

Relational Sociology and Postcolonial Theory: Sketches of a “Postcolonial Relationalism”

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What do relational sociology and postcolonial theory have to do with each other, if anything? In some ways they are diametrically opposed, not least because sociology more generally and postcolonial theory are opposed. Disciplinary sociology first emerged as a knowledge project in, of, and for empire. It was born in the USA and Europe out of the interests and concerns of the white, straight, middle- to upper middle-class males in the urban centers of the imperial metropolises (Connell 1997). The very notion of the “social”—as a space between nature and the spiritual realm—initially emerged and resonated in the nineteenth century among European elites to make sense of and to try to manage social upheaval and resistance from workers, women, and from so-called natives (Owens 2015; Go 2013; Steinmetz 1993).

Relational sociology may or may not be directly implicated in imperialism, but it is nonetheless part of this sociological tradition. Powell and Dépelteau (2013, 2) remind us that relational ideas in social theory “go back at least as far as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and feature prominently in the works of landmark theorists like Karl Marx, Georg Simmel, Ernst Cassirer, Norbert Elias, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, Seyla Benhabib, Bruno Latour, and Nancy Chodorow, among others.” In other words, relational sociology is yet another instance of Western European discourse, part of particular intellectual concerns and debates that have developed in the center of the empires. In this sense it is like the sociological discourse of which it is a part: it was born of, and embedded within, the culture of Anglo-European imperialism.

Postcolonial theory has a different lineage. While this history also has to do with empire, postcolonial theory has been spirited by opposition to empire. Postcolonial thought is primarily an anti-imperial discourse that critiques

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empire and its persistent legacies. Today, when academics hear the term “postcolonial theory,” most think of the scholarly fad in the humanities that began in the 1980s with theorists like Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Subaltern Studies and Dipesh Chakrabarty, among many others (Gandhi 1998). But in fact this was only the “second wave” of postcolonial thought. The first wave emerged earlier in the twentieth century with anticolonial thinkers such as Frantz Fanon (1925–1961), Aimé Césaire (1913–2008), Amílcar Cabral (1924–1973), C.L.R. James (1901–1989), and W.E.B. DuBois (1868–1963) among others (Go 2016). These first-wavers were all embroiled in a wider climate of anticolonial revolution of the early to mid-twentieth century. They all wrote, thought, argued, and mobilized in opposition to colonialism and its economic, political, and racial injustices. In the process, they came up with a novel set of concepts, categories, and theories—a body of writing and thought that is now labeled “postcolonial theory” (Young 2001).

In short, not only do sociology and postcolonial thought have different and divergent histories, they also embed opposed viewpoints and ways of thinking about the modern world in which we live. Sociology embeds the culture of imperialism; postcolonial thought manifests critiques of empire. Given this opposition, and given that relational sociology is a branch of sociology, what would relational sociology and postcolonial thought have in common, if anything at all? How might they be reconciled? In this chapter I suggest that, contrary to appearances, relational sociology and postcolonial thought share common ground and can be readily reconciled. This is because relational thinking itself is endemic to the postcolonial project; something called a “postcolonial relationalism” already exists. I begin by sketching the contours of postcolonial theory and how it offers a critique of dominant strands of sociological thought. I then discuss the relational ontology and analyses which I argue are inherent to postcolonial theory. Through this, we will see that relational sociology and postcolonial thought are complementary rather than opposed. I conclude with an empirical example using Bourdieu’s field theory.

1 POSTCOLONIAL THEORY AND SOCIOLOGICAL THOUGHT¹

As noted, one key characteristic of postcolonial thought is its anticolonial stance. Postcolonial thought ultimately aims to critique, and transcend, the world of modern empires whose legacies persist to this day. This is what both the “first wave” and the “second wave” share. Of course, other intellectual traditions, such as Marxism, have been critical of empire and colonialism. But postcolonial theory has a more specific focus. It interrogates the discursive, ideological, epistemic and psychological processes and forms associated with imperialism. For instance, while Frantz Fanon (1967) wrote of colonialism’s economic exploitation, he also uniquely highlighted the role of racial ideology and racial knowledge in shaping French colonialism. Similarly, in *Orientalism*, one of the founding texts of the second-wave of postcolonial theory, Edward Said (1979) showed how epistemic structures representing the Orient

(as regressive, static, singular) served to support Western imperialism. Other lines of second-wave theory continued this tradition, yielding a subfield of study known as “colonial discourse analysis” (Bhabha 1994; Parry 1987).

Postcolonial theory, in sum, critically analyzes the entire culture of empire and its colonial expression. This means, in turn, that the analytic and critical target of postcolonial theory is wider than colonial discourse. The culture of empire includes novels or other art forms, as well as scientific knowledge (Said 1993). From the perspective of postcolonial theory, the culture of empire penetrates deep, constituting an entire imperial episteme of which Western science is a part. The goal of postcolonial studies follows: to create or find new knowledge that does not fall prey to the limits of the imperial episteme and help decolonize consciousness. This is why it is labeled postcolonial theory. The word “postcolonial” here does not refer to the historical phase or period after decolonization. It refers instead to a critical position or stance against colonialism and beyond it (Young 1990, 4).

