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Decolonizing Migration Studies: A Du Boisian/Decolonial Perspective[1]

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This essay addresses my current thinking on the question of the decolonization of the sociology of migration. Coloniality in knowledge production means that knowledge systems are founded in the ways of seeing created by colonialism. To decolonize a field means to think beyond these ways of seeing. This essay first identifies the key ways through which coloniality is expressed in the sociology of migration and then it presents an alternative decolonial approach based on the sociology of W. E. B. Du Bois. I show how this approach may reshape the field by a critical examination of my own work.

KEYWORDS: assimilation; coloniality of sociology; decolonial methodology; Dominican migration; historicizing; W. E. B. Du Bois.

INTRODUCTION

I was trained as a migration scholar interested in how Latinx immigrants encounter the structures of race and class in the United States. I was always critical of assimilation theory in its diverse forms, but my critique was limited in that it did not break with the frame of convergence that animates the different assimilation approaches. My intellectual trajectory eventually led me to pose the question of whether we can decolonize the field and how to do it. Coloniality in knowledge production means that knowledge systems are founded in the ways of seeing created by colonialism. To decolonize a field means to think beyond these ways of seeing. This essay briefly presents my current thinking on this question as it concerns the sociology of migration.

I structure this essay around a reflection on my book on the Dominican experience in Providence (Itzigsohn 2009). That book criticized the mainstream assimilation view as well as the apparently more critical segmented assimilation approach, but it did not break with the convergence frame that informs those approaches. I did not accept the claim that immigrants were eventually going to become more or less undistinguishable from the mainstream of American society—aka the white middle class. I proposed a critical analysis of the racialized social structure of the United States and how it reproduces inequality among first- and second-generation immigrants, but my analysis kept focused on the question of the differences between immigrants and the white middle class.

I am still fond of that book. It was well received in the local community, and it was a critical intervention on the debates on convergence, an intervention that

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emphasized the racialized character of incorporation processes. Today, however, I would write a very different book. I explain how in the second section of this essay where I outline a Du Boisian/decolonial approach to the field. Before that I need to explain why it is necessary to decolonize the sociology of migration.

COLONIALITY IN THE MAINSTREAM SOCIOLOGY OF MIGRATION

Coloniality in sociology is based on the fact that the discipline was built around Eurocentric perspectives and it has embraced the normative values of the dominant groups in shaping its questions and methods.[3] Furthermore, the discipline looks at processes that are linked in complex ways across national borders as processes that take place in separated and independent units of analysis—that is, different nation states, ignoring the systemic relations of inequality and power differentials between states and between regions within the world system. Go (2016) has described these problems as metrocentrism and analytical bifurcation.

The sociology of migration emerged at the University of Chicago in the late 1910s and 1920, with the publication first of *The Polish Peasant* by William Thomas and Florian Znaniecki (1996) and the many monographs on Chicago under the guidance of Robert Park. These studies have set the tone for the field up to these days in posing the question of convergence—how different certain groups are from the dominant group—as the central question that structures the field.[4] Since the Chicago days research has focused on how similar or different are immigrant groups and their children from the social position, norms, and identities of the white middle class—aka the mainstream (Alba 2009, 2020; Gordon 1964; Jimenez 2017; Portes and Rumbaut 2014; Waters 2000).[5]

The convergence approach is linked to the pragmatic study of "social problems." And the problem with this pragmatism-based approach is also that it takes the dominant values and social structures as the normative standpoint to define what is a social problem. Lack of convergence into whiteness is considered a problem. This position does not problematize the structures of exclusion that make convergence in fact impossible.

To be sure, the question of convergence also animated Du Bois' inquiry in *The Philadelphia Negro*. Du Bois asked what would need to happen for the black population of Philadelphia to have the same opportunities as the white population? Du Bois posed the question of convergence way before Chicago did, but in a different way. His early studies were geared to document the barriers to inclusion of black people in the United States. He argued that for convergence to happen it was necessary to undo the color line.[6] Du Bois called upon the black elites to do the work of

[3] See for example Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva (2008).
[4] For a critique of the Chicago based race relations frame see McKee (1993) and Steinberg (2007).
[5] This is not an exhaustive list of publications, but it represents the mainstream approaches to the analysis of migration. Despite differences between them, all these books take the question of convergence as their central question.
[6] Interestingly, Milton Gordon (1964) asserted that for assimilation to happen the receiving society needs to bring down its barriers and prejudices. His work was justly criticized because it did not account for how race structured the experience of immigrants, but differently from current versions of assimilation theory, he realized that no assimilation is possible as long as a society maintains it structures of exclusion.

