

# Sociology beyond Social Class

## The theoretical status of race and sex

**Antonio Sérgio Alfredo Guimarães**

Professor of the Department of Sociology at the University of São Paulo, Brazil.

[asguima@usp.br](mailto:asguima@usp.br)

### Abstract

In this article, I elaborate a critique of social class as the concept is commonly employed in sociological analysis, that is, as the category that allegedly provides the most adequate picture of the basic social relations of modern societies. We should keep in mind that beneath such pretense of realism lie normative concerns. Thus, I argue that extra-economic and extra-mercantile mechanisms for the distribution of power and wealth, such as the division of sexes, continue to act within modern capitalism; this is similar to what happens within peripheries and areas of colonial expansion, as expressed through the category of race. In the contemporary post-colonial world, sociology must move forward to conceive of race and sex as social relations not to be confounded with objects linked to genetics and biology; rather, together with social classes, they structure power relations and exploitation. In the present text, I defend the thesis that the movement which constitutes sociology as a discipline that conceives social phenomena as independent from their connections to the natural world only comes to true fruition when it takes on the study of the social definition of the sexes<sup>1</sup>.

**Keywords:** Social structure. Power relations. Race. Sex.

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Sociology emerges as a scientific reflection insofar as it is able to demonstrate the fundamentally historical and socially constructed character of its objects, previously understood as belonging to the realm of nature. Classes, races and sexes were in fact considered ‘natural objects’ before sociological thought came about to turn them into cultural artifacts.

The challenge of thinking of the last of the three – sexes – in a way that is not naturalizing still encounters considerable resistance outside circles of thinkers who are familiar with contemporary feminist theory. Race, which was dislocated from the terrain of the natural by anthropologists and sociologists in the late 19th century, continues to be the subject of ontological disputes within scientific milieu. Class, on the other hand, seems to have had its ties to the natural world permanently severed with the rise of modern society, the historical moment in which divine right, biology and theology lost their privileged place in the justification of social hierarchies.

In order to gain a clearer understanding of the ‘social nature’ and constructed character of sex and race, placing both categories firmly within the ranks of the objects of contemporary sociological study, I begin by returning to the first rupture – that which initially created classes as a ‘pure’ sociological object. For practical reasons, primarily due to spatial limitations, I restrict myself to classical sociology.

## Social classes

It is a well-known fact that Karl Marx (1974 1012-1013) was planning a chapter on “social classes” for Book III of *Capital*, of which only two pages actually came to be written. Nonetheless, from these scant two pages we glean an understanding of how in his view, social classes could be sociologically defined strictly in relation to a particular mode of production, rather than to particular forms of income and their sources. In another well-known passage, Marx (1963) rather than defending his own originality on the use of the term, emphasizes

the radical theoretical connection with historical materialism that he inaugurates. I could refer back to several other passages in Marx's work, yet that would make little sense here, since my purpose is to establish one basic point: social classes, in Marx, are rigorously defined from within his theory of political economy, that is, in their articulation to the capitalist system of production and its dynamics of historical change.

The implications of a Marxist approach are numerous, but I emphasize the premise that has best withstood the test of time: the formation of social classes as central to the reproduction and eventual revolution of capitalist societies. On the one hand, Marx leaves us the legacy of a totally sociological notion of social classes, with no reference to any fact of 'human nature'; on the other, however, he seems to accept the notion that certain ideologies and hierarchies – such as those of sex and race – are linked to nature, while others, such as religion, are not peculiar to the capitalist mode of production but to earlier modes.

Durkheim (1897) attributed the explanation of individual actions to "collective conscience", albeit explicitly denying any Marxist influence on his thought. Yet he recognized that the method Marxists used, which he referred to as "naturalist", would through evolution of mid-19<sup>th</sup> century social and philosophical thought come to represent a hegemonic method for the study of history. The sociology that Durkheim institutionalized within French universities was also a social science that refused both psychological explanations of social life – that is, tied to individual consciousness – and those that sought explanation in physical nature, which in his mind meant race, climate, geography and sex. What Durkheim (1987:5) praised in Marxist work was precisely its use of this new ontology, which he referred to as "naturalism".

