end of the road Bourdieu was travelling down. Dewey enables us to understand that everyday people are not fundamentally doing anything different from what scholars are doing. The agency of ordinary folk, what C. L. R. James called 'self-activity', is every bit as reflexive as the agency of sociologists. That 'radical' pragmatism allows us both to understand much better, and to respect much more, the 'modes of practical action' that Bourdieu would dismiss – begging the question in my view – as 'grounded in dispositions'. For more on radical pragmatism, see Du Bois, critical race theory, subaltern studies (James Scott and Robin Kelley in particular), and yes, racial formation theory too.[6]

What are the pressing issues in racial theory? Here I would include: identity politics; 'colour-blindness' and other forms of putative post-racialism; the status of the racialized body and the resurgence of a new racial biologism (mainly via genomics); shifting racial demographics in many nations, and also globally across both the North–South and West–East axes; and the crisis of neoliberalism and its enactment in various regimes that deploy 'states of exception', state violence and exclusionary politics. I have not the space here to address all this, so I shall confine myself to the subjects Emirbayer and Desmond take up, and conclude with a brief note on racial politics today.

To be sure, turning the reflexivity lens in the direction of racial theory enables a serious interrogation of the politics of identity, something quite valuable and visible thoughout Emirbayer and Desmond's discussion, for example in their account of black people's expertise on 'the souls of white folk' (p. 581, following Roediger, Baldwin, and indeed Du Bois). We need to go much deeper here, taking note of the 'politicization of the social' that resulted chiefly (although not only) from the tremendous racial upheavals that swept the entire planet from World War II to the fall of apartheid in 1994 (Winant 2001). We can usefully situate the racial reflexivity of Emirbayer and Desmond within the vast expansion of the political terrain that accompanied the mass mobilization and population movements, the upsurge of emancipatory aspirations, and the legitimation crises that engulfed many nations and empires during this period: think civil rights, national liberation, women's rights, sexual citizenship, even political ecology. While these democratizing

impulses remain far from fulfilled, they have hardly been contained either; the genie of the politicized social is not returning to its bottle.

This brings me to the theme of 'colour-blindness' and its equivalents ('racial differentialism', 'post-' and 'non-racialism'), which I regard as failed attempts on the part of various states to reassert racial hegemony.[7] Here a bit *more* reflexivity might well be in order. While I accept Emirbayer and Desmond's general critique (pp. 587–588), a series of deeper points should be made: the 'colour-blind' claim[8] is that one should not 'notice' race, correct? For if one 'sees' race, one would not be 'blind' to it, after all. But what happens to race-consciousness under the pressure (now rather intense in the USA, anyway) to be 'colour-blind'? Quite clearly, racial awareness does not dry up like a raisin in the sun. 'Colour-blind' ideologies of race today serve to *occlude* the recognition of racial difference or racial inequality based on claims that race is an archaic concept, that racial inclusion is already an accomplished fact, and so on. Just so, persistent race-consciousness *highlights* racial differences and particularities. 'Colour-blindness' and race-consciousness are both politically 'open'. They can each cut two ways. 'Noticing' race can be linked to despotic or democratic motives, framed either in defence of coercion, privilege and undeserved advantage, or invoked to support inclusion, human rights and social justice.

Although there has been ferocious and brilliant criticism of the 'colour-blind' racial project (Brown *et al*. 2003; Carbado and Harris 2008), arguing for the necessity of an ongoing race-consciousness exhibits certain contradictions as well. The significance of race in a given practical setting can be misunderstood; racial identity can be misconstrued or flat-out mistaken. And when does race actually *matter*, by the way? Always, or sometimes? If the answer is 'some-times', then what about those situations when race 'doesn't matter'? In such situations, should we not notice race? How exactly is that accomplished in practice? ('Don't think of an elephant', as the famous tease goes.)

Racial identity is often ambiguous and contradictory. For example, what is the political importance of race for solidarity and alliance across group boundaries (those same ones that Brubaker *et al*. dismiss as 'merely' cognitive artifacts)? What is the personal significance of race for friendship, or indeed love, across those sociocultural frontiers? Of course, these are venerable problems; no matter how 'old school' they seem though, they still retain their transgressive and unsettling dimensions, even as they become more familiar, more 'normal', more recognizable in practical, everyday life. So come on, reflexivity people! Tell us if trust and solidarity can operate across racial lines? Help us understand whether, both in individual and in collective (you know, 'groupist') social practice, we can 'get beyond' race? What exactly

would it mean to do that? How definitive is racial identity and what are its implications for democracy, humanism and anti-racism (Gilroy 1999, 2002)?

