



Disciplines Unbound: Notes on Sociology and Ethnic Studies

Yen Le Espiritu

Contemporary Sociology, Vol. 28, No. 5. (Sep., 1999), pp. 510-514.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0094-3061%28199909%2928%3A5%3C510%3ADUNOSA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-D>

Contemporary Sociology is currently published by American Sociological Association.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/asa.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

management is not for everyone. It is a comfortable location only if you are willing to move beyond the boundaries of sociology and, at the same time, are inclined to bring sociological

ideas into management. Since I like moving between disciplines and between theory and practice, I wouldn't trade places with anyone.

Disciplines Unbound: Notes on Sociology and Ethnic Studies

YEN LE ESPIRITU

University of California, San Diego

The new social movements of the 1960s—and the post-1965 increases in racialized immigrant populations—transformed the academy, ushering in new subjects of social knowledge as well as new critical social knowledges (Seidman 1994). These new subjects posed new questions, challenged the dominant paradigms of academic disciplines, and contested the separation of knowledge and politics. The new critical knowledge seeped into the traditional disciplines, but took full shape in the emerging interdisciplinary fields of Ethnic Studies, Women's Studies, Third World Studies, Cultural Studies, and Queer Studies. It was amid this changing intellectual and political milieu that I entered the United States and eventually the university. Arriving from Vietnam in 1975 and entering higher education in the early 1980s, I inherited a more democratized and diversified university and a more critical and politicized body of social knowledge. By the time I began graduate school in the mid-1980s, I had come to view the university as a potentially important site for activism—a site to generate critical social knowledge and practices aimed at social change. Focusing my scholarship on comparative race and ethnic relations, I received my graduate training in sociology but have worked since then in the interdisciplinary field of Ethnic Studies. It is the relationship between sociology and Ethnic Studies—both the gaps and the overlaps—that I will attempt to sketch in this brief essay.

At its best, sociology grapples seriously and effectively with issues of social inequality, power, and collective action. From its inception, sociology has asked difficult questions about important social issues and believed that it could inform social action in answering them. The founding sociologists—Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Simmel, and others—all responded to the crises of emerging industrial capitalism and intended to shape the course of historical events through their social theories. Within American

sociology, the Chicago School sociologists spoke powerfully to the social issues of industrialization and urbanization through their attention to everyday experience. In the late 1950s, C. Wright Mills's *The Sociological Imagination* advocated a critical social science, urging sociologists to commit themselves to an activist critique and reconstruction of society. But there were also prominent countertrends; in particular, during the postwar decades, the growth of the research university and of funding sources for the social sciences "scientized" sociology (Long 1997: 9–10). Anchored in positivist epistemologies, the disciplinary mainstream of sociology became increasingly more specialized and correspondingly less engaged with related disciplines; its claim to universal and objective knowledge also moved the field away from an explicit commitment to social activism (Sprague 1998).

Paradoxically, even as sociologists wrestled with issues of power, conflict, and inequality, they have largely neglected or subordinated race and thus have missed the manner in which race has been "a *fundamental* axis of social organization in the U. S." (Omi and Winant 1994: 13). The great social theorists of the nineteenth century all predicted that race and ethnicity—conceptualized as remnants of a preindustrial order—would decline in significance in modern society. For example, the classical Marxist understanding that capital seeks "abstract labor" overlooks the ways in which capital has profited precisely from the "flexible" racialization and gendering of labor. In the United States, before the 1960s, much of the sociology of race expressed assimilationist principles and predicted that with each succeeding generation, U.S. ethnic groups would improve their economic status and become progressively more similar to the "majority culture" (Park 1950; Gordon 1964). Developed to explain the experiences of European immigrants and their children, this assimilationist framework did not differentiate

between the experiences of racialized minorities and those of white ethnic groups, and therefore could not account for the enduring and specific ways in which race—as manifested in conquest, genocide, slavery, and immigration—has been ingrained in the nation's social structure and culture.

The social upheavals and minority movements of the 1960s underscored the centrality of race in American life and shattered the myth of the inevitability—and even the desirability—of assimilation. Race relations—along with poverty, gender, and sexuality—surfaced as an urgent social problem. Sociologists varied in their responses. Some sought to uncover and fill gaps in sociological knowledge by documenting the accomplishments and contributions of previously unstudied and uncelebrated individuals and groups. Others began to incorporate race into their research, but as a mere variable or as a source of research rather than as a central theoretical concept. Still others conceptualized race as a “problem” to be managed and to get beyond. Conceptualized primarily in terms of difference, race remains a subordinate component of broader and supposedly more important social relationships, especially class. By treating race as a property of individuals instead of a principle of social organization, sociologists saw “difference” but failed to “see differently.” In other words, the inclusion of race in sociology has most often been additive, not transformative.