community uplifting, but he asserted that this work would only be possible if white elites work to undo racism. It was the latter that kept black people back. I took *The Philadelphia Negro* as the model for my book on Dominicans in Providence. If I were to rewrite that book today, I would take my cues from Du Bois' later anticolonial work (Itzigsohn and Brown 2020).[7]

The mainstream sociology of migration has refrained from putting racism and the color line at the center of the analysis of migrants' experiences. Take for example Richard Alba's *The Great Demographic Illusion*, published in 2020, a book that got considerable attention in the public sphere and praise from migration scholars. Alba's book argues that Latinx people are intermarrying and crossing the boundaries into an increasingly diverse mainstream that includes many Latinx people and Asian Americans. As a result, argues Alba, the idea that the United States will become a minority majority country is doubly problematic. On the one hand, it is not based in fact, it is by no means guaranteed that this will be the case. On the other hand, it is problematic because it stokes white Americans fears of becoming a minority.

Alba provides some evidence on intermarriage and on the identities of children that suggest that indeed some U.S. born Latinx people are assimilating. On the other hand, there is also evidence that some Latinx people identify and organize as people of color as they encounter the brunt of racism in their everyday lives. The problem with Alba's book is not so much the evidence it presents, though the evidence is ambiguous. It should surprise no one that, given the great diversity in national origins, stories of migration, and encounters with American racialization, some Latinx people may be assimilating as Alba argues, while others may identify and organize as people of color. The decolonial critique of the assimilation approach is not over whether convergence happens but over the characterization of American society. Alba writes:

> The question of whether assimilation in the United States requires a permanently excluded group or whether the exclusion of African Americans, Puerto Ricans, and some other nonwhites has so far been an incidental feature of assimilation, a product of more durable but ultimately surmountable disadvantage, seems to me the most fundamental question about the ethno-racial construction of American society. (p. 173)

His answer to this question is that

> . . .the question should be held open. I confess to shrinking from the pessimism implied by a positive answer to the question of a permanently excluded group. (p. 174)

Although Alba leaves the question open, it is clear from the book and his previous works that he leans toward thinking that racial exclusions are a durable but surmountable disadvantage. The fact that previous waves of assimilation resulted in the changing boundaries of whiteness and the reinforcement of the color line is not

[7] Du Bois asserts in *Dusk of Dawn* (2017) that at the beginning of his career he thought that there was nothing intrinsically wrong with the white world but for the fact that it excluded people of color. Later on, he understood that there was indeed something inherently problematic in the racial and colonial structure of capitalism. It is at that point that he became an anticolonial theorist. The question for him was not anymore one of convergence but how to undo the structures of oppression of racial and colonial capitalism.

evidence for him of the permanent exclusion of people of color in the United States. For Alba, the creation of a more diverse mainstream is a positive development, even if it means a new redrawing of the boundaries of the color line.[8] This is so because it diminishes white fears of becoming a minority.

The segmented assimilation approach, in turn, is critical of the assimilation claims and makes the racial structure of a central point of its analysis of American society. But while segmented assimilation theory accounts for the effects of the racial structure on immigrant trajectories, it still embraces assimilation into whiteness as normative. It identifies assimilating to the white middle class as immigrant success. This approach focuses on and celebrates the ethnic enclave as a way to entering the white middle class. Being pushed into the ranks of the excluded is conceptualized as downward assimilation, rather than a form of structural racist exclusion (Portes and Rumbaut 2014). The segmented assimilation approach is ultimately a variation on the theme of convergence.

For a decolonial sociology, as Jung (2015) asserts, the United States was never a nation state in the sense of being a community of equals. Rather, it was always an empire state structured around racial differences. Changing this, as Du Bois knew well, would require major structural and political changes. The point of the decolonial critique is not that convergence does not happen, as it indeed does happen for some immigrants. Moreover, assimilation has been the goal of many immigrants. The point is that assimilation in the context of racial and colonial capitalism always means the reshaping of the boundaries of racial exclusion, not their end (Bashi Treitler 2013; Hammer 2020). Taking convergence into the mainstream as normative and celebrating the inclusion of some groups of immigrants, as assimilation and segmented assimilation theory do, implies accepting the structures of racist exclusion that marginalize a large number of immigrants and nonimmigrants alike. Furthermore, white fears of becoming a minority are indeed a political issue, but the fundamental political challenge is not how to assuage white fears but how to dismantle white supremacy. Only then we can start thinking about a society of equals in which all groups can live without fear.

