

Specifying Race:
A Set Theoretic Analytical Framework for a Post Colonial Historical
Sociology of Race

Abstract

Prominent sociological theorists of race have been arguing over whether to consider race through primarily materialist conceptual lenses or symbolic conceptual lenses for the last 30 plus years. These fault lines reflect analytical preferences of historical materialism associated with Marx and the symbolic interactionism of Weber. The symbolic interactionists critique the materialist analytic vantage point for essentializing race. This paper shows how the symbolic interactionist race concepts also deeply essentialize race, arguing that prioritizing either the material or the discursive dimension of race at the expense of the other deeply limits the capacity for race scholarship. This paper draws from the postcolonial sociological tradition and uses a set theoretic foundation to build an analytic framework for race that captures the symbolic and material dimensions of race rooting out the essentialism of prominent sociological race theorizing by focusing on race as a historical construction.

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Introduction

Dominant sociological traditions presently constrain U.S. sociological theory such that it cannot sufficiently explain race. Other disciplines with more robust theoretical frameworks, particularly postcolonial studies, threaten to “surpass” the sociology of race (Magubane 2016). Two traditions that underpin a characterizing debate in the sociology of race have roots in the historical materialism of Marx and the symbolic interactionism of Weber. Famously coming to a head in 1999 in a debate between Eduardo Bonilla Sylva and Mara Loveman (1999; 1999), the shadowy tension between sociologists who prioritize the way race impacts people’s material lives and those who prioritize how race changes as a mind-dependent, symbolic category continues to shape methodological tendencies and race definitions. This paper demonstrates how prioritizing either the material or the discursive dimension of race at the expense of the other deeply limits the capacity for race scholarship by essentializing race. The way out of this predicament is not better theorizing in a Marxian tradition or better theorizing in a Weberian tradition, instead, this paper follows the rising call

for Postcolonial, Du Boisian sociologies of race and empire (Bhambra 2023; Coenders 2024; Go 2018, 2020; Hammer 2017; Itzigsohn and Brown 2020; Magubane 2016; Meghji 2021, 2024; Quisumbing King 2019) and proposes a postcolonial sociological race framework that roots out the hidden essentialism in dominant U.S. race sociology by insisting that scholars consider the substance of racial categories the social positions established by early Modern Western European colonial expansion.

Background to the Problem: Sociological Theories of Race

In the first third of the 20th century, anthropologists, sociologists and psychologists debated whether “the races” of people were inherently equal or unequal. Having swayed popular opinion to equalitarianism, the debates shifted by the mid-late 20th century to argue whether race was a legitimate (natural) taxonomic unit below the species level (Lieberman 1968). In the context of this debate, the language was whether race “existed” or if it was “a myth”, scientifically speaking (Lieberman 1968). Now, prominent sociologist of race, across debate-lines accept that race, as an idea of human distinction, is an impactful social reality by way of racial domination and that a major pillar of its logic (that there is a legitimate, scientific and natural taxonomy that separates humans) is fallacious. Now, sociologists argue over the best way to study race, often prioritizing either materiality or semiotics.

The sociological theorizing of race has been afflicted by the same problematic bifurcation in the social scientific study of race that Stuart Hall pointed to in 1980 in “Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance,” that George M Frederickson noted in historical studies of race in 1988 in “The Arrogance of Race”, and that DuBois pointed to in *Dusk of Dawn* in 1940. The bifurcation cuts between tradition that reduce race to economic configurations versus traditions that (often reactively) point to a pluralistic, non-material, often culturalistic center of analysis. Where the consequence of economic reductionism is a failure to account for social complexity, the culturalistic approach tends to “stop short with a set of plural explanations which lack an adequate theorization, and which in the end are descriptive rather than analytic”(Hall 2021)¹. In the context of Sociology, these fault lines can more or less be likened to the analytic preferences of historical materialism as opposed to symbolic interactionism. The structural materialists focus on how race, as a “master category”, structures social life and can always be traced to resource allocation (Bonilla-silva 1999; Bonilla-

¹In that same paper Hall proposed the then emerging branch of Marxist analysis that provided tools to avoid economic reductionism and descriptive pluralism that included an academic geneology of concepts like Althusserian “articulation”, to Gramscian “hegemony”, to LaClauian “interpellation” which each link ideas and things, (ideological) “superstructure” and (economic) “structure”. Though I follow the programmatic imperative Hall defines in the latter part of the paper, I use sets of tools beyond Marxist theoretical traditions simply because I find other tools more clearly articulated and I don’t personally feel beholden to the Marxist intellectual tradition, exclusively. While what the social phenomena “articulation”, “interpellation”, and “hegemony” (ontologically) refer to come up to varying degrees in my analysis and conceptual approach, I do not rely on these conceptualizations for the sake of clarity without the baggage of allegiance to a particular strain of Marxist analysis.