The Ethnic Studies response was different. Emerging from the student and community grassroots movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s, Ethnic Studies claimed the academy as one site of struggles over culture, education, and citizenship (Lowe 1996: 37). Explicitly critical and oppositional, this scholarship condemned the production of “objective” and “universal” knowledge that misinterprets, misinforms, and erases the histories, experiences, and actions of racialized groups; and it demanded more inclusive, situated, and transformative knowledge. The Ethnic Studies critiques of socially sanctioned forms of knowledge echo those raised by sociologists of knowledge: Both call attention to the ways in which struggles over the production of knowledge—over meanings, ways of assessing “truths,” and control of discursive production and authorization—are intimately connected to struggles over the (re)production of power and inequality. However, the primary intellectual goal of Ethnic Studies is specific: to investigate

the complex roles played by race and ethnicity in social relations as a way to produce new epistemologies and new data on social power, social institutions, and social identities.

The early Ethnic Studies scholarship and programs were intensely nationalistic. Writing from an anti-assimilationist stance, many scholars sought to unearth a “buried past,” to chronicle traditions of protest and resistance, and to establish that racialized populations have been absolutely crucial to the making of history. Though important, this cultural nationalist paradigm tended to homogenize differences, assuming heterosexuality and subordinating issues of gender and social class. For example, early Asian-American cultural nationalism pursued an aggressively masculinist agenda “to challenge the metonymic equation of Asian with the feminine” (Yanagisako 1995: 287). Confronted with a history of painful “emasculatation,” these male writers took whites to task for their racist myths, but were often blind to their own acceptance of the racialized patriarchal construct of gender stereotypes (Cheung 1990: 236–37). The focus on individual groups also obscured the ways in which racialized ethnicity is relational rather than atomized and discrete, and the ways in which group identities necessarily form through interaction with other groups—through complicated experiences of conflict and cooperation—and in structural contexts of power.

But racialized groups are heterogeneous; their cultures are varied and unfixed; their group boundaries are unstable and changeable; and their identities are marked with identities of gender, sexual preference, class, and religion. These complex realities—the products of uneven histories and unequal power relations—challenge the binaries implicit in the cultural nationalist paradigm, and they demand that Ethnic Studies scholars pay attention to the complicated, conflicted, and composite nature of all social identities, particularly to the inseparability and mutually constitutive realities of race, class, gender, and sexuality. For example, writing from and about the realities and complexities of living on the borderlands, Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) insists on the interconnectedness and simultaneity of the often contradictory aspects of her gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and feminist politics. Calling attention to the interconnections between patriarchy and the racialized capitalist state, Chandra Mohanty (1991) argues that the definition of citizenship is

always a gendered and racial formation. Similarly, George Lipsitz (1994) contends that the rise of identity movements during the 1940s reflected how class came to be increasingly lived and experienced through race and gender. The recent scholarship in Ethnic Studies also calls attention to the ways in which new social relations have produced new coalitions and conflicts that transform the meaning of racial and ethnic identity. For example, Lisa Lowe (1996) shows how the current global restructuring—particularly the internationalization and feminization of labor forces—constitutes a shift in the mode of production that now necessitates alliances between racialized and Third World women within, outside, and across the border of the United States. In sum, most of the best work in Ethnic Studies views ethnicity as *conjunctural*, as a “product of intersubjectivity and interaction in concrete historical and social circumstances” (Ethnic Studies Department 1994).

Perhaps most important, the most exciting work in Ethnic Studies is relentlessly interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary. Born amid the radical flux and reconfigurations of knowledge within the academy, Ethnic Studies owes its existence to the development of interdisciplinary trends within traditional disciplines, to the establishment of new interdisciplinary studies, as well as to the growing dialogue across disciplines. Drawing from the best work in the humanities and social sciences and from the burgeoning theoretical and methodological innovations in Feminist Studies, Queer Studies, Postcolonial Studies, Cultural Studies, and Communication Studies, Ethnic Studies scholars conceptualize race and ethnicity as an element of both social structure and culture. Noting the mutually constitutive qualities of cultural forms and social structures, Ethnic Studies scholars delineate the role of race in the cognitive mapping of U.S. culture, emphasize the oppositional cultural practices among aggrieved groups, and examine how the cultural symbols generated by the dominant group seem to justify the economic exploitation and social oppression of racialized populations over time. In an innovative study of Asian-American women as a problem of knowledge, Laura Hyun Yi Kang (1997) traces the complex connections linking the discursive production and circulation of Asian-American women as transnational labor with the actual physical labor performed by these women in globalized, militarized capi-

talism. In another instance, Rosa Linda Fregoso (1994) shows how culture functions as a social force by documenting how gendered images and ideas in cultural products and practices serve as impetus for the development of a Chicana feminist politics of “differential consciousness.” This interdisciplinarity is not only methodological or theoretical; it is also a response to the inadequacy of self-contained disciplines—particularly the universalizing models of social analysis—to address the new and complex connections between culture and social structure engendered by a new global context, new communications technologies, and new transnational social relations (Lipsitz 1997; Basch, Schiller, and Blanc 1994).