Furthermore, both the assimilation and segmented assimilation approaches rely on analytical bifurcation—that is, analyzing processes that take place in the core and the periphery of the world system as if they were independent from each other—and methodological nationalism—that is, taking the boundaries of the state as equivalent to the boundaries of social life. Even though migration studies look at movements between countries, the convergence approach look at those countries as separate contexts of analysis. The transnationalism approach addresses the limits of methodological nationalism and aim to incorporate the relational dimension between places of migration into the analysis (Basch et al. 1993; Levitt 2001; Waldinger 2017).

Rather than focusing on convergence, the transnational literature asks us to pay attention to existing networks between places of origin and destination, and to the ways in which the actions of people who migrate are linked to their places of

[8] Eduardo Bonilla-Silva anticipated the possibility of this development in his analysis of the Latin Americanization of the American racial system (Bonilla-Silva 2004).

origin. To this extent, this approach is an improvement over the convergence approaches. Yet, the sociological literature on transnational migration seldom addresses the forms of neocolonialism and coloniality that structure the transnational fields that they analyze. The transnational literature focus on the networks that link the lives of peoples in places of origin and reception, on the meso-level of organizational life that structures social action across boundaries, or on the way people understand their social world across national boundaries. But empire, coloniality, and the global color line, are not, in general, part of the conceptual and analytical toolkit of these approaches.[9]

The paragraphs above are just a cursory review of the field, which is all I can do in this text. There are of course many more authors and more nuances in the vast literature on migration. This review, nonetheless, presents the broad contours of the field and makes the case for why we need to decolonize it.

A DU BOISIAN/DECOLONIAL SOCIOLOGY OF MIGRATION

As mentioned above, to decolonize a field means to address the colonial matrix of knowledge that structures it. In the case of sociology, it means addressing metrocentrism and analytical bifurcation (Go 2016). But what does this entail in concrete terms? And is it possible to do it? There are different answers to these questions. For Walter Mignolo, one of the leading decolonial thinkers, the disciplines are the product of coloniality and therefore cannot be decolonized (Mignolo and Walsh 2018). For Ali Meghji, the author of a recent book on decolonizing sociology, decolonization entails opening up the disciplinary conversations to multiple perspectives emerging from the peripheries of the world system and the discipline. It is a call for a sociology based on a plurality of perspectives that brings into it the visions from the global margins (Meghji 2021).

In this essay I propose a decolonial sociology inspired by the anticolonial work of W. E. B. Du Bois. I agree with Mignolo that the disciplines are the product of coloniality, but so is the university and the many institutions of the academic world. As long as we operate in the frame of these institutions, we operate within the frame of coloniality. If we abandon the disciplines, they will keep naturalizing the structures of oppression that constrain human lives. Following Du Bois, I believe that the social sciences can provide critical knowledge to the public sphere and to social movements, thus strengthening the tools available to critical publics to intervene in shaping the world we inhabit. A Du Bois inspired decolonial sociology would use empirical research and theoretical critique in order to unveil conditions of oppression and the different ways in which people resist them and attempt to build their lives. To be sure, decolonial empirical research, as shown by the example of Du Bois' work, is subject to all the checks that any other form of empirical research does, but also like Du Bois's work a decolonial approach is a critical approach that aims to analyze the world from its margins in order to help change it (Du Bois 1995).

[9] There are works that have brought the global structures of capitalism to bear on the analysis of migration. See for example Hernandez (2002); Massey (2003), or Sassen (1988). But these works did not develop an alternative framework for the analysis of migration that centers coloniality and the color line at the core of their analyses.

In order to decolonize the discipline, we need to rethink the questions that we pose and the ways in we approach them—or, in other words, we need to rethink our theories and our methodologies. In terms of the sociology of migration this means, first and foremost, to abandon the assimilation/convergence frame. Instead, we should focus on migrants' encounters with racism and coloniality in a global space shaped by the color line and different historical forms of colonialism. At the center of a Du Boisian/decolonial approach is the focus on the structures of oppression of racial and colonial capitalism and the many ways people have live and sometimes oppose these structures with different degrees of success. This means bringing the study of empire and coloniality to bear on the study of migration. Adopting a decolonial approach means then to connect fields that currently we consider separated areas of inquiry.