Silva 1997; Marx 1998; Mueller 2017; Seamster and Ray 2018; Torres 2024; Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva 2008). The symbolic interactionists prioritize boundaries and social closures, seeing race as a fiction that exists in peoples minds and studying race as a conceptual category, as a phenomenon of belief and cognition (Brubaker, Loveman, and Stamatov 2004; Desmond and Emirbayer 2009; Loveman 1999). Though scholars grounded firmly in either tradition would acknowledge the import of studying the material impact of race on peoples lives the inconsistency and profoundly human-made “subjective” nature of racial categories as well, they choose different priorities. The structural materialist frames are better suited to reveal how race structures people’s lives, and offers theories as to *why* racial categories exist, shift and change. The symbolic interactionist frameworks are better for showing the complexity of *how* and *when* racial discourse changes, demonstrating how categories and requirements for membership in categories are made and change. Where the structural materialists fail to capture the complexity of race making in everyday life, the symbolic interactionists fail to offer tools to explain why race emerges when it does as a discourse, or what the racial categories represent.

The symbolic interactionists argue that the structural materialist frameworks lead to misapplication of rigid categories, reducing race to class conflict (Desmond and Emirbayer 2009), and essentializing race categories in a way that reifies their naturalness (Loveman 1999). Though the critique symbolic

interactionists lob at structural materialists over-represents the analytical prioritization of the structuring nature of race as an ontological assertion about race being independent of the mind, structural materialists' methodological tendencies can obscure the important fluidity, adaptability, and inconsistency of racial identification and ascription. Additionally, though the structural approach theoretically often grounds its understandings of race in a global terrain (ie world systems adjacent perspectives), often, the U.S. structural materialists focus exclusively on the United States to their detriment.

The symbolic interactionists rightfully champion the importance of exposing the human-made-ness of race, but their theoretical frameworks ironically re-essentialize and re-naturalize race as a social phenomenon. Though they methodologically prioritize global comparisons, their core theories of race avoid the global specificity of race in favor of implicitly characterizing race as a universal mode of human differentiation. The frameworks that consider race a phenomenon that lies primarily and exclusively in the symbolic world of cognition ironically reify race as an inevitable, biological, set of categories of distinction because their reference to what the categories are based on are the very logics of race. In other words, within the dominant symbolic frames, "race is socially constructed as race". Political theorist Barnor Hesse points to the tautology of this kind of definition writing that "what the thesis understands as the social fact of race is essentialized biological or cultural references to calibrations

of the human body or fabricated human distinctions” (Hesse 2016:vii). For example, Desmond and Emirbayer define race as “a symbolic category, *based on phenotype or ancestry* and constructed according to specific social and historical contexts, that is misrecognized as a natural category” (2009: 336, emphasis my own). In this definition, the physical or ancestral difference that distinguishes some people from others is prior to race, race just gives these existing differences a name. Within this definition, racial categories are based on differences of phenotype and ancestry. This definition requires that biological racial differences (phenotypical and ancestral differences) exist prior to race, which reinscribes the naturalness that the very definition seeks to refute. This definition essentializes race, falling into the psychological essentialism that characterizes most human thought and a large degree of social scientific knowledge (Mahoney 2021) by failing to “recognize that the mind groups together entities as members of a given social category despite the fact that these entities are heterogeneous in their natural and physical composition” (Mahoney 2023:329). Though the symbolic interactionists chide the structural materialists for reinscribing an essential character to racial categories, their frameworks for understanding race fallaciously re-essentialize and even biologize racial categories.

This articulation of race as a socially constructed symbolic category *based on phenotype and ancestry*, implicitly reinscribes the idea that racial difference is an inevitably occurring natural fact of the human world that exists in

ancestry and phenotype. This tautology not only compromises the theoretical soundness upon which race sociologists construct theories and empirical pursuits but also poses a practical problem for people trying to challenge racial orders outside of academia; the “race is a social construct” passing phrase is rendered toothless for epistemically challenging the naturalness of race and racial order. The false notion of the inevitability of racial difference as an organizing principle of the social world vastly limits the imaginations of people trying to construct new social worlds without racial hierarchy.

Not only is the characterization of race as a symbolic category that is *based* on phenotype or ancestry, essentializing, it is inaccurate. When thinking through a racial lens, a person may use phenotype and ancestry to assign people to a racial category, but the categories themselves are not based on phenotype or ancestry. Consider, as an example this imagined scenario: there are two people in the same U.S. hospital in rooms next to each other giving birth. One of the birthers is a person of small stature with fair olive toned skin and tightly coiled, coarse hair who descended from people who were stolen from different parts of West Africa and English and Dutch slave owners. The other person is tall and thin with deep reddish-brown skin with glossy curly hair whose grandparents immigrated to the United States from two different countries in East Africa. This person’s ancestry is of the Habesha, Tigre, Oromo, and Somali peoples. These two birthing people share no common ancestry apart from the common ancestry

of being human. They have entirely different skin tones, hair textures, facial and bodily features that if you individually isolated could be associated with several different racial categories depending on who you ask. However, it is likely that the assisting nurse, who grew up in the United States with parents and grandparents who also grew up in the United States considers both patients Black. If she is one of the several American medical professionals who underestimate the pain felt by Black patients as opposed to White patients, both people giving birth may experience a painful consequence of this nurse understanding them to be Black. Here, both people giving birth experience potentially life altering consequences of existing in a society and situation where certain things about them signal to someone else that they are “Black”. However, these two people don’t share any ancestry or phenotypical characteristics beyond having all the trappings of average human beings (eyes, nose, lips, etc). Race is not based on phenotype or ancestry.