The critical social knowledge produced by Ethnic Studies and related interdisciplinary studies left the barest traces on sociology until the 1980s. The publication of Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s *Racial Formation in the United States* in 1986 (republished in 1994) was groundbreaking. Emphasizing the socially constructed nature of race, Omi and Winant insist that race and racial logic are ubiquitous, determining one’s political rights, one’s location in the labor market, and one’s sense of identity. Perhaps most important, the authors link cultural expressions with social structure by defining race as “a matter of both social structure and cultural representation” (1994: 56). Subsequent studies of race in sociology have both drawn from and expanded on Omi and Winant’s influential racial formation perspective. For example, in a study of multicultural and multiracial California during the last half of the nineteenth century, Tomas Almaguer (1994) skillfully traces the “racial formation” of Anglos, Mexicans, Indians, Chinese, and Japanese populations by denoting how race is mutually determined by structural and ideological factors. In her pivotal study *Black Feminist Thought* (1991), Patricia Hill Collins argues that ideological representations of gender and sexuality are central in exercising and maintaining racial, patriarchal, and class domination. Nonsociologists have also been influenced by the racial formation perspective. For example, in an impressive study of Asian-American cultural politics, literary theorist Lisa Lowe (1996) traces the genealogy of a distinct “racial formation” of Asian Americans through the history of the legislation of the Asian as alien and the administration of the Asian American as citizen.

As a sociologist who works in Ethnic Studies, I draw from both disciplines. From sociology, I learn to be attentive to lived social experience, to grasp the social constructions of social reality, and to link the study of individual lives with broader issues of political economy.

But I am excited and challenged by Ethnic Studies' aggressive theoretical and empirical engagement with the reality and complexity of race, by its insistence that knowledge is always partial and situated in relationship to power, and by its explicit interdisciplinarity. These conceptual and methodological frames provide me with alternative ways of gaining knowledge about the world that better reflect my experience as a racialized immigrant woman. This is not to say that sociologists have not produced important, even indispensable scholarship on race. To the contrary, sociological theory and research on race have grown exponentially, producing an enormous body of critical studies on the issues of social difference, social conflict, and social change. But it is to say that the *institution* of sociology continues to resist change.

Even as race was incorporated into individual research projects, no corresponding change has been made in the discipline's concepts, theories, methods, and epistemologies. Consequently, the racial paradigm, which positions race as a prominent social category creating hierarchies of difference in society, remains a minority position within mainstream sociological paradigms. Like Patricia Hill Collins (1998), I suspect that this resistance has something to do with sociologists' efforts to guard disciplinary borders and in turn to protect their assigned places in the naturalized sociological hierarchy. But in an era of globalization, new technologies, and paradigm shifts, the boundaries of sociology continue to be "ever more slippery" (Long 1997: 12) as sociologists—especially graduate students and young faculty—stretch beyond sociology for other conceptual frames more fully to gain knowledge about *their* world. If the goal of our scholarship is to better understand and thus better build a more just and humane social order, then it seems imperative that we learn from as many areas of academic expertise as possible. A good place to start is to establish dialogue across disciplines, beginning with sociology and Ethnic Studies.