Furthermore, the decolonial approach I am proposing here is rooted on a four-pillar methodology that guides how we ought to approach research: historicism, contextuality, relationality and a subaltern perspective (Itzigsohn and Brown 2020). These four pillars are connected to each other and together they constitute a methodology that represents a very different way to approach research than the field's mainstream ways.

The first methodological move is to historicize, to think within history. This means understanding the global and local historical processes that constructed the inequalities, the differences in opportunities, and the networks that structure migration movements. Our first step in understanding a phenomenon in the present is to understand how it came to be and whether and how the processes that constructed it are still operating. We ought to analyze the trajectories of migrants in the context of understanding the histories of empire and colonialism that shaped the choices they encounter. We need to analyze the historical construction of economic and political inequalities and the structures of classification within which migration takes place. This means paying attention to the ways in which different forms of neocolonialism have shaped local politics and economics and how the color line has developed in particular places. This goes against the established practices of the discipline that is mostly ahistorical and chooses to ignore that social constructions are also historical constructions. Sometimes there are historical references or historical backgrounds in sociological analyses, but the discipline generally does not pay attention to the ways the differences that we encounter in the present have concrete histories that keep acting upon us.

My book on Dominicans in Providence (Itzigsohn 2009), suffered from this problem. I included a discussion of the historical origins of Dominican migration and a historical sketch of the city of Providence, but I failed to fully embed my case in the history of the relation between the United States and the Dominican Republic (and the Caribbean in general). But I failed to analyze how racial and colonial capitalism has structured and continues to structure the relationship between the United States and the Dominican Republic. If I were to rewrite the book, I would pay much more attention the historical field that links the United States and the Dominican Republic and to the changing position of Providence in this field. Without this analysis, we cannot understand the reason and the characteristics of Dominican migration, nor can we comprehend migrants' experiences and trajectories. If I were to

rewrite the book, it would be a book about the Dominican experience in a historically constituted field of neocolonialism and coloniality.

The second methodological move is to contextualize cases. The sociology of migration, as sociology in general, aims to find general explanations for why and how people move or why people become more or less similar to the dominant groups of the receiving society. Instead, before we generalize, we need to understand processes of migration in their diversity and in their specificity. We need to realize that causes never operate outside of contexts, and rather than looking for general trends we need to pay attention to local and historical social configurations and conjunctures. Of course, there are many studies in the field that do careful analysis of conjunctures of migration. But then they tend to downplay these specificities for the sake of generalization and the classification of cases into ideal types. Abstraction and generalization may be the goal of a sociology that looks at the world from the standpoint of the center, but it cannot be the goal of a decolonial sociology that aims to look at the world from its margins. This is so because the movement to abstract and generalize hides the subaltern histories that are the focus of a decolonial sociology.

The goal of a decolonial sociology is not to look for abstract generalities but to explain local historical conjunctures. What histories and local conditions led people in a certain place to move? What particular histories guided them to specific destinations? How did they perceive this transnational space as a field of opportunities, risk, and constraints? These questions should guide the analysis of specific conjunctures of cross-border movements. Once we have accounted for the diversity and specificity of cases, we may then contrast different experiences and find commonalities that we can generalize, but always starting from the specific elements of different cases.

My analysis of Dominican migration to Providence, again, failed to do so. I did look at the particular structural and demographic characteristics of Providence, but I tried to argue that in spite of its specificities, Providence was similar to other places of migration and representative of broad trends. Today I would not make such a claim. On the contrary, I would focus on the in specific characteristics of Providence and its Dominican population. I would root my analysis on local histories and their global entanglements, and I would pay much more attention to life trajectories that illustrate those histories.

The above, however, does not mean that a decolonial sociology is an inductive approach or that it embraces methodological nationalism. A decolonial approach focuses on local configurations, it examines them in their embeddedness in larger processes and structures. Rather than abstracting into general theories, a decolonial sociology aims to reconstruct the connections between the local and the global. This is the third methodological move. The local conjuncture is never separated from global trends, cases are always examined within the frame of the global history of racial and colonial capitalism. Every case is the result of a specific historical conjuncture of structures and actions, but all cases are linked because they are part of the global structures of colonialism and the color line.

The forms of the embeddedness of the local in the global, however, is not something that can be assumed or just a part of a background section. The political boundaries of the states and their local regimes are very important but are not the

only relevant boundary. Class and racial inequalities crisscross global spaces. So does power. We should think about the global space as one social field constituted by many boundaries, fault-lines, and inequalities (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). Migrants move through these boundaries and fault lines. The construction of the global ties of local cases, the analysis of how empire and coloniality constructed the local conjuncture should be a fundamental part of the overall process of analysis.