Hesse’s critique asks scholars to plainly state what material social conditions racial discourse actually refers to and to consider “the historical relation between words and things, signifiers and signifieds; and the different social conditions and temporal processes in which things and responses to things are named and naturalized under that naming” (Hesse 2016). In other words, “if race is an illusion, then we must ask *what is it an illusion for*” (Torres 2023:126). Sociologists have helped explain how governmental and formal racial categories

emerge and change in specific moments but the existing sociological theoretic tools can not help us interpret what these categories represent (Coenders 2024). Sociologists rarely ask what is being signified by racial signifiers like phenotype and ancestry as stand alone empirical projects, perhaps because of our presentist tendencies (Inglis 2014). Studying the social substance of race is always a historical endeavor. This kind of work looks to sites where “race” conceptually emerges, ie where people first start using the language of “race” consistently and examines the social and material contexts in which they emerge with the aim of pointing to the material social systems upon which race as discourse is mapped at different points in time. This kind of scholarship can be found in arguments over the origins of the idea of race and its relationship to slavery (for reviews of race origins from a US American vantage point, see Eltis and Allen 1997 and Vaughan 1989), discussions of race and it’s relationship to capitalism (Hall 2021; Robinson 2020), race and its relationship to settler colonialism (Lowe 2015; Wolfe 2016a) and in the broad historiographies and genealogies of the idea of race (Doron and Haddad 2021; Fredrickson 1988; Gossett 1997; Hannaford 1996; Schaub and Sebastiani 2014, 2021; Smedley 2018; Stovall 2021; Wynter 2003). Where these studies explicitly ask what the social substance of race is, symbolic interactionist frameworks deprioritize the question of racial substance². This deprioritization

² Loveman writes that her suggested framework “gives priority to analysis of the relationship construction or dissolution of boundaries, rather than to the “substance” on either side of the boundaries (Barth 1969)” and that though the “substance” is relevant to empirical

has resulted in a void in the conceptual and analytical framing; in failing to make a claim about what the substance of race *is*, the slippery logic of biological race implicitly creeps back into their understanding of race.

The consequence of this is catastrophic and deeply ironic. As social scientists producing theory and science products, we risk legitimating racial discourse societally (Coenders 2024). The danger we thus encounter as sociologists of race is reproducing racial discourse that re “naturalizes” race. Specifically, the above definitions of race occlude the human-madeness of race by ultimately considering the substance of the categories created by nature or God (phenotype and ancestry), as opposed to thoroughly made and reproduced by us. Sylvia Wynter’s calls the tendency to “repress the recognition of our collective production of our modes of social reality”, *social occultation* which she considers a natural tendency of humans in societies (Godelier 1999, cited in; Wynter 2003:273). When we give a societal phenomenon an extra-human origin, we not only obscure the sociology of the phenomenon, but also make the phenomenon inevitable. It becomes tantamount to a justification of the existence of race simply because it is what is/was/will be. This represses attempts at fundamentally changing or reimagining these societal arrangements. Thus, a sociology of race that makes room for efforts to fundamentally change racial inequality, racial

analysis, “its relevance is “secondary” in that it matters only insofar as it both reflects and influences the motivations for social closure”(Loveman 1999:897)

oppression, and global racial orders must conceive of a theory of race that magnifies the human-madeness of race, specifying its human origins.

Though some critical leaning race sociologists have attempted to bridge the gap between the two traditions of race scholarship to “articulate the connections between racist ideologies and racist structures”(Golash-Boza 2016:129), they still bump up against the tautology that Hesse points us to. For example, Golash Boza’s “Critical Comprehensive Sociological Theory of Race and Racism”, which actively pushes back against Emirbayer and Desmond’s critique of race scholarship includes this definition: “racism refers to both (1) the ideology that races are populations of people *whose physical differences* are linked to significant cultural and social differences and that these innate hierarchical differences can be measured and judged and (2) the micro- and macrolevel practices that subordinate *those races* believed to be inferior” (2016, emphasis my own). In this definition, the physical difference that distinguishes some groups from others (what people often understand as race in biological/phenotypical articulations) is once again prior to race. This definition thus implicitly assumes existing, essential sameness and difference that the racial categories correspond to, instead of generate. Though both phenotype and ancestry as categories of analysis are also social constructions, they are comfortably situated in biological understandings of race. This can be thought of as an example of the psychological essentialism that characterizes so much of the

social sciences (Mahoney 2021, 2023), despite their explicit intention of de-essentializing race. Symbolic interacts re-essentialize race by overrepresenting the study of the symbolic dimension of race as the study race as a whole and by failing to define the social substance of race. Structural materialists sometimes point to class as the substance of race (Torres 2024), which, taken out of the context of a broader ecosystem of theories could simplify race and limit our analysis. For a sociological framework for the study of race to thoroughly de-essentialize and de-naturalize the phenomenon of race, it must account for the material and symbolic dimensions of race simultaneously as well as clearly define the substance of race, name what is being signified by race as a signifier.

