

Book review: *Sociologie de la race* [*Sociology of Race*] by Solène Brun and Claire Cosquer (2022)

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Book review: *Sociologie de la race* [*Sociology of Race*] by Solène Brun and Claire Cosquer (2022)

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- 1 Publication of a book in the “128” collection on race as a “sociological object” and “analytical tool” (p. 10) is a noteworthy event. While the issue of race has been the subject of much scientific and political controversy in recent years –even though affirmations against experts on racial issues “are less often scientific objections than rhetorical tricks” (Belkacem *et al.* 2019)– the publication of *Sociologie de la race* in a pedagogical collection is a sign that the theme has taken root in the field of French social sciences. The book by Solène Brun and Claire Cosquer is a particularly well-documented, clear and effective synthesis of current research and debate on social race relations, racialization phenomena and racism in general. It represents an essential step in the gradual recognition of research on racial issues, and of its dissemination in the French academic world.
- 2 The book adopts a particularly heuristic genealogical perspective that confirms the denaturalization of racial categories. The outline chosen juxtaposes and establishes a dialogue between the birth of race as a category of practice and its emergence as a category of analysis. The authors show that the meanings attached to these categories vary according to the contexts and researchers who use them. Thus, they have chosen to describe how the dynamics and effects of racism have been grasped by the social sciences, and how the concept of race has served this analysis (p. 11). The book is

divided into three main movements. The first part is devoted to the pioneering work of race studies both in the United States and in Europe. A second section describes the field's development and the main debates within it. The third and final part of the book looks at how research on race contributes to a more general understanding of inequalities, and to the study of social relations, from both an epistemological and a methodological standpoint.

- 3 The first part of the book presents the genesis of race studies (p. 15) and reviews the contributions of various disciplines. The authors begin by identifying key milestones in the earliest research, navigating through the works of W.E.B. Du Bois at the end of the 19th century, anthropologist Fredrik Barth, geneticists Richard Lewontin and Anthony Edward, and ending with a presentation of the ideas of psychiatrist Frantz Fanon in the 1950s. At each stage of the demonstration, they discuss the “constructivist gesture” (p. 19) of these works, to show the progressive conceptualization of race as a category of analysis. This process leads to the idea that racism results from the racialized imposition of the white gaze (p. 25). The book continues with this concept of racialization, insisting on its Fanonian origin, contrary to the myth of being imported from the United States and what it implies (p. 28). The authors notably revisit the ideas of Colette Guillaumin and Véronique De Rudder, and explain how they view race relations in terms of “majorities” and “minorities”. The final chapter of this first part re-introduces the sociology of social race relations in its important dialogue with social movements and specifically anti-racist activism (p. 37). On the American side, the authors emphasize the links with the civil rights movement and the role of *Black feminism* in theorizing intersectionality. On the French side, they show that the urban uprisings of 2005, triggered by the deaths of Zyed Benna and Bouna Traoré in the Paris suburb of Clichy-sous-Bois, gave fresh impetus to studies on race until then mainly carried out by URMIS researchers specialized in “interethnic relations”. In a constant effort to contextualize scientific productions, this study sheds light on the emergence of the field of racial studies in France and the United States, while tracing conceptual circulation between different intellectual spaces. The very way this section is organized and follows the conceptual trajectory of race, serves to denaturalize the concept, which is even more necessary and important now that essentialist theories on the racial question are making a comeback (Morning 2014).
- 4 The second part of the book examines the theories behind the “racialization of the world” (p. 55). The authors describe the two paradigms used in historiography: on the one hand, the colonial and slavery model, and on the other, the religious model racializing Jews and Muslims. The authors call for a perspective that interconnects colonialism and religion to gain a deeper understanding of the genesis of the racial category. They draw on the work of Ramón Grosfoguel and Eric Mielants who, while highlighting the colonial dimension of racialization processes, show that religion and race have been intertwined from the very first use of the concept of race (p. 59). This introduces another important idea defended in the book, namely, that the distinction between cultural and biological registers, which often frames the conceptual distinction between “race” and “ethnicity” (Bertheleu 2022), does not hold. The authors devote an entire chapter to discussing these two concepts and their use in scientific research, before disqualifying the analytical distinction between them. They show that race can also be cultural, notably in the imposition mechanisms that create it: religious or linguistic practices are thus powerful levers for disqualification and the production of hierarchical differences between groups. This chapter is a critical synthesis of the

debates on the subject, and it ends with the definition of a distinction based on ties with coloniality, in line with Ramón Grosfoguel's thesis. In this logic, the process of racialization is much more about a position within a colonial or post-colonial relationship than it is about skin color *per se* (p. 72): Algerians settling in France are racialized, whereas in the United States, they are most likely reported as "white". This issue of ethno-racial categories in surveys and statistical systems is addressed in the chapter that closes the section on the racialization of the world (p. 55). The authors point out the ambivalent nature of these categories, which lies at the heart of the debate on what has been called "ethnic statistics" (Simon 2020): statistical systems help to create the categories they use (p. 73), but they are also the primary tool for understanding ethno-racial inequalities (p. 73).