But what, exactly, characterizes this imperial episteme that is the target of postcolonial criticism? First, postcolonial writers highlight how the imperial episteme operates through racialized and Orientalist modes of thought. Said’s *Orientalism* revealed how colonial discourse reduced other societies into a singular homogeneous mass called “the Orient,” or “culture” that was presumed to be static, unchanging, and fully endogenous. Orientalist discourse denigrated what scholars called “Islam” or “Arab culture” for “its sensuality, its tendency to despotism, its aberrant mentality, its habit of inaccuracy, its backwardness” (Said 1978, 205). Similarly, Fanon (1967) critiqued the racial knowledge that informed French colonialism in Algeria. Such racial knowledge, which depended upon biological reductions of race, manifested what he called “epidermal” thinking (112).

Second, postcolonial theorists critiqued the binary schemas of the imperial episteme. Said called this the “law of division.” This relates to *Orientalism* but reflects a more general operation; one whereby—in Said’s (1979, xxviii) words—“an ‘us’ and a ‘them’” are constructed. Postcolonial theorists claimed that the colonizer and colonized, the Orient and the Occident, the East and the West, and metropole and periphery are all constituted through mutual interaction (Césaire 2000). Said (1979) showed that it was through Orientalist discourses that the “West” was invented. “The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience” (1979, 2). Similarly, Fanon (1967 [1952], 110; 1968 [1961]) theorized colonialism as a mutually constitutive social force that shaped the identities and self-understandings of the colonizer as well as the colonized. He also insisted upon recognizing how colonialism made Europe wealthy. “Europe is literally the creation of the Third World. The wealth which smothers her is that which was stolen from the underdeveloped peoples” (Fanon 1968 [1961], 102). But the imperial episteme’s law of division occludes rather than admits of mutual constitution. Rather than recognizing that “us” and “them” are constructed in opposition to each other, the law of division

insists upon their ontological separation. Likewise, rather than recognizing the importance of colonialism and empire in shaping the experience and wealth of Europe, the imperial episteme erases colonial and imperial history, and isolates “Europe” as separate entirely from relations with its Others.

The related aspect of the imperial episteme pinpointed by postcolonial studies is the occlusion of subaltern agency. As the law of division separates West from the Rest, so does it analytically repress the role of postcolonial and colonized peoples in making history. DuBois (1915) criticized mainstream historiography for writing Africa out of world history. C.L.R. James (1989) opined the way in which Africans were mischaracterized in conventional historical texts. “The only place where Negroes did not revolt,” he wrote, “is in the pages of capitalist historians” (77). The Subaltern Studies variant of postcolonial theory challenged conventional histories of India for effacing the role of peasants and other marginalized groups in history (Chakrabarty 2002; Guha 1984, vii). Postcolonial thinkers thereby sought to recover that agency. “The colonists usually say that it was they who brought us into history,” Amílcar Cabral declared in a conference in Dar es Salaam in 1965, “today we show that this is not so” (Cabral 1969, 65).

In sum, whether questioning Orientalism, binary thinking or the occlusion of agency, postcolonial theory aims to interrogate all the “impressive ideological formations” and “forms of knowledge affiliated with [colonial domination]” (Said 1993, 9). This would include sociological knowledge. It is well known, for instance, that classical sociological thinkers like Marx, Weber, and Durkheim effectually portrayed non-Western societies in their theories as homogeneous essences, blanketing over “inter-group complexity and differences” and transforming the non-West into a “generalized ‘other’” (Chua 2008, 1183; Connell 1997). They likewise portrayed non-Western societies as static and backwards, hence reserving dynamism, social creativity and energy and enlightenment for European societies alone (Magubane 2005, 94; Zimmerman 2006). Said (1979, 153–156, 259) himself discussed these Orientalist strands of thought in the work of classical theorists.

We could also notice the related “law of division” in sociology: an analytic bifurcation of metropole from colony, the “East” from the “West,” the “domestic” from the “foreign,” the inside from the outside, and so on. Note, for instance, that Durkheim’s (1984) theory of social solidarity was dependent upon colonialism: it was through data on so-called “primitive peoples” that he differentiated between organic and mechanical solidarity. But he never incorporated colonial societies as social types into his analysis—even though, in his time, most of the world’s societies were either imperial societies or colonized societies. Nor did he recognize how those very societies were interconnected: how, for instance, those societies that he called “organic” were actually industrial imperial societies whose very existence was shaped by if not dependent upon the colonial societies they ruled and whose so-called “mechanical” solidarity was kept intact deliberately for the purposes of colonial rule. Durkheim

instead sees “mechanical” societies as isolated spatially from colonialism, and temporally relegates them to the past. He bifurcates into two societies that were inextricably connected, hence cutting off vital social relations across space.

