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The contours and complexities of race and racism continue to confound the social sciences. This problem originates in the historical complicity of the social science disciplines with the establishment and maintenance of the systems of racial predation, injustice and indeed genocide upon which the modern world was built. All the social sciences originate in raciology and race management, a fact that is rarely acknowledged. A critical reappraisal of 'mainstream' social science's theoretical and methodological approach to race is therefore overdue. The *Ethnic and Racial Studies Review* is the right venue for this rethinking. Andreas Wimmer's distinguished oeuvre provides an appropriate 'case' of the tendency that this editorial essay seeks to revise. Concentrating on Wimmer's 2013 *Ethnic Boundary Making*, whose publication was the subject of a highly laudatory 2014 issue of *ERS Review*, this essay criticizes the book as an instance of the problematic social science approaches mentioned.

Keywords: racism; racial phenotype; Verstehen; nomothetic; idiographic; racial formation

Introduction

This editorial is prompted by the recent *ERS Review* symposium (2014) on Andreas Wimmer's (2013a) book *Ethnic Boundary Making*. I was distressed by the symposium, which consisted nearly totally of acclamation. My own reading of Wimmer's book is more mixed. Although I respect Wimmer's work and consider him a friend, I differ with him substantially, notably in our understandings and approaches to race and racism. My work (with Michael Omi) on the theory of racial formation, as well as my comparative historical work on race and racial politics, diverges not only from *Ethnic Boundary Making* but also from Wimmer's substantial oeuvre on ethnic politics and nationalism.

It then turned out that the *ERS Review* had invited both of us to contribute editorials to the journal, and that a dialogue between us was seen as useful. Anxious to avoid polemic, we communicated over email and met in Santa Barbara in November 2014. We talked at length. Wimmer can speak for himself, but I will just say that I liked him enormously, and that our discussions were useful for me. Still, I consider it important to question *Ethnic Boundary Making* in ways that the *ERS Review* symposium did not, because I see an inauspicious anti-political trend emerging in the symposium, and perhaps in the *ERS* journalplex as a whole, that Wimmer's work embodies. So the editorial below explores what the social scientific study of race and ethnicity is about, using Wimmer's book as a convenient 'case'. Since this book has received the enthusiastic endorsement of the symposium's participants, some of the most eminent people in the field, I see this editorial as something of a challenge to the journal as well.

In this brief piece I cannot address the full range of Wimmer's arguments, and therefore stress only a few points that I consider crucial. Although I must concentrate on political sociology here, I think that a parallel discussion is waiting to happen on the historical sociology of race, ethnicity and nation (hereafter REN) as well. The magnitude and unquestionable virtues of Wimmer's oeuvre provide a useful fulcrum upon which at least some of the controversial issues can be raised, but he is no scapegoat and I am no arbiter of correct views. We are both simply scholars wrestling with these issues, components of a larger initiative bound to political praxis in various ways.

This essay has three parts. I begin by questioning the theoretical and methodological framing of *Ethnic Boundary Making*. Theoretically, Wimmer balances between what he terms Herderism (essentialist characterizations of social collectivities of various kinds) and social constructivism. His political sociology draws on numerous writers, notably Barth, Bourdieu and Tilly. Methodologically, although Wimmer's analytical technique is highly developed, his empirical cases are woefully inadequate to the task of demonstrating his claims. Next I consider the book's framing of its central category of ethnicity. I question Wimmer's conflation of REN; I argue that race in particular cannot be reduced to ethnicity, and note the