Since sociology was born along with the formation of modern Nation-states, it was principally geared toward explaining the European societies that had undergone rapid transformation and were being reshaped through the repression of all manifestations of ethnic and religious solidarity in the public sphere. Modern states sought to

guarantee the linguistic unification of their territories with the clear goal of consolidating national communities, that is, forging new sentiments of identity and belonging that would be superimposed on all earlier forms of group sentiment. In order to guarantee the superiority of this project, leaving no room for doubt that the nation would not be just one more community, the modern State invested in building what Alexander (2008) calls the “civil sphere”, whose members were to be both *individuals* and *citizens*. Sociology’s founders, whether French or English, worked under the premises that the modern world no longer needed the old ties of ethnic, religious, racial and regional solidarity, which would lose strength or become subsumed in new forms of sociability.

Durkheim insisted that, through the increasing complexity of the social division of labor, a new form of solidarity, which he called ‘organic’ – based on the increased interdependence inherent in new forms of the social division of labor – would rise up and replace ‘mechanical solidarity’ based on ethnic or community homogeneity. Such development, for him, did not depend on political will: it was a social law. Marx had already pointed to the formation of bourgeois society, founded on capitalist *exploitation* and premised on free labor, the individual and markets. In Marx’s view, the bourgeois world was a world of social classes, and of political and economic associations based on individual and collective interests, defined through different forms of participation in the material production of social life. This also acquired the status of social law. Max Weber, in turn, supported the notion of modern society as a market society, and of the predominance of a new form of rationality – an ‘instrumental’ one –, which alongside state and business bureaucracies worked to the detriment of communities and of traditional or charismatic forms of action and ethical substantive rationalities. None of the early theorists of sociology problematized the power relations which were embedded in or flowed from the sexual division of labor, nor took them as objects of sociological analysis.

The process that constituted the modern world, briefly suggested herein, was clearly centered in England and France, that is, Western Europe, where sociology was first instituted. Nonetheless, the same bourgeois world that gave birth to the individuals and interests that made up modern social classes established itself without dealing a death blow to the old world. The latter was revived in a variety of modern forms. It was enlarged through European (Portuguese, Spanish, French, English, Dutch) expansion throughout the Americas, where forms of production already extinct in the West and on the decline in Eastern Europe – such as slavery and servitude – were introduced, through the subjugation of Africans and indigenous populations.

Another limitation of the West's (England and France's) emergent sociology that banished from within the concept of ethnicity and race, was the silence and absence of reflections on the nationalist tensions between European states and renewed waves of ethnic fervor, expressed in forms of racialization such as anti-Semitism. Few authors understood the modernity of such "archaisms". Exception in this regard was Weber, clearly the major figure of modern German sociology, who developed a way of thinking that was from the start nourished by concern for racial and ethnic issues. In fact, he began his academic career with musings on the issue of the Slavic peoples living on the border of German farmlands (Weber, 2003a).

## Races and sociology

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, race lost its acceptance as a scientific division of the human species. It began to be seen as an ideological and political construct, mobilized in the interests of European empire and overseas expansion, and was systematically rejected by sociological theory. Yet the truth of the matter is that the sociology that was at that time being practiced in England and France completely overlooked the imperial and colonial worlds that had been created concomitantly with its institutionalization as a science. Theoretical reflections and empirical

research were concentrated mostly on metropolitan life and the formation of social classes. And this was true not only of European sociologists, but also included the young anthropologist Franz Boas (1911) and, in Brazil, Manoel Bomfim (1903) who was among those that regarded race as a spurious concept, lacking in scientific foundation and employed in the interests of national oppression and imperial domination. Again worthy of emphasis is the fact that Durkheim viewed the concept of race as a simple biological and geographical intrusion on sociological explanation. This was of course consistent with his approach and in particular with his key methodological rules that stated that one social fact could only be explained by another.

Weberian sociology took a slightly different position on race. Weber rejected the notion of “race” not because he believed that biological factors could not condition the explanation of social action. Rather, he maintained the idea that human society had been edified over the substrata of living organisms, knowledge of which resided within the domain of biology. The mature Weber’s rejection of the notion of race was founded on the claim that biology itself lacked a scientific notion of race. What he referred to as a “racial mystique” was in truth little more than a racist ideology that attempted to attribute to biology the explanation of phenomena that needed to be understood through the lens of culture. In other words, those who advocated the use of the concept of race were in fact reducing culture to biology. This was the basis of Weber’s point of contention (1977, p. 43) with the sociological use of the idea of race.