- 5 The third section of the book, "What race does to sociology", views current research on racialization processes and race relations with reference to other fields of the sociological discipline. This section shows how the questions that race specialists grapple with are fertile ground for discussing cross-disciplinary themes in the social sciences, such as interconnected social relations, the relationship between biological and social issues, or the tension between scientific discourses necessarily based on categories and the risk of essentializing these categories. In this section, the authors draw on the theoretical and methodological contributions of their respective dissertations: on the construction of racial boundaries through family socialization for Solène Brun (Brun 2019) and on whiteness among "expatriate" groups in Abu Dhabi for Claire Cosquer (Cosquer 2018). This section takes stock of the different ways in which racial inequalities can be analyzed. It presents standard fields and approaches, such as racist discrimination, the study of the repressive effects of the police and judicial system, and urban segregation. It also introduces newer issues in France, such as those of racial socialization or whiteness, understood as dominant positions in social race relations. By showing the links between race and other social relations (gender and class) in this section, the authors counter one of the critiques often levelled at researchers studying the effects of racism, which is to minimize, or even hide to a greater or lesser extent the inequalities linked to social class (see in particular: Lilla 2018, Beitone and Hemdane 2019, Beaud and Noiriel 2021). The authors show instead the centrality of the linkages between race and class in past research, notably when analyzing the combination of oppressions, or in the way cultural capital influences the management of the stigma imposed on racialized graduates (Druetz 2016). On a more theoretical level, they mention the way the Bourdieusian analytical framework circulates in the field of racial studies. It is regrettable that these issues are discussed in just a few lines and in a footnote suggesting references, in contrast to the extensive discussions they generate, particularly with regard to racialized habitus (see in particular: Horvat and Antonio 1999; Bonilla-Silva 2006; Perry 2012) or black cultural capital (see in particular: Carter 2005, Desmond and Emirbayer 2015, Rollock *et al.* 2015, Wallace 2017). The last section of the chapter offers a particularly interesting clarification. While constructivist approaches are sometimes criticized for dissolving the materiality of racial markers (skin color, hair texture, accents, etc.) when analyzing practices, "cultural racism" or "racism without races" (Balibar and Wallerstein 1988), this section takes a fresh look at the way race can be displayed.
- 6 On this thorny and highly controversial issue, the authors of this book manage to jointly offer a *response* –always appropriate and measured– to the many attacks against this field of study; and raise *questions* –always open and intellectually honest. The book

nevertheless advocates against voluntary blindness to the racial dimension of social phenomena (p. 125). Solène Brun and Claire Cosquer offer a synthesis of racial studies that goes beyond the black/white binarity that dominates American (and to a lesser extent French) racial studies, notably by emphasizing the role of the religious question in the emergence of racial thought. While the limited format of the “128” collection necessarily imposes certain choices, a few objections can be made. A first regret is that the book does not give greater prominence to studies on the body, sports and health that represent important aspects in the development of the racial paradigm and its use by the social sciences. Although the last section of the book mentions some of these studies, it seems to provide only an overview of this research rather than a real discussion of their contribution, as was provided by the authors in the first two sections. Moreover, we might have expected a dialogue with other categories circulating in academic and political spaces, such as “indigenous peoples” (Smith 2012). Finally, while this book in the “128” collection clearly shows how the understanding of race varies depending on the historical period and context, it places less emphasis on variations due to space and scale. Certain configurations nevertheless contribute to the spatial shaping of social race relations. Notably, what David Delaney calls the “conventional geographies of race” (Delaney 2002), i.e. spaces such as reservations, border regions or impoverished inner-city neighborhoods in the United States; and on spaces perceived as “outside” racial issues, but which are in fact at the heart of the construction of whiteness. The work of Margaret A. Hagerman (2018), for example, has been effective in identifying the mechanisms of racial socialization and the internalization of racial privilege, and notably of race blindness, in certain suburban neighborhoods of a Midwestern city. Despite these few comments, which should be considered as avenues for further study rather than fundamental objections, the book offers a remarkable synthesis, and its publication is a major milestone in the gradual legitimization of racial issues in French academic circles.

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