Various strands of sociological thought also repress colonialism from their accounts and thereby fail to appreciate the agency of colonized and postcolonial populations. Just as Du Bois had charged historians for writing Africa out of world history, so, too, did Durkheim and other classical social theorists write colonialism out of its accounts, agenda, and analytic infrastructure. As Boatcă and Costa (2010, 16) puts it, “key moments of Western modernity, for which the sociological approach was supposed to offer an explanation, were considered to be the French Revolution and the English-led Industrial Revolution, but not Western colonial politics or the accumulation of capital through the Atlantic Slave Trade and the overseas plantation economy.” This suppression reproduces the very “law of division” that Said lamented while falling prey to the imperial episteme’s failure to appreciate the contributions to history made by dominated groups.

A good example of these limitations in conventional sociological theory and research can be found in accounts of diffusion in “World Society” theory and research. In advancing his World Society perspective, Meyer (1999, 138) claims that modernity originates in the metropolitan core and then diffuses throughout the rest of the world-system. This theory, by its very categorical scheme, centers Europe as the origin of all things and makes Europe the prime agent. It overlooks both colonialism and the role of colonized peoples in making history. If the approach is able to refer to colonialism, it is obliged to portray it as the medium through which Western ideas or practices flowed upon the colonized. It thereby portrays colonized peoples as passive receptors.

Of course, we know that colonialism sometimes served as a mechanism through which things, practices, and ideas flowed. The problem is what gets elided in the theoretical approach. We cannot see, for instance, the ways in which the presumably essential unchanging thing that spreads might get refashioned or reconstructed along the way or how it may have been forged through interactive relations in the first place. It may very well be, for example, that our modern notion of human rights emerges from key discourses and events in the West and that the concept of rights has diffused to other parts of the world. But what would not be captured in existing sociological theories of diffusion is how the notion of rights has been able to diffuse partly as a dialectical response to Western imperial domination; or that the very reason it has been able to resonate with non-Western peoples (and, therefore, more easily diffuse) is because non-Western peoples already have their own indigenous or preexisting local discourses of rights from which to work, and so there is an active reception and engagement on the part of colonized peoples rather than passive adoption. In other words, the problematic assumption, reflected in the theory, is that diffusion always and only happens when it is from the West to the Rest, and the flow is unidirectional rather than interactive.

These are just some of the ways in which sociology can be rightly situated firmly within the imperial episteme, and therefore how sociology does not escape the problems pinpointed by postcolonial thought. Yet not all of sociology would suffer from these critiques registered by postcolonial thought. Relational sociology, through its critique of substantialism, in many ways escapes the limitations of imperial episteme. Fittingly, there is a strong tradition within postcolonial thought of relying upon, deploying, and cultivating relational ontologies and analyses. A postcolonial relationalism is already available.

2 POSTCOLONIAL RELATIONALISM

Postcolonial theory itself manifests relational thinking. Much of its epistemic critique derives from an implicit relationalism, and its analytic strategies follow the imperatives of relational sociology. Consider postcolonial literary criticism, such as in the work of the philosopher and literary critic Walter Mignolo (2013). Advancing a “decolonial” approach to knowledge (which for our purposes is interchangeable with “postcolonial”), Mignolo critiques the conventional comparative method in literature. That comparative method obliges us to separate different literary texts as representing ontologically distinct and sequestered “nations” or “cultures.” It also implies that the observers are separate from those nations or cultures. On these counts, the conventional comparative method embodies the “European frame of modernity,” and comparison is exactly how European imperialism operated (2013, 114). “Overall, the major implicit motivation behind comparative methodology ... was to consolidate Europe, in the line of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, as the epistemic center of the world” (2013, 112).

To overcome this problem and thereby develop a more critical approach, Mignolo (2013, 112) asks instead: “But what if, in trying to compare two or more entities, we attempt to relate them? What would be the consequences of relating instead of comparing?” Finding relations between texts, and recognizing the observers’ embeddedness in those relations, constitute Mignolo’s decolonial approach. Such an analysis would not be “interested in similarities and differences” between putatively separate entities but rather “relations and hierarchies between entities, regions, languages, religions, ‘literatures’, people, knowledges, economies, and the like” (Mignolo 2013, 114). This approach thereby focuses “not on two assumed autonomous entities to be observed and compared” but rather “the entanglement, in which we, as scholars, are also intellectually implicated” (115). In short, Mignolo advances a sort of relational sociology as the way to overcome the limits and violences of the imperial episteme. In fact, he names it as “relational ontology” precisely, suggesting that we move from an “ontology of essence to a relational ontology” (113).