However, after his visit to the United States in 1904, Weber initiated a methodological reversal: rather than thinking of race as an expression of characteristics immanent to a certain human biology that could condition social behavior, he began to ask questions about what the belief in the notion and existence of race could mean in terms of community formation. Such a methodological turn-around was doubtlessly due not only to his own observations but also to the dialogue

he maintained with African American leaders, DuBois in particular; the latter was probably the thinker who most influenced his perceptions on race in the United States (Weber, 2003b; 2005; Scaff, 2011)<sup>2</sup>. His attempt to understand the racial question in that country encouraged him to rethink his position on ethnic conflict in Europe, and above all, in Germany.

For the mature Weber, the idea of race in the United States led to the formation of human communities that had to be understood in order to comprehend the nation's social life. At the time of Weber's visit to the United States, Robert Park was still at the Tuskegee Institute, in Alabama. It was only a few years before Park went on to test his theory of assimilation, in the city of Chicago (Park; Burgess, 1921), in the hopes that Black people's integration into North American society would merely be a matter of time and that it would follow, roughly speaking, along the same lines that characterized the trajectories of European immigrant groups, according to the famous cycle of "contact, conflict, competition and assimilation". It can be said, then, that Weber anticipated Park, providing a less optimistic and more realistic view of the lasting bases of racial communities in the postcolonial world.

Taking DuBois' lead, Weber realized that assimilation and integration would not be easy and that the formation of racial community would be a more lasting phenomenon in North American society. In fact, according to some of his biographers (Winter, 2004), many elements of Weber's analyses of the formation of Indian castes represented a historical transposition of what he had observed in North American society; that is, his ideas on how invader races, using color markers, ended up crystallizing as castes. There is some irony in the fact that here we find a less culturalist Weber, who considers color to be

<sup>2</sup> DuBois' influence on Weber is demonstrated in a letter dated November 17, 1904. In this letter Weber echoes DuBois saying "I am quite sure to come back to your country as soon as possible and especially to the South, because I am absolutely convinced that the 'colour-line' problem will be the paramount problem of the time to come, here and everywhere in the world" (Scaff, 2011, p. 100).

a natural phenomenon, that is, a sort of indelible marker impeding rapid integration and assimilation. Weber himself would return to these reflections on ethnic groups in his studies on Judaism and on how anti-Semitism developed in Europe in ways that ended up segregating the Jews, as well as in his examination of how beliefs regarding gender and ethnicity led to certain forms of professional specialization that constituted occupational niches and segments. In other words, this was a Weber who argued that culture generates economic practices, thus inverting both biological and Marxian methods. In his view, the cultural differences that crystallize through belief in races move on to create real distinctions in the social and economic worlds; racism and anti-Semitism are, for him, instruments – points of departure and arrival – to promote such ends.

Weber was thereby the starting point of sociology's arduous path through the notion of race. Within sociology, race appeared as a mature theoretical concept only in the United States, resulting not only from the writings of the first Black sociologist DuBois<sup>3</sup> –, but from systematic reflections on the part of the entire disciplinary field (Park; Burgess, 1921; DuBois, 2004; Lipset, 1996; Parsons, 1968; 1993; Omi; Winant, 1986).

## Post-colonialism

The other thesis I would like to put forth in this article is that it has been precisely the diverse colonial and post-colonial modernities emerging from the advance of English and French colonialism over other parts of the world (Central Europe, United States, South America and Asia) that have revived and awarded visibility to forms of exploitation that seemed little more than archaic in France and England, such as those based on race and ethnicity. Therefore, a brief incursion into the literature that

<sup>3</sup> In a recent book, A. D. Morris (2015) provides a convincing argument that it was DuBois' sociology of race that inaugurated the first school of empirical sociology in America, in Atlanta.

has inspired theorizing on coloniality becomes necessary. In this section, I will examine two episodes of the historical process of *de-coloniality*, involving Afro-Brazilian struggles, that constitute moments when the ideas circulating internationally were appropriated at the national level. The first one occurred in the 1960s and 1970s, under the influence of Afro-Americans' struggles for civil rights, and it can somewhat be synthesized in the concept of *internal colonialism* (Casanova, 1965; Gutiérrez, 2004). Emerging nearly at the same time, yet extending through the 1980s and until today, the second event was that of the embrace of Frantz Fanon's ideas by a new generation of Afro-Brazilian activists (Guimarães, 2008; Silva, 2011).