My book aimed to analyze the transnational engagement of Dominican immigrants but analyzed this engagement as occurring between two separated and independent units of analysis. I did not conceptualize at that point the United States and the Dominican Republic as constituting one neocolonial field crisscrossed by multiple legal, racial, class, and gender boundaries. Today I would engage in mapping these multiple boundaries and inequalities and how they affect immigrant movements and immigrant lives. I would try to understand what kind of places of opportunities, safe havens, dangerous roads and spaces, and faultlines people face in their movement across transnational spaces.

The final methodological move is to take a subaltern perspective. Adopting a decolonial approach means looking at the world from its peripheries, understanding how racial and colonial capitalism work, how people live through it and sometimes oppose it. Adopting a subaltern perspective means to listen to the communities we work with. Of course, communities are diverse, and each community has many voices, but decolonial scholars aim to listen to these diverse voices and try to frame the research around some of their concerns. A subaltern perspective is a commitment to understand what the experience of migration means to migrants, what are their hopes and how do they understand belonging. But a subaltern perspective means more than just listening to and understanding migrant communities. Some ethnographic works do that very well. A subaltern perspective means also understanding the place of those communities within the context of racial and colonial capitalism and thinking about how to undo the existing structures of exclusion, exploitation, and oppression they encounter.

For my book on Dominicans in Providence, I discussed my project with community activists and hired community members to help me with the research. They all gave me good feedback and suggestions. This was an opportunity for them to help shape research on their community. For some it was also an opportunity to engage in social research, something they enjoyed doing in the Dominican Republic and could not do in the United States because their Dominican academic credentials did not give them access to academic jobs here. I shared my chapters with the people I interviewed and with those I worked with. And there were community events to discuss the book. But the overall questions were mine and the arguments were derived from discussions in the sociology of migration, the famous puzzles in the literature. I took a critical view concerning the racial and class faultlines that Dominican migrants face, but as I mentioned earlier, I framed the book within the overall discussions about convergence.

Today I would do things differently. I would listen to what migrants say is important to them rather than to the discipline in shaping my questions. And I would try to address their concerns in my research. At the same time, I would take a more critical look at how coloniality and racism has historically shaped the local

community and the lives of its people. And, very importantly, I would be very open about this with the people I work with and engage with them in conversation about questions of coloniality.

CONCLUSIONS

In my book, I took the critique of the convergence approach as far as I could without breaking with it. I am still fond of it, and I think it is still a useful book for understanding the Dominican experience in the United States. But if I were to rewrite it, it would be a very different book. One that completely breaks with the assimilation/convergence approach and focuses instead on the Dominican experience in a transnational space shaped by neocolonialism, coloniality, and the global color line. I am by no means the first to propose such a decolonial vision for the field. Already in the late 1990s and early 2000s Ramón Grosfoguel was proposing a decolonial vision, a vision I have relied upon to build the approach I described above (Grosfoguel 2003; Grosfoguel et al. 2005). And before Grosfoguel there was Stuart Hall's analysis of the Caribbean migration experience in England (Hall 2018, 2021).

Grosfoguel is a sociologist who made a career at the Ethnic Studies Department at the University of California—Berkeley. There he became one of the main global decolonial thinkers. At the same time, he has, for any practical purpose, given up on sociology. Whether going into Ethnic Studies was his choice or the result of sociology pushing him out I do not know. Whether he agrees with Mignolo that it is impossible to decolonize the disciplines I do not know either. In any case, my proposal to decolonize the field aims, in part, to bring the work of scholars such as Hall and Grosfoguel back to the attention of the discipline. But it mainly aims to make sure that upcoming young critical scholars have a place in the discipline and are not pushed out of it.

It took me almost three decades of work in the discipline to reach the approach I am articulating here. There were always models of how to do things differently, but disciplinary blinders precluded me from considering those models. Perhaps, if I left the discipline, I would have reached this point faster, but there is something about the kind of structural/institutional research associated with sociology that is very appealing to me. I am happy that I can make these arguments today within the discipline. In fact, it was my students that constantly pushed me to consider different ways of practicing sociology, and I am hopeful that dialogues such as this will open spaces for young sociologists to thrive doing decolonial work.[10]

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[10] I see the decolonial approach as one of several disciplinary critical approaches including critical race theory, postcolonial sociology, connected sociologies, Black Feminist Sociology, and others. All these approaches emerge from different groups and have different questions and concerns, but they all aim to change the way we practice the discipline.

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