Mignolo notes that this relational tradition has roots in Europe.² For example, he highlights how Max Horkheimer and other Critical Theorists questioned “the ontology of essence” and instead proposed a relational ontology, one that recognized not only relations as primary (113). Yet Mignolo

adds that a relational ontology that advances a decolonial project is “not the same as the relational ontology in the frame of Western modernity with which Horkheimer was operating,” primarily because decolonial relationalism puts colonial relations front and center. It is not only that objects and knowers are constructed relationally, it is that they are constructed through colonial relations of power. Postcolonial or “decolonial thinkers,” he summarizes “are interested in uncovering hidden connections and relations between events, processes and entities in the colonial matrix of power” (Mignolo 2013, 114; my emphasis).

Relationalism is also clearly evident in the first- and second-wave’s critiques of the imperial episteme. Much of these critiques are critiques of substantialism from the standpoint of relationalism. Consider Fanon’s challenge to racial discourses in the French empire, which he saw as reflecting “epidermal” thinking. Such discourses manifest naturalizations of race, conceptualizing race as a matter of blood or stock, phenotype, and biology. Fanon, however, argued that this notion of race, and the subsequent ideas of “black” and “white,” were products not of biological essences but relations—specifically, colonial relations. For Fanon, the colonial relationship itself constructs race: the colonized exist only in relation to colonizer, and so blackness is constructed only in relation to whiteness. “For not only must the black man be black,” Fanon declares in *Black Skin, White Masks*, “he must be black in relation to the white man” (1967, 110). The very identity of “black,” and with it, the sense of inferiority which the colonized internalize or “epidermalise,” is invented by the colonial relationship:

I begin to suffer from not being a white man to the degree that the white man imposes discrimination on me, makes me a colonized native, robs me of all worth, all individuality, tells me that I am a parasite on the world, that I must bring myself as quickly as possible into step with the white world ... The feeling of inferiority of the colonized is the correlative to the European’s feeling of superiority. Let us have the courage to say it outright: It is the racist who creates his inferior. (Fanon 1967 [1952], 93)

Said’s critique of Orientalism and his subsequent strategy for transcending it is probably the clearest expressions of such postcolonial relationalism. Note that Said’s critique of Orientalism is basically a critique of substantialism from the standpoint of relationalism. When Said warns of Orientalism, he is warning against the dangers of essentialism—itself a form of substantialism (1993, 311). Orientalism suffers from turning complex societies into singular essences. The same goes for “nativism,” which Said contends is a form of “reverse Orientalism.” All such discourses are problematic because they essentialize, which is also to say they operate from a substantialist ontology. Nativism and Orientalism together embody and reproduce the “metaphysics of essences” which also takes other forms, “like negritude, Irishness, Islam and Catholicism” (1993, 228–229).

Alternatively, like Fanon, Said insists upon the relational construction of all such identities. Both the “Orient” and the “Occident” exist only in relation to each other. “As much as the West itself, the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West. The two geographical entities thus support and to an extent reflect each other” (Said 1979, 5). And why? As Said (1995, 35) avers, “the development and maintenance of every culture require the existence of another different and competing alter ego. The construction of identity ... involves the construction of opposites and ‘others’.”

It is arguably difficult to find a clearer statement of a relational ontology in the humanities than this, and it follows that Said’s analytic strategy for transcending the imperial episteme and its substantialism is to enlist relational analysis. In suggesting ways of overcoming Orientalism and its related “law of division,” Said proposes instead a “contrapuntal perspective” that reveals “overlapping territories” and “intertwined histories” (1993, xxviii, 36). He explains: “If I have insisted on integration and connections between the past and present, between imperializer and imperialized, between culture and imperialism, I have done so not to level or reduce differences, but rather to convey a more urgent sense of the interdependence between things.” He continues:

So vast and yet so detailed is imperialism as an experience with crucial cultural dimensions, that we must speak of overlapping territories, intertwined histories common to men and women, whites and non-whites, dwellers in the metropolis and on the peripheries, past as well as present and future; these territories and histories can only be seen from the perspective of the whole of secular human history. (1993, 61)

The strategy is deceitfully simple. If the imperial episteme’s law of division cuts the world up into separate entities, Said’s postcolonial approach starts by reconnecting the separated parts. This means recognizing that the “experiences of ruler and ruled [colonizer and colonized] were not so easily disentangled” (Said 2003; Said 1993, 20). In other words, this “contrapuntal” approach is itself a relational strategy.