[Against Essentialism: Tools from set theoretic methods](#)

I use tools laid out in Mahoney’s “Constructivist Set Theoretical Analysis”, which explicitly works against scientific essentialism, to rethink race as an object of sociological study. Mahoney’s “Constructivist Set Theoretical Analysis” seeks to offer a framework for using “categories” in social science that resist essentialism. This approach calls on set-theory and asks social scientists to understand categories of analysis (Brubaker 2013) in the social sciences as “conceptual spaces in the mind’s representational system” that are attached to the meanings and understandings of categories for the person using the categories. The conceptual space of a specific social category exists prior to the entity in the natural world that it may classify, and “an entity in the world is a member of a

social category when the mind processes it as having membership in the conceptual space for that category”(Mahoney 2023:331). Additionally, Mahoney calls for a constructivist set theoretic approach to abandon the “property possession assumption” in thinking about these sets and instead embrace a special-set assumption, “the belief that social categories exist as spatial sets in human minds” (Mahoney 2023:344). So instead of understanding all things in the world that have X property exist in Y category, a constructivist set-theoretic social scientists considers the Y category a mind-dependent spatial set where some or all of the members of that set share X property. In a constructivist set-theoretic conceptualization of race, race refers to a conceptual set (or sets) of social phenomena, observable in the world.

Constructivist Set Theoretic Theory of Race as Structure

Acknowledging the limits of overrepresenting race as materiality or as discourse, a suitable framework for the study of race must understand race in a material sense as well as a semiotic sense. Recent sociological theorization that attempts to remedy the prioritization of either race as symbol or race as economic material have relied on a Sewellian dual structuralism to join together the materiality and semiotic dimensions of race in one theory (Jung 2015; Lewis 2004). Roughly 12 years after Hall wrote that about the different approaches to the social scientific study of race, Sewell reflected on a similar conceptual problem in the understanding of the word “structure” in the social sciences and

defined a theory of “structure” that attempted to “overcome the divide between semiotic and materialist visions of structure” (Sewell 2005:126). Drawing on Anthony Giddens’s duality of structure and Pierre Bourdieu’s “habitus”, Sewell created a theory of structure that resolves cross disciplinary tensions in the understanding of “structure” as primarily material versus primarily cultural, by providing a theory of structure that includes both material and ideological/schematic elements. For Sewell, structure is “sets of mutually sustaining schemas and resources that empower and constrain social action and that tend to be reproduced by that social action” (Sewell 1992:19). Moon Kie Jung (2015), like Lewis (2004) attempt remedy the problem of prioritizing materiality or semiotic dimensions of race by using Sewell’s (1992) theory of structure alongside Bonilla-Silva’s (1997) structural theory of racism. Accepting the assertion that we live in a racialized social system, or a “society[y] in which economic, political, social, and ideological levels are partially structured by the placement of actors in racial categories or races” (1997:496), Jung and Lewis both adapt this to a Sewellian dual structure such that race consists of the dominant racial logics *and* the material oppression of some groups and elevation of other groups whose “groupness” is constituted on dominant racial logics theory. Jung and Lewis set a foundation for a sociological dual (in the sense of materiality and semiotic) sociological theory of race as structure.

The framework in this paper builds on these two works but instead of Sewell's definition of structure, it employs Mahoney's (2021) definition³. To theorize race as a discursive structure, I use Mahoney's conceptualization of rules, institutions, and structures. A structure is "a social institution that distributes resources in ways that constitute mutually dependent role identities and that regulate behavior among actors with the constituted identities" (Mahoney 2019:104), where an institution is "a system of enduring rules that affect the distribution of significant resources" (Mahoney 2021:250), where a rules are "logical statements that connect together human kind categories designating situations... particular actions... general actions...and sanctions for non-compliance" (Mahoney 2021:246). A rule will determine if a particular action counts as a specific broader action in the context of a particular situation. For example, a rule of many spoken languages is that inflecting your voice at the end of a sentence means you are asking a question when you are speaking. In a Mahonian constructivist approach, these rules exist in the minds of people to whom the rules apply as collective understandings. Rules also instruct humans to do general actions in particular contexts, or face sanctions for non-compliance. For example, in many performance settings a rule is "be quiet while the performance is going" or be shushed or asked to leave. Systems of enduring rules

³This definition is undoubtedly influenced by Sewell but more clearly articulates a solid foundation for understanding race as structure that fits well with the anti-essentialist intention

that impact resource distribution are institutions, and institutions where resource distribution constitutes mutually dependent social roles which regulate behavior are structures. Examples of institutions in this definition include marriage or nationhood. Structures are institutions that also constitute specific role-identities, examples include family structures (Mother, Father, Child), prison structures (warden, guard, prisoner), and race (White person, Black person, Yellow person).