In Latin America, as Quijano (2000) correctly reminded us, Mariátegui (1928), in his *Siete ensayos de interpretación de la realidad peruana* [Seven essays on Peruvian reality], had already argued that racial groups were perpetuated through colonial exploitation and oppression. Although the Communist International has attempted to impose a similar interpretive vein on the US Communist Party, the repercussions were minor (Sotero, 2013). In Brazil as well, the idea that Black and indigenous peoples suffered a specifically racial form of oppression, generating a particular type of colonial exploitation, although found in some communist writings of the 1920s – for example, in Léoncio Basbaum's 1934 self-criticism (Sotero, 2013) – had no further academic or political ramifications. During the 1940s, the notion that Afro-Brazilians should be treated as part of the popular classes exploited by capitalist relations of production prevailed, as in the work of the Black communist intellectual Edison Carneiro (1964 [1953]). Carneiro's arguments hardly differed from what latter-day sociology came to theorize. That is, within certain social formations such as the Brazilian one, racial groups – classified and constituted during the colonial period – lose their ethnic specificity and are assimilated into the dominated or popular classes, thus, no longer representing ethnic groups to which the concept of internal colonialism could be applied. Such was the

Communist Party interpretation of the Brazilian racial situation during the 1950s. The concept emerged from Casanova's account of the Mexican situation seems, however, more applicable to the relationship between whites and indigenous people throughout vast areas of Brazilian territory. Nonetheless, such relationship was rather coined by Roberto Cardoso de Oliveira (1967), a follower of Florestan Fernandes, as "inter-ethnic friction" – a notion that places more emphasis on territorial struggles than on coloniality.

While, in the United States, rigid territorial segregation lent support to the analogy with internal colonialism observed in Mexico by Casanova (1965) and Stavenhagen (1965), in countries like Brazil, the locus of oppression and exploitation seemed entirely social (albeit frequently located within urban slums). In this case, it was through the social classes that Afro-Brazilians were scattered throughout the social tissue, thus renewing old colonial relations of oppression that were not primarily territorialized. These distinct realities converged in Fanon's work, since it encompassed as much the anticolonialism of national liberation struggles, as the class contradictions between national elites and popular groups and the anti-racism of struggles to overcome the colonized subjectivity.

Silva (2011) notes that the Black activist and journalist Geraldo Campos de Oliveira had an outstanding participation in the Second Congress of Black Writers and Artists, held in 1959, in Rome, which was attended also by Fanon. The influence of this latter on African-Brazilian intellectuals linked to the Brazilian Black Cultural Association is not quite clear in the accounts of contemporaries interviewed by Silva. Much probably, given the focus on the heroes of African liberation struggles, such as Patrice Lumumba, who organized the Congolese independence war, these heroes had a greater influence over them. There is little indication, to date, that Fanon's initial reception occurred differently from what I have sketched out elsewhere (Guimarães, 2008) – that is, indirectly, through its impact on African and African-American

political leaders. The novelty, however, is that Silva has convincingly demonstrated how the reading of Fanon was important during the 1980s; thus, Afro-Brazilian writers such as Marcio Barbosa and his peers, conjoined in the literary group *QuilombHoje*, were able to define a new meaning for *Afro-Brazilian literature* and *Black consciousness*.

The anti-racist political struggles of the 1980s were, thereby, at the vanguard of what would later come to constitute a fully sociological understanding of the connection between class, race and sex relationships. Heir to the Brazilian tradition that Florestan Fernandes had been promoting since the 1960s, (Fernandes, 1965) – consolidated later through his reflections on the bourgeois revolution in Brazil (Fernandes, 1975) – the African-Brazilian activists who founded the Unified Black Movement (*Movimento Negro Unificado*) would very soon undergo the feminist contestations from within their own movement, leading them to withdraw from viewpoints excessively based on class analysis.

Black feminist leadership gradually won its place, through tenacity, organizational abilities and solidarity; as of the early 1980s, the voices of scholar women such as Lélia Gonzalez (Rios e Rats, 2016) came to the forefront of the movement. The way as African-Brazilian women's consciousness matured is significant. According to Gonzalez (2011, p. 18): "An important aspect of our historical reality is worth noting here: for us, African-descendant women of Brazil and other countries of the Americas – as well as indigenous American women – consciousness of oppression comes, before anything else, through race. Class exploitation and racial discrimination are basic elements of the common struggle of men and women who belong to subordinate ethnic groups".

Without making unnecessary inferences from these phenomena, it is nonetheless important to emphasize that, in the Brazilian case, forms of solidarity among women of different races were late in developing, perhaps due to the greater strength of the naturalization of sex. Let me explain: insofar as sex differences were taken as natural facts rather

than questioned as inherently political, forms of racial or class solidarity blossomed among the oppressed more quickly. Not until social sex became clearly articulated as a power relationship could it begin to work as a conduit for building solidarity between women of different races and classes.