For Said, this relational or “contrapuntal” approach is partly a literary approach, a way of reading texts. Contrapuntal analysis means reading texts “not univocally but contrapuntally, with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominant discourse acts” (1993, 59). For instance, a contrapuntal literary analysis would mine texts to find constitutive relations and interdependencies between metropole and colony, or dominant culture and subordinate culture. Understanding an English novel contrapuntally involves contextualizing the novel within a bigger “history of colonization, resistance, and native nationalism” (1993, 59). And this tactic of reading underscores not just the English characters of the narrative but also the otherwise hidden histories of colonization and subaltern agency that stage those

characters' trials and tribulations (1993, 51). Said accordingly rereads Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* to show how England's overseas possessions structured the narrative. In his reading, slavery on West Indian plantations provided the wealth of the English estate in the novel. Slavery is thus shown to be intimately connected with the lives of protagonists like Fanny Price far off in England (1993, 80–95). The “principal aim” of this “contrapuntal” strategy, Said (1993, 15) stresses, “is not to separate but to connect.”

But more than a literary approach, Said's postcolonial strategy of contrapuntal analysis also insinuates a relational sociology. For Said, contrapuntal analysis has other possibilities besides just offering a way to read novels. Said suggests that it could be used to craft new histories and narratives, such as those about English or French identity. These identities would be approached analytically “not as god-given essences, but as results of collaboration between African history and the study of Africa in England ... or between the study of French history and the reorganization of knowledge during the First Empire.” Said explains further: “In an important sense, we are dealing with the formation of cultural identities understood not as essentializations ... but as contrapuntal ensembles, for it is the case that no identity can ever exist by itself and without an array of opposites, negatives, oppositions” (Said 1993, 52). Furthermore, Said goes on to suggest that contrapuntal analysis is pregnant with political possibilities, enabling us to better realize the goal of crafting new postcolonial knowledge. “[B]y looking at the different experiences contrapuntally,” he explained, “I shall try to formulate an alternative both to politics of blame and to the even more destructive politics of confrontation and hostility” (1993, 19).

Again, the relationalism is palpable here, but it does more than allow postcolonial critiques of Orientalism and the law of division. By carefully recounting the ways in which Europe and the Rest, West and East, colonizer and colonized were constituted ideologically, discursively, and materially by their relations with each another through contrapuntal analysis, this relationalism also allows for a certain type of agency on the part of the colonized to be retrieved. Contrapuntality adumbrates how colonized peoples have helped constitute “the West” and, indeed, modernity itself. It serves to incorporate the subaltern into historical narratives and social analysis in a way that substantialism does not. Whereas substantialism would posit a distinct essential “European” history untouched by outside influences, a contrapuntal approach in the mode of relational thought would recognize how that history has been connected to and shaped by those presumably “outside” of Europe's history. It would show how the subaltern has contributed to European modernity, even as substantialism would analytically repress the relations by which those contributions occurred.

In short, postcolonial thought here is firmly planted on anti-substantialist ground, to be replaced with contrapuntal analysis. Contrapuntal analysis for Said offered a way of thinking that did not fall prey to the imperial episteme's binarisms and related essentialisms. But contrapuntal analysis is merely another name for relational sociology. “In an important sense,” he writes, in discussing

his approach for understanding English or French identity, “we are dealing with the formation of cultural identities understood not as essentializations ... but as contrapuntal ensembles, for it is the case that no identity can ever exist by itself and without an array of opposites, negatives, oppositions” (Said 1993, 52). In their musings regarding relationalism, Dewey and Bentley (1949, 112) clarify that relationalism involves “the seeing together ... of what before had been seen in separations and held severally apart.” How better to describe post-colonial theory’s strategy for overcoming the limits of the imperial episteme? In this sense, relational sociology and postcolonial thought are not only compatible; they are interdependent and can be mutually beneficial.

3 FIELDS OF REVOLUTION: AN EXAMPLE

But what would contrapuntal analysis actually look like in sociological research and theory? To better see the compatibility between postcolonial relationalism and relational sociology, here I critically reconsider the French Revolution from the standpoint of postcolonial relationalism, and I use Pierre Bourdieu’s field theory as the sociological counterpart to Said’s contrapuntal analysis.

The French Revolution of 1789–99 has long been heralded as a monumental event in modern history. It has figured as a “story of the origins of the modern world” that establishes European identity as modern (Bhambra 2007, 107). Brubaker (1992, 35) summarizes the long-standing view that the French Revolution “invented” modern national citizenship, bringing “together for the first time” ideals of civil equality, political rights, and the “link between citizenship and nationhood.” Others expound its global and universal character, a centerpiece in the history of all of humanity. Historical sociologists Skocpol and Kestnbaum (1990, 27) declare: “The French Revolution was, is—and ever will be ... a truly world-historical event.” Once the valiant French revolutionaries invented and codified this universalist language, it then spread to other parts of the globe to make the modern world.

This scholarly story about the French Revolution as the center of modern human history sits happily with dominant social theories. It fits with the categories and logic of diffusion stories produced by the World Society approach. Highlighting the “Western” origins of global political ideas, this theory would treat France as the “mother and repository of the universalist language of rights” (Dubois 2000, 22). It would then conceptualize the French Revolution as the source from which all things liberal and universal flowed. Even critical theorists are not immune to these tempting grandiose characterizations. As Bhabha (1994, 224) notes, Michel Foucault ethnocentrically treats the Revolution as the paradigmatic “sign of modernity.”