The rules that make up structures exist in a hierarchical relationship characterized by “depth” where a rule is deeper based on how dependent it is on other rules for its meaning and how necessary it is for the meaning of other rules (Mahoney 2021; Sewell 2005). Rules can be deep in the sense that they govern basic modes of thought or communication, sets of deep rules, like Logic, mathematics, and linguistic structures can feel like the deepest kind of common sense. Deep rules often go unnoticed, get taken for granted and are rarely vulnerable to change. Surface level rules, on the other hand, depend on many other rules for their meaning and provide the foundation for few other rules. They are often consciously perceivable as rules that we can choose to follow or not follow. Examples of surface-level rules include pedestrian and traffic laws, tax laws, the rules of scrabble or dress codes. Surface-level rules are subject to contestation and vulnerable to change (Mahoney 2021). This paper argues that race is one of many systems of rules affecting resource distribution that constitute specific role-identities. From this foundation, the paper outlines a sociological

framework for a non-essentializing sociology of race as structure by specifying what rules constitute the structure.

Post Colonial Sociology of Race: The Substance and Rules of Race as Structure

In order to thoroughly de-essentialize race, an analytic framework must specify what the “substance” of race is and distinguish this substance from the discursive dimension of race (or how people imagine and talk about race and draw racial boundaries). Following scholars who conceptualize race as both a discursive formation as well as a material practice (e.g. Fields and Fields 2012; Golash-Boza 2016; Hesse 2007; Locke 2010; Wolfe 2016b) this work considers “race” multivalent. When we discuss race from a social scientific perspective with explanatory aims, we must consider both racial discourse (the signifiers) and race as practice (the signified).

To theorize the substance of race and the relationship between the discourse of race and the practice of race I turn to post-colonial theorizing which constantly accounts for both the materiality and discursivity of race. Following Go’s argument that post-colonial theory is necessary, as opposed to supplementary, to the sociology of race, this paper shows how a thoroughly articulated postcolonial sociological theory of race actually offers an alternative pathway to solving the primary critiques of one of the major disagreements in field of race sociology. A postcolonial sociological theory of race allows for a simultaneous prioritization of the material and discursive elements of race, while

specifying the substance of race so as not to implicitly reinscribe biological essentializing logics of race. It tends to the wounds that presentism and methodological nationalism have inflicted on the U.S. based sociology of race, reaffirming the importance of transnational racial configurations that sociologists have recently emphasized (Go 2018, 2020; Hammer 2017; Hammer and White 2019; King and White 2021; Magubane 2016; Quisumbing King 2019).

As I demonstrated earlier, racial categories are not *based* on phenotype and ancestry. If not that, then what are they based on? What is the substance of the racial category? In the birthing example, the combination of physical features as well as other indicators signaled “Blackness”, but they did not share these features or any ancestry. What this “Blackness” as a category corresponds to is the perceived identification of ancestry to peoples who existed in the large landmass we call Africa, between the end of the 15th century and the early 19th century. What, if not phenotype nor ancestry, do people who were born of people who lived in Africa from the 16th through the 18th century share that they don’t share with people with ancestry in other continents? Nothing, except for the fact that some of their ancestors lived on the same large land mass, and everyone who lived on that land mass during a certain time period people were articulated as a single people in the 18th century (Hannaford 1996). Some people enslaved some of these people during Western European colonial expansion and brought them all over the world as movable property, and the broad swath of peoples spread across

an enormous land mass, who often shared no ancestry culture or phenotypic characteristics became one discernable “race” that corresponded to how they related to Western Europe’s colonial economic imperial expansion.

The social substance of race is the material social order produced by European colonial rule of the people in parts of the world considered non-European between the last decade of the 15th century and the first decade of the 19th century. Racial categories are derived from colonial positionality directly in relationship to Western European empires between the last decade of the 15th century and the first decade of the 19th century. Race as a social practice is the maintenance of “population-specific modes of colonial domination through time” that corresponds to the Western European’s colonial domination over large parts of the world during the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries that prompted “local attempts to impose classificatory grids on a variety of colonized populations” (Wolfe 2016:10). In this conception, racial categories were not inspired by naturally occurring logics of difference between already established groups or based on the way people look or shared ancestry. Instead, racial categories and their boundaries are derived from relational social positions of European modern colonial empire. Behind this orientation lies an allegiance to the narration of Modern history that asserts that European colonial imperialism starting at the end

of the 15th century constituted a new (*racial*) world⁴ ; a new material global world order accompanied by new ways of interpreting social and political possibilities that reverberated across every continent (Anghie 2007; Lowe 2015; Maldonado-Torres 2008, 2012; Mignolo 2012; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018; Quijano 2007; Trouillot 2002; Wynter 1995). All racial categories in this formulation are *based* on combinations of the geographical, labor and trade relationships people had to Western European countries during Modern colonial imperial expansion. Racial categories are the role-identities of race as structure, and they were constituted by the distribution of resources assorted with Western European Modern colonial imperial expansion.

However, just because race is here defined as a specific social phenomenon tied to Modern Western European colonial practices, does not mean that racial practice or discourse is the same from one region to the next. In fact, this framing actually allows for a firmer foundation for historically specific, global, comparative studies of race. Grounding the study of race in Western European Modern colonialism allows for a broad array of different racial systems.