References

- Almaguer, Tomas. 1994. *Racial Fault Lines: The Historical Origins of White Supremacy in California*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. 1987. *Borderlands/La Frontera*. San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute.
- Basch, Linda, Nina Glick Schiller, and Cristina Szanton Blanc. 1994. *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments, and Deterritorialized Nation States*. Langhorne, PA: Gordon & Breach.
- Cheung, King-Kok. 1990. "The Woman Warrior Versus the Chinaman Pacific: Must a Chinese American Critic Choose Between Feminism and Heroism?" Pp. 234–51 in *Conflicts in Feminism*, edited by M. Hirsch and E. F. Keller. New York: Routledge.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. 1991. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge.
- . 1998. "On Book Exhibits and New Complexities: Reflections on Sociology as Science." *Contemporary Sociology* 27: 7–11.
- Ethnic Studies Department. 1994. "A Proposal for a Program of Graduate Studies in Ethnic Studies for the M.A. and Ph.D. Degrees." University of California, San Diego.
- Gordon, Milton. 1964. *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origin*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Fregoso, Rosa Linda. 1994. *The Bronze Screen*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Kang, Laura Hyun Yi. 1997. "Si(gh)ting Asian/American Women as Transnational Labor." *Positions* 5: 403–37.
- Lipsitz, George. 1994. *Rainbow at Midnight: Labor and Culture in the 1940s*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- . 1997. "Facing Up to What's Killing Us: Artistic Practice and Grassroots Social Theory." Pp. 234–261 in *From Sociology to Cultural Studies*, edited by Elizabeth Long. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Long, Elizabeth. 1997. "Engaging Sociology and Cultural Studies: Disciplinarity and Social Change." Pp. 1–32 in *From Sociology to Cultural Studies*, edited by Elizabeth Long. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Lowe, Lisa. 1996. *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Mills, C. Wright. 1959. *The Sociological Imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mohanty, Chandra. 1991. "Cartographies of Struggle: Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism." Pp. 1–47 in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, edited by Chandra Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press.
- Omi, Michael and Howard Winant. 1986. *Racial Formation in the United States*. New York & London: Routledge.
- . 1994. *Racial Formation in the United States From the 1960s to the 1990s*. 2d Ed. New York & London: Routledge.

- Park, Robert E. 1950. *Race and Culture*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.
- Seidman, Steven. 1994. *Contested Knowledge: Social Theory in the Postmodern Era*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Sprague, Joey. 1998. "(Re)Making Sociology: Breaking the Bonds of Our Discipline." *Contemporary Sociology* 27: 24–28.
- Yanagisako, Sylvia. 1987. "Transforming Orientalism: Gender, Nationality, and Class in Asian American Studies." Pp. 275–98 in *Naturalizing Power: Essays in Feminist Cultural Analysis*, edited by Sylvia Yanagisako and C. Delaney. New York: Routledge.

A Gray Zone? Meetings between Sociology and Gerontology

GUNHILD O. HAGESTAD

Northwestern University and Agder College, Norway

It is nearly impossible to discuss the border between sociology and gerontology without considering several disciplines. While some people would disagree with me, I do not consider gerontology a discipline. Rather, I see it as a field of inquiry in which a number of disciplines address questions related to aging and old age. Thus, when we consider sociologists who have participated in this field, we ask how they have contributed to and have been affected by its discourse. Gerontology, with etymological roots in the Greek *ger-* (to grow old) and *geron* (an old person) (Achenbaum and Levin 1989), brings together questions, theoretical perspectives, and methodological preferences from various disciplines, ranging from biology and medicine to psychology and sociology. Very often, as Achenbaum and Levin point out, attempts to define gerontology have used the word *problem*. The field has experienced fairly continuous tension between two goals: building scientific understanding versus seeking to ameliorate problems associated with individual and population aging. This tension is important in the relationships between sociology and gerontology.

Long before gerontology was a field of inquiry, classics in the social sciences included considerations of age and social structure. For example, Comte pondered progress and how it might be linked to generational succession and the average length of life. Marx and Engels considered how industrialization would affect the significance of age and gender. Durkheim explored connections between age and social integration. Early in the twentieth century, Mannheim gave us his influential essay on how age places individuals in the flow of history, and generational units constitute a social location, with subjective awareness of such location. It would seem reasonable that long-standing intel-

lectual concerns in sociology could be pursued in gerontology, through well-anchored questions about how age is related to social integration, social differentiation, and the creation of meaning. Gerontology would also seem to allow for theoretical and methodological explorations of micro-macro connections. In her ASA Presidential Address, Matilda Riley (1987) gave us a powerful reminder that age is and should be significant in sociology. Yet, about the same time, a group of British colleagues argued that:

Any sociologist working on old age (in England at least) knows self-evidently how marginal the subject has been to sociology as a whole and how under-represented has been the sociological perspective within the conglomeration of disciplines working under the umbrella of social gerontology. (Fennel, Phillipson, and Evers 1988: 170)

To begin thinking about the meeting ground between sociology and gerontology, I contacted a number of colleagues in North America and Europe who have been active in the field of aging. I asked them when the border started to exist, who the early key actors were, how sociology and gerontology might have mutually influenced each other, and what might constitute unrealized potentials for cross-fertilization.

Although the word *gerontology* was in use early in this century, a series of new institutions, such as associations and journals using the name, arose shortly after World War II. It is therefore not surprising that when I asked colleagues how far back they would trace interconnections, the 1940s was the earliest point. Nearly all of them mentioned Talcott Parsons, often also anthropologist Ralph Linton. Both Parsons and Linton published essays on age and sex as bases of social roles in the 1942 volume of *American Sociological*