Is there another way to think of this? Consider C.L.R. James’s *The Black Jacobins* (1989 [1963]). Rather than putting the French Revolution, or indeed European revolutions, at the center of history, James puts the Haitian Revolution at the center, thus inviting a reconsideration of the French Revolution by virtue of his analysis of the Haitian Revolution. James reminds

us that France was economically dependent upon its overseas colonies, such as Saint-Domingue, which, along with Guadeloupe and Martinique, had been among the world's most lucrative slave-holding colonies. He explains that the fortunes created from the slave trade supported the revolutionary bourgeoisie; and many of the National Assembly members relied upon colonial trade for their own wealth (James 1989 [1963], 31–61). In this sense, liberty in Paris depended upon slavery in the colonies. James further reveals how the French Revolution was connected to the Haitian slave revolt in critical ways. In fact, it was the slave revolt that compelled the French revolutionaries to rethink their own beloved concepts of freedom and liberty. The revolutionaries previously had discarded the notion that *liberté* should apply to blacks or mulattoes. Robespierre was among many who did not even support the notion that blacks should have equal rights. But the slave insurgency changed everything. Due to the slave revolt the Parisian revolutionaries eventually universalized their otherwise restricted operationalization of rights and liberty (James 1989 [1963], 119–121). Directly inspired by James's approach, historians have built upon James's insights, further highlighting their relevance. "If we live in a world," writes one such historian, "in which democracy is meant to exclude no one, it is in no small part the actions of those slaves in Saint Domingue who insisted that human rights were theirs too" (Dubois 2004b, 3).

As a historical narrative, James's story fulfills the postcolonial challenge of overcoming the "law of division" while insinuating a contrapuntal approach. James's historical narrative reveals an interdependence between metropole and colony. But in terms of relational sociology, one way to think about James's narrative is to consider it in terms of Bourdieu's field theory. In Bourdieu's (1991) conceptualization, a "field" is a social space of relations defined by struggle over capitals. It is an arena of struggle in which actors compete for a variety of valued resources, that is, various species of "capital" that are potentially convertible to each other. The concept field thus refers to the configuration of actors (the multidimensional "field of forces") and the classificatory schemes and rules of the game, which actors use as they strategize and struggle for position (i.e. the "rules of the game") (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 97). Field theory thus offers a relational rather than a substantialist view of the social. "To think in terms of fields," explain Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, 96), "is to think relationally." The field concept is also relevant because although it typically has been used to refer to intranational or local arenas of action (like a professional field), it also can refer to terrains of action that cut across national boundaries. The boundaries of fields are at times blurry but always potentially extensive; the boundaries themselves are often the site of struggle and, therefore, can expand, contract, or be redrawn. This means that, analytically, fields might not just be restricted to sites within a single society or nation. We might thus think of transnational or trans-, intra-, or inter-imperial fields; fields of interaction and struggle between actors (over different species of capital) that extend across conventional nation-state boundaries (Go and Krause 2016).

In terms of the French Revolution and its relation to the Haitian Revolution, a fields approach offers an angle that more closely approximates James's analysis and hence a contrapuntal perspective than conventional bifurcated accounts. Rather than seeing unilateral flows of influence from France outward, a fields approach urges us to consider revolutionary actors in wide arenas of struggle and conflict, interacting and (re)shaping other actors and one another. To be sure, the Parisian revolutionaries were not just struggling against conservative loyalists at home. They were embedded in wider transnational, inter- and intra-imperial fields of interaction that included challenges from imperial rivals like Britain and potential problems in France's colonies in the Caribbean, not least Saint-Domingue. Expanding the lens to include these wider fields is exactly James's approach in *The Black Jacobins*. The intra-imperial economic field that included the Caribbean colonies was vital for the Revolution, as James (1963) points out. And there was also a wider political-ideological field wherein Parisian revolutionaries interacted with a wide range of political actors, including groups in the Caribbean like the *gens de couleur* (freemen of African descent), French settlers and planters, bureaucrats, and slaves. From Paris and Nantes to Saint-Domingue, all of these groups were engaged in various "struggles for position" (in Bourdieu's phrase) to define and shape the Revolution. The French Revolution became a field in itself, overlapping with and shaped by the other fields. And it included not just revolutionaries in France but also colonists and colonized peoples.