One way to distinguish racial systems from each other is by identifying the formal colonial power and the colony wherein race is being practiced. Thus, one can study the French racial system of Saint Domingue, or the Spanish racial

⁴ I am using language inspired by Adom Getachew's "world making after empire" here. Particularly, on page 3 she calls European imperialism a "world-constituting force that violently inaugurated an unprecedented era of globality"

system of Florida, etc. Comparative race, colonialism and slavery studies have focused on the differences in colonial race making across different Western European empires' colonial expansions into the Americas. Within this literature, there is a consensus that the production of race across these empires and colonies yielded different racial systems, but different authors have called for different explanations as to why they did. Some comparative race and slavery scholars of the Americas attribute different systems of racial classification and identification to different colonial practices influenced by the colonist nation's cultures, religions, and doctrines (Elkins 2013; Fenelon 2016; Klein 1967; See De La Fuente and Gross 2010 for review; Tannenbaum 1992), some to varying national ideologies (Sue and Golash-Boza 2009; Telles and Flores 2013), and others still to different material conditions like economic needs (Harris 1964; Williams 1966) or population demographics in the colonial territory (McNamee 2020; Montgomery 2011). Though often considered competing views, I consider the empirical findings from these works additive. These findings show that a combination of cultural practices of the empires, ideological commitments of the settlers, and material and demographic conditions of the colonies create complicated systems of racial classification that vary not only by empire, but also by each individual colony and population. Additionally, many European trade posts that were not formally colonized but were fundamentally impacted by and impactful to European colonial trade and presence also are impacted by traces of

racial logic and practices; with the presence of European traders, people stolen as slaves or indentured servants from different parts of the world, the social practice of race and racial structures emerge.⁵ Different racial systems emerge at different moments, and different colonial regimes ruled over the same parcels of land at different moments creating layers of different colonial laws and social contexts that produce temporally bound local racial systems that can rely on logics from multiple colonial racial systems (Parham 2017). American Louisiana, for example, specifically in New Orleans at the turn of the 20th century, showed traces of the French and Spanish colonial regimes' racial systems (Parham 2017).

Race: A Subset of Structures of Descent-Based Difference

A fair critique of centering European conquest in defining race states that it “provides little guidance to understanding how non-European societies organized social groups and difference” (King and White 2021:4). That is true. However, I would argue that all systems of “organizing social groups and difference” do not have to be considered “race” for them to be studied. Ann Morning asks if the “eurocentric account of race merely reflects a lack of serious scholarship about the notions of human difference that have been obtained elsewhere at varied times and places” continuing to ask if it behooves scholars to

⁵ For example, in a piece written on the people of African descent in Iran, which stresses differences across groups of people who settled in different locations and assimilated in different ways refers to this entire group of people as Black—despite their vast array of cultural differences (Mirzai n.d.)

think of the race concept as a “unique cultural product of a particular time and place” or as “an umbrella of similar concepts of difference that have emerged in some places outside Europe and at different times?” (Morning 2018:60). Within the parameters of set theoretic framing, the question becomes whether we consider “race” the spatial set that covers all human structures that include rules that determine role-identities through the idea of descent, or if we consider “race” a more specific subset of structures of descent-based difference.

What, as knowledge producers and consumers, do we stand to gain or stand to lose by choosing to name the broad set of related systems of ideas “race” versus conceiving of race as a “limited historical, ideological and political phenomenon -- one tool among others in the arsenal of horror devised by human beings to demean, oppress or exterminate each other” (Dikötter 2008:1480)? As I have demonstrated, calling all similar concepts of difference that rely on the idea of heritability to naturalize a social order “race” risk re-essentializing race because it does not also point to the specific set of practices that constitute the modern racialized world. In not specifying this particular social phenomenon, or applying it more broadly across time periods, we risk epistemic presentism and universalism that makes the idea of racial distinction an inevitable, natural part of human society, occluding the human-made history of the idea and social material of race. The articulation of race as a superset of structures of descent-based difference, as opposed to a subset, ultimately acts as social occultation of race.

In addition to occluding the human-madeness of racial categories, sociological work that employs the race-as-superset conceptualization sometimes borrows tools from critical theorizing that uses the race-as-subset conceptualization in a way that over-represents a specified theory of race to be a universal cross-space/time/group way of differentiating some people from other people. As an example, Desmond and Emirbayer's 2008 framework concedes that "race" is fairly new in human history but then considers it any symbolic category that naturalizes a social order based on phenotype and ancestry. Categories like royalty and nobility can naturalize social orders based on phenotype and ancestry and have existed far before the late eighteenth century. Thus, the crucial benefits to considering race the social order produced by Western European colonial expansion and the discursive institution the hides the human-madeness of that social order including theoretical and conceptual consistency and flow as well as the capability to thoroughly re-affirm the human-madeness of race and racial order.

To avoid over-representing race in this manner we need a framework that can also account for, or at least consider, the many ways people draw boundaries between people that are based on the idea of descent and phenotype. This way we can compare these systems of belief, sharpen our understanding of the specificity of race, as well as the enduring logics of descent-based difference that show up across the world at different times. This paper asserts that sociologists of

race should broadly adopt a framework that considers *race* a structure a *subset* of structures of descent-based difference⁶.