## Sex, gender and sociology

Modernity as constituted by Western European colonial expansion emerged *pari passu* to the racialization of other peoples that had been forced into regimes of colonization and slavery, made possible on the one hand, by large scale migrations and on the other, by patriarchal regimes for the regulation of sexuality. These were the regimes that constituted race, staking out the boundaries around the reproduction of human groups that were considered to be biological. In this regard, the social regulation of sexuality was and continues to be fundamental for the conformation of human groups, whether families, ethnicities, races or social classes. Far from considering sex as a biological phenomenon, natural and given, on the basis of which social regulation is exercised, in the stratigraphic sense which Clifford Geertz (1977) criticized, we must understand social relations of domination and exploitation as constitutive of sexes and of the different modes for regulation of sexuality. Rules of racial classification, for example, as well as of sexual classification, are made to correspond to the regulation of inter-racial sexuality.

Feminism, understood as the political demand for equal rights between the sexes, was, just as sociology, initially framed and limited by positions of class, race and coloniality (Quijano 2000). This encapsulation was only gradually dissolved, as feminist politics was confronted with the need to understand the mutually-implicated nature of class, race and gender oppressions characterizing the situation of women in post-slavery and post-colonial societies. It is not my intention to summarize that history here. I would however like to conclude by pointing out

two challenges that feminist theory has posed for sociology. The first, epistemological in nature, was summarized by Bilge (2010), who notes three ways in which relations of power and sex are conceived of in feminist theory: first, the *monist* view that substitutes the primacy of class relations with the concept of patriarchy; second, the *pluralist* view, which introduces an additive and cumulative explanation articulating diverse forms of exploitation and oppression (class + race + gender), in other words, women's situation is seen as the sum of a number of different situations of oppression; and finally, the *holistic* view, which conceives of intrinsically articulated and interwoven determinants that express themselves both at individual and collective levels. In Kergoat's (2010) terms, it is a matter of the "consubstantiality" of power relations. One important step in that direction was given by the concept of "intersectionality" (Crenshaw 1991), which brought the challenge of thinking about how these diverse relations are articulated in social practice, and how diverse forms of subordination, discrimination, exploitation and exercise of power can be approached theoretically, into the mainstream of the social sciences, without simplifying them as a mere sum of parts or forcing them into a causal model of interrelated variables.

Such an epistemological challenge can be faced successfully when brought together with another, ontological one. On this point, I draw attention to Elsa Dorlin's (2008) reflections on the historicity of sex: for a genealogical demonstration on how the sexual definition of individuals emerges from social will (Fausto-Sterling, 2001/2002), that is, from social relations of power and exploitation, and how sexuality emerges from the way "sexuation" is molded, that is, how biological capacities develop in interaction with the socially regulated world to become and to function as *sex*.

By analogy to Geertz's argument (1977, p. 33-54), sex can be thought of as defined concomitantly with sexuation. For Geertz, the human being has developed its biological potential *pari passu* with

culture, for which reason we cannot claim that the latter follows from the former or that culture becomes possible only after the human biological apparatus has been constituted. Insofar as sex is concerned, it cannot exist in human societies without culture, since without the latter, there would be no definition, just a sequence of sexuation. Yet, without entering the terrain of ontological realism, we could also say that sex, as a sociological object, is but a power relationship through which other, diverse social processes operate.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, from an analytical point of view, social classes are, for sociology, possible constellations of power and interests as well as forms of collective action that produce unequal distribution of goods and services within the social order. Classes, however, in most sociological works have become legitimated forms of inequality because their formation is conceived as the result of the simple operation of market mechanisms, independently of the use of extra-economic coercion; this is what simultaneously constitutes their analytical definition and their existence as normative strategies. In other words, the concept of social class, when used by some sociologists, contains within it a normative ideal: that power shall be exercised only through the mediation of market mechanisms, independently of the relations of domination that are incrusted in the social relations of sex or race, for example. This is a bourgeois utopia. Running counter to this normative view, it seems clear that the concentration of wealth and power and their distribution within contemporary societies only become effective through extra-market mechanisms: the manipulation of social prestige and bodily markers that seek to give legitimacy to natural differences. The social relations of sex, for example, used for the regulation of family life, are extrapolated to all arenas of sociability and market activity; the same can be said for the power relations established during colonial conquest and crystallized as race and ethnicity. Yet such mechanisms can only be

separated analytically, within theory, and it is through their merging within social practices that they gain efficacy.

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