With this field mapped out, we can begin to reconnect and reconstruct rather than separate. For instance, one of the key issues at stake in the revolutionary field was citizenship. According to conventional accounts, the French Revolution is to be noted for connecting citizenship to nationhood and articulating both with a universalist language of rights. But what gets overlooked in these accounts is the question of who was to be granted full rights and citizenship. What about, for instance, the *gens de couleur*? Or the slaves in France's Caribbean colonies, like Saint-Domingue, the richest slave colony of the Americas? The matter was not discussed. Neither the Revolution of 1789 nor that of 1791 did anything about slavery. Any time the question of slavery came up in the National Assembly, it was tabled or swiftly ignored (Dubois 2004b, 74–76). This outcome surely pleased the many colonial plantation owners in the French assembly. They had been trying to keep at bay the Société des Amis des Noirs ("Society of the Friends of Blacks"), the only active political group in Paris discussing race and citizenship. Inspired by antislavery movements in Britain, the Société had been attacking the slave trade. The antislavery movement in France had nowhere near the same following as did its counterpart in Britain, and the Société restricted its initial efforts to granting citizenship to the *gens de couleur*. But its efforts nonetheless put French planters on the defensive, and so the planters funded the Club Massiac to pressure the National Assembly to work in their interests.

One of the planters' allies, M. Barnave of Dauphiné, proposed important new laws in 1790. These effectively ensured the continuance of slavery in the

colonies and prohibited even the *gens de couleur*, the black freedmen, from full citizenship status by granting colonies full autonomy. Given that the colonies were ruled by white planters, it was assumed the planters would maintain the existing slave system and the racial hierarchy that excluded *gens de couleur* from enjoying full rights. With hardly any debate, the laws came into effect in March of 1790. They essentially meant that the French constitution or, presumably, the Declaration of the Rights of Man, did not apply to the colonies. The colonies, notes Laurent Dubois (2004b, 85), were “made safe from the dangers of universalism” (see also Dubois 2004a). Thus did France perpetuate conservative tyranny, even as it supposedly originated liberal modernity? This is the sort of thing that Bhabha, in his remarks on Foucault’s valorization of the French Revolution, might refer to as “the aristocratic racism of the ancien régime” (1994, 244). It marked a “tragic lesson” that “the moral, modern disposition of mankind, enshrined in the sign of the Revolution, only fuels the archaic racial factor in the society of slavery” (Bhabha 1994, 244).

Later, the French Constitution was, indeed, extended to the colonies. The *gens de couleur* obtained active citizenship and the slaves were freed. This was radical, and it came in two steps. On April 4, 1792, the National Assembly declared that “the hommes de couleur and the nègres libres must enjoy, along with the white colons, equality of political rights.” They could finally vote in local elections and be eligible for positions (as long as they, like whites, met the regular financial criteria for “active” citizenship). The salient political distinction in the colony was no longer based upon color but upon freedmen status. It was not whether one was black or mulatto that mattered; it was whether one owned property or not. Then, later, even that distinction was obliterated. In 1793, still amidst the slave insurgency, French Republican colonial officials on the island abolished slavery, and in 1794, the National Convention ratified the decision. Slavery for the entire French empire was abolished. Slaves were no longer slaves, and the principle of liberty and active citizenship applied to all.

This was a profound transformation in the modern world. But how and why did this happen given the Parisian revolutionaries’ early recalcitrance to the extension of rights? What had changed? The answer does not lie in the benevolence of the Assembly, nor even in the work of the Société des Amis des Noirs in Paris. Rather, it lies in the agency of colonial subalterns: specifically, the slave insurgents in Saint-Domingue. Erupting in August 1791, when thousands of slaves overthrew their masters in the Northern Province, and then spreading to most of the colony by January 1792, the slave insurgency altered the revolutionary field in fundamental respects, ultimately leading to the profound transformations that existing scholars pin on the agency of the Parisian revolutionaries only. The “slave insurgents claiming Republican citizenship and racial equality during the early 1790s ultimately expanded—and ‘universalized’—the idea of rights.” The actions of slave insurgents “brought about the institutionalization of the idea that the rights of citizens were universally applicable to all people within the nation, regardless of race” (Dubois 2000, 22).

How? The answer lies in the slave insurgency, which transformed the field entirely. The slave revolt had posed a radical threat to the Revolution: without stability and order in the colonies, the revolutionary state's wealth and power would be undercut. The Parisian revolutionaries now had to do all they could to stop it. In order to enlist their support, the Parisian revolutionaries decided to finally grant *the gens de couleur*, and the so-called mulattoes in the colony, the rights they had been demanding. The decree granting them their rights expressly noted that the decree was in response to the "uprising of the slaves" and would create unity among citizens against the slaves (Dubois 2004b, 154). It would put freed blacks and mulattoes on equal footing with white planters, aligning them against the insurgent slaves. The irony is not lost on historians. The "only way to save the colony," James (1989 [1963], 115) observes, "was to give the Mulattoes their rights." The National Assembly, adds Dubois (2004b, 131), had "to grant racial equality in order to save slavery." Ironic or not, this extension of active citizenship to freed blacks was a strategic measure amidst struggles within the imperial field, a relational action rather than one that flowed from the benevolence of Paris.