INSERT FIGURE ONE

Other structures of descent-based difference include different structures of monarchy, royalty, nobility, some religious institutions, many other structures of slavery and empire. Institutions of descent-based difference are systems of “enduring rules that affect the distribution of significant resources” where the deep rules of the system include: people can be distinguished from each other based on who sired and/or birthed them, people inherit traits from their parents and ancestors, people can identify who is related to whom based on traits that are inherited, these distinctions are meaningful, there are inherent similarities in those who share ancestry. Orienting this theory in relationship to Cedric Robinson canonical Racial Capitalism theory, I would consider the pre Modern colonial thought of European nobility that considered nobility of “better blood” than the common people who were “supposed to be descended from Ham, who, for lack of filial piety, was known to have been condemned by Noah to slavery”(Friedrich

⁶ In Morning and Maneri's 2022 book “An Ugly Word: rethinking Race in Italy and the United States”, the authors find it useful to distinguish race as a member of a family of descent based difference to handle the slippery language issues across contexts as well as manage the refusal for some people to use the word race but invoke logics of difference that many race scholars are interested in. This work also specifies race as a particular kind of logic of differentiation associated with Linnean racial taxonomies. Though my work departs from this exact function and definition, I draw inspiration from their distinction, and use their terminology of descent-based difference to define a superset of structures and institutions of differentiation within which racial structure exists conceptually.

Hertz, *Race and Civilization*, 1970, p. 4 cited in Robinson 2020:55) as an example of an institution of descent based difference that preceded Race as I define it.

Though this kind of logic may have created the possibility for Modern Race, it should not be considered race because in doing so, we risk overrepresentation that essentializes race as a natural inevitable phenomenon.

Sociology of race functions as social occultation when it over-represents race as all structures of oppression that rely on logics of descent-based difference. Defining race (as a category of analysis in social science) in property-possession terms that render all structures of descent-based difference race makes race a broad, far-reaching, inevitable social phenomenon and inaccurately detaches it from its genealogical roots. Conceiving of race as a specific structure with rules that come from a specific place and time associated with a set of specific social practices allows for a global, transnational, historically informed sociology of race that does not overrepresent race while also makes room for comparison of discourses of difference that are not generated by Modern European colonial expansion.

Within this postcolonial set theoretic framework of race, a structure of descent-based difference should be called “race” when it’s categories correspond to classification systems demarcating Western European (those with the right to colonize) from all others whose membership in a racial categorical set is based on their relationship to Western European empires from the 15th to the 19th century. I

do not wish to imply that the many imperialisms of the non-European worlds that couple with institutions or structures of descent-based difference, or pre-Modern imperial practices similarly coupled with structures of descent-based difference are nonexistent or unimportant. On the contrary, studying these structures is crucial to understanding human societies, power, and cruelty. Comparing the practices and structures of non-Western-European colonial empires would, in fact, strengthen the study of race in this specification. The Japanese, Chinese, Ottoman, Persian, and Russian empires which parallel, to different degrees, Modern European colonial imperial expansions are largely overlooked in American sociology. This is oversight that hurts Sociology broadly. In many of these empires, racial discourse as a Western European social structure exists in different moments alongside other structures of descent-based difference. To analytically pull them apart allows for clarity and resists the tendency for social scientists to essentializes race and apply a specific structure broadly and universally.

Summary of A Set Theoretic Post Colonial Sociological Framework for Race

According to this framework, race is a social structure of colonial occultation: a system of rules that obscure the human-madness of the mutually dependent roles constituted by the distribution of resources and patterns of social relations generated by Western European colonial imperial expansion from the 16th through the 18th centuries. Race is an occultative structure because it makes surface level rules appear to be deep rules. A constructivist set theoretic

framework for race reveals that the rules of race, thought of as deep and unchangeable (that racial categories correspond to groups people with shared phenotype and ancestry), are indeed more surface level rules that can be profoundly changed. The rules of the structure of race rely on the conjunction of sets of rules emerging from Western European Enlightenment science, the Western European Enlightenment philosophy of the Rights of Man, and the rules of social use-relations established during Western European colonial expansion from the end of the 15th to the beginning of the 19th century. Combining the set theoretic notion of race as a structure with a postcolonial analysis of the substance of race produces a conceptualization of race that specifies a time-bound social practice linked to a lasting and changing social structure that corresponds to this practice. The framework grants sociologists with theoretical precision, explanatory power, and a way out of producing knowledge that essentializes race occluding it's human-madeness and rendering it inevitable.

Conclusion

The sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit discord in sociological theoretical traditions echoing Marx and Weber is not ultimately ontological as much as a difference in epistemological priorities – the “structuralists” focus on how race as global phenomenon shapes people’s lives and the symbolic interactionists focus on how race is defined, contested, made and remade in different moments and locations. The critique the symbolic interactionists lob at

the material-structuralists is that the theory and methods behind their work often reduces race to class conflict such that the complexity of race-making is invisible from their vantage point. However, the symbolic interactionists fail to provide a framework that explains why race exists and emerges discursively when it does or why it changes, in addition to failing to provide alternative ways to measure how race impacts people's lives broadly, regardless of their identity. This epistemological tension maps onto the social science of race broadly, as Stuart Hall noted in his examination of this conceptual issue in the broad social science of race, both critiques hold weight and challenge each other's epistemological soundness, failing to provide a vantage point to achieve a holistic understanding of race as a social phenomenon.