To conclude: race remains the *dark matter*, the often invisible substance that in many ways structures the universe of modernity. In contrast to earlier epochs when claims about its permanence and immutability were taken for granted, the very existence of race is often denied today. These denials are in large part the effects of the great – albeit partial and contradictory – waves of racial reform that swept the planet in the late twentieth century. Vast political mobilizations, untold amounts of blood, sweat and tears, were expended by millions of everyday people during those years in the effort to achieve civil rights, inclusion and recognition. In shabby return for those exertions, race is now disallowed and disavowed, both as a proper political theme and as a social scientific category. But despite the best efforts of both political authorities and astronomers (I mean, politicians and social scientists) to render it invisible, it keeps exerting a tremendous gravitational force: on political economy, globalization, enlighten-ment, identity, subject/object, and social theory itself! Where does it stop?

Well, it does not stop. The same state that now declares itself 'colour-blind' cannot dispense with racial practices in its efforts to rule: consider electoral manouevres, jurisprudence, resource distribu-tion, the making of census categories, collective consumption, criminal 'justice', military interventionism, and so on. The same people who recently confronted the police dogs and fire hoses, who crossed the mountains and deserts to reach Phoenix or Los Angeles (or traversed the Mediterranean to reach Madrid or Lisbon or Paris), the same people who resist military occupation in Jenin, these same people are still there, without rights, *sans papieres*, 'driving while black'. Their bodies are still racialized, their labour is still required, their identities still confound the state, their rights are still restricted. They still exert an immense gravitational pull.

Notes

1. Race is also constitutive of modernity on a global scale. See Winant 2001. For reasons of space I emphasize US reference points here.
2. To cite but one example, in his extremely well-known article, 'Economic development with unlimited supplies of labor' W. Arthur Lewis (1954) did not trouble himself to inquire by what means these unlimited supplies became available.
3. Note my disparaging remarks about sociology above. From the perspective of Emirbayer and Desmond, such comments are insufficiently reflexive. In this I may claim some affinity with Durkheim who, as the authors note, 'championed the benefits of reflexive thought while remaining less than unambiguously reflexive when it came to matters of racial

inequality and cultural difference' (p. 45). Indeed I am certain that if pressed, Emirbayer and Desmond would admit to some lapses of reflexivity themselves.

4.   Dewey and his social thought largely disappear from the piece after the introductory pages, although some race-oriented pragmatists (Tommie Shelby, Iris Young) are cited.

5.   See Brubaker 2004; Brubaker, Loveman and Stamatov 2004.

6.   As far as I can tell the term 'self-activity' was introduced into the political lexicon in *Facing Reality*, a theoretical text by C. L. R. James *et al.* that appeared in the 1950s. Because 'self-activity' cannot be delegated to others, it embodies radical democracy. James *et al.* (2006, p. 58) writes:

> The end toward which mankind is inexorably developing by the constant overcoming of internal antagonisms is not the enjoyment, ownership, or use of goods, but self-realization, creativity based upon the incorporation into the individual personality of the whole previous development of humanity. Freedom is creative universality, not utility.

The radical pragmatist (and arguably Deweyan) framework here is quite palpable. See also George Rawick (1969). Lee (later Grace Lee Boggs), still active today at age ninety-five, remains a leading anti-racist radical activist and author. She received her PhD in 1940 with a dissertation on George Herbert Mead and has written on Dewey as well.

7.   Elsewhere this theme takes other forms: racial differentialism (Taguieff 2001[1988]); multiculturalism (Lentin and Titley 2011); and post-racialism (Durrheim, Mtose and Brown 2011), among others.

8.   'Colour-blindness' is a horrible term, a neologism twice-over. First and most obviously it is rooted in an opthalmic condition that has no relevance to race, unless we understand race as being 'about' skin colour, a deep reductionism in the term's meaning. Second, the term appears in the dissent of Justice John Marshall Harlan in the 1896 *Plessy* case, where the Justice's insistence that 'Our Constitution is colorblind' coexists blissfully with a range of support claims for eternal white superiority and supremacy (see Gotanda 1995).

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