On the one hand, it is the case that the insurgent slaves had been partly inspired by the language of rights articulated by the Parisian revolutionaries. On the other hand, the Parisian revolutionaries did not extend the constitution until the unexpected slave revolt compelled them to do so. In the terms of Bourdieu's field analysis, the slave insurgency turned the *gens de couleur* and mulattoes into a valued resource to the Parisian revolutionaries, whereas they had not been one before. Due to the agency of the once silent slaves in Saint-Domingue, the *gens de couleur* suddenly became political capital for Paris. Or as historian Robin Blackburn put it, the argument for free-colored's political rights did not resonate due to French Republic ideals alone. It "had been transformed by the sight of the smoke rising from burnt-out plantation buildings and cane fields" (Blackburn 1989, 206).

The ultimate extension of the constitution to the slaves also can be apprehended in terms of relational field dynamics. For this, there was an additional field at play: the inter-imperial field, which included the rival empires of Spain and England. In January of 1793, the Republican revolutionaries executed Louis XVI, and the Spanish and British monarchies declared war on France. They wisely had their eyes on Saint-Domingue: as the heart of the French empire, taking it would be decisive for the tide of the inter-imperial war. "If the British completed the conquest of San Domingo," James (1989 [1963], 136) writes, "the colonial empire of revolutionary France was gone; its vast resources would be directed into British pockets, and Britain would be able to return to Europe and throw army and navy against the revolution." It was so important that England dispatched enough troops to leave itself defenseless against an invasion from the Continent (1989 [1963], 135).

Had the war broken out a decade earlier, in the absence of the slave revolt, this might have been a typical war. But the fact of the slave insurgency, with thousands upon thousands of armed blacks clamoring for freedom, changed the field significantly: having the support of the insurgent slaves was now vital

political and military capital. Therefore, amidst this inter-imperial struggle, the French intra-imperial struggle over the meaning of the Revolution took a radical turn. The French Republic eventually offered full freedom to the slaves to encourage them to fight off the foreign empires banging on the door. It began when the Republic's Civil Commissioner in Saint-Domingue, Léger-Félicité Sonthonax, granted official freedom to all slaves in an effort to win them over. He previously had pleaded with the Convention to "do something for the slaves" because it would give the Republic new allies in the inter-imperial war and against monarchical loyalists (quoted in Dubois 2004b, 154). As the war erupted, though, he took the initiative himself, declaring that any slaves who took up arms and fought with him would become "equal to all freemen" and be granted "all the rights belonging to French citizens" (ibid., 157). His official decree later freed all slaves in the colony. The decree began by stating: "Men are born and live free and equal in rights" (ibid., 163). Finally, the National Convention in France ratified the decree, but only as a strategic measure to ensure that the slaves would fight for France. James (1989 [1963], 142) summarizes: "by ratifying the liberty which the blacks had won," the Convention gave the ex-slaves a "concrete interest in the struggle against British and Spanish reaction." And it gave France the power it needed to fend off its imperial rivals. "The English are done for," shouted Georges Jacques Danton after the ratification at the Convention, "Pitt and his plots are riddled" (ibid., 142).

Standard sociological accounts of diffusion would compel us to think of metropolitan France as the center from which the innovative ideas of modernity emanated. This would accord with conventional histories that portray slave emancipation, as Blackburn (2006, 643–644) notes, as something that flowed easily "from the proclamation of the principles of 1789 and the Rights of Man and the Citizen" to the colonies. It is true that Enlightenment thinkers in France played a part in conceiving of the idea of universal rights. But whereas diffusion stories are obliged to stop there, a fields approach in the spirit of James's empirical analysis and Bourdieu's theoretical apparatus enables us to see this and subsequent processes for their relational aspects. A field is not a space wherein ideas or action flows unidirectionally from one point to another. Rather than having us search for metropolitan origins, a field analysis beckons us to map diverse stances and positions in relation to each other. And rather than an outward flow it posits interactions between actors engaged in struggle and exchange, alliance and confrontation. While not denying power differentials (i.e. differential access to economic, social, or symbolic capital) across actors, it nonetheless highlights mutual constitution and interdependent action between them. Unlike conventional diffusion accounts, therefore, recognizing the wider field of discourse and interaction in which the Parisian revolutionaries were embedded alerts us to the contrapuntal dynamics to which Edward Said alluded: the "overlapping territories" that made the "French" Revolution both French and Haitian, a story of master and slave, metropole and colony. It thereby helps us better see the relationality of power relations in the imperial world, while also illuminating the shared ontological and analytic ground of relational sociology and postcolonial thought.

NOTES

1. For a more complete analysis of postcolonial theory and sociology, see Go (2016).
2. In fact, relational thinking is not purely Eurocentric in its origins. Strands of thought from outside the Western tradition also contain strong relational elements, such as various forms of Native American or “indigenous” knowledge (Wilson 2008).

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