This paper demonstrated how both traditions come up short if the goal is to avoid essentializing race and specifying what it is as a social phenomenon. Leaning on constructivist set theoretic logic and postcolonial theorizing of race, this paper urges sociologists to adopt an understanding of race as a dual structure, where race is a contemporary structure of occultation that obscures how the substance of racial categories is the legacy of varied patterns of social relations that (differently) demarcated Western European people from all other people through practices of Modern colonial subjugation. Understanding race by this definition, requires that in any part of the world, to understand race, one must at minimum have an understanding of how Modern Western European colonial

expansion impacted the social relations of that region. It also requires that sociologists consider race to be a subset colonial practices, and a subset of ideas of descent-based difference. This allows for clear specification of race, for analytic clarity and new room for comparing logics of descent-based difference in ways that don't occlude the specific, colonial human-madeness of race as structure. For example, Dikötter (1996) shows that while Chinese people used logics of patrilineal descent-based difference, the end of the 19th century ushered in distinctly racial notions of descent-based difference which considered the world to be comprised of 5 races where the White and Yellow races were competing for superiority and conquest. The framework presented in this paper helps clarify the difference between the many logics and structures of descent-based difference and race as a specific subset of these structures that comes from Modern Western European colonial practices and the rise of science as a logic.

Though there haven't been many sociological theories to accommodate a dual material-discursive colonial conceptualization of race, there is tradition in the sociology of race (though far more abundantly available in other disciplines) that concentrates neither primarily on the way that race structures life globally nor the way that race is constructed in a symbolic sense. Instead, this kind of race scholarship focusses on the process of linking the material, conflictual, economic dimensions of race to the discursive, mind-dependent elements of race.

Empirically, that has meant studying the contexts and practices that couple,

decouple, or reorient discursive racial references to material racial substance. It requires uncovering or scrutinizing the social conditions, processes, and human actions that facilitate the codification of human-made social distinctions based on material practices as “racial difference”. Examples of this kind of scholarship can be found in studies that focus on explaining the why of changing racial classifications (Fox and Guglielmo 2012; Lopez 2000; Roediger 1994)⁷, and especially those kinds of scholarship that trace how states disperse resources in ways that shape and were shaped by different racial ascriptions, laws, and practices (Fox 2012; Katznelson 2005; Khan 2021; Nakano Glenn 2002; Nobles 2000; quisumbing king 2022). This kind of work is bound by time period and specific social contexts⁸. This kind of work exemplifies potential empirical pursuits based on this theoretical framework, the only specific amendment is that

⁷ I think it not a coincidence that so much of this work is concentrated on a focus on whiteness, I think studying Whiteness it provides as epistemological advantage for the study of the substance of race that forces scholars to grapple with the both the material and the symbolic dimensions of race. As Lewis (2004) writes “In any serious engagement of whites, careful attention also must be paid to links between symbolic and material dimensions of race. It is the interaction between the two dimensions that often makes whites appear to be a somewhat invisible or not altogether interesting subject of analysis. Our very ideas about whether racial *groups* are “social problems” deserving examination is connected deeply to our ideas about those groups and their location within social hierarchies. Studies of Whiteness then must pay attention to the relationship between ideological and material components of race” (page 624-625)

⁸ I am presently playing with considering presentist studies of implicit bias research and studies of instances of racial discrimination in housing, banking, employment etc because they link people’s ideas about race, and people’s ascription of race onto individuals, families, and communities that reinscribe the material conditions of the racial order into society.

the race as colonial occultation framework requires the constant reference to and understanding of the how European colonial forces shaped the emergence of the racial categories in question.

Further, the specification of race as a structure which emerged from practices of Western European Colonial expansion from the late 15th to early 19th century requires a theoretical apparatus to account for the dynamic changes alongside the consistency of the demarcation of Western Europeans from all (varied) others. This specification of race as a structure of colonial occultation supports the post-colonial argument that “changes in racial categories can coincide with, and even benefit from, stability at the level of racial conceptualization”(Coenders 2024:3). A sociology of race that considers race a structure of Modern Western European colonial occultation traces how and when categories shift thinking of these changes as “colonial recursion,” or the sociology-cultural processes that modify racial categories but also reinscribe colonial racial categories to colonial patterns of relations characterized by oppression, exploitation, and theft. These tools will help theorize how, as the wave of U.S. territorial empire and the expansion of European power and control into Africa in a formal colonial sense during the 19th and 20th centuries, racial rules shifted/ expanded and contracted and changed but retained the substance of earlier colonial racial categories. Taken together, a postcolonial set theoretic sociology of race provides a much-needed way out of the sociological traditions

of material structuralism and symbolic interactionism that have supplied sociologists with inadequate theoretical tools that ultimately obscure the human-madeness of race, and reiterate the false essentialism that race as a discourse of occultation inscribes.

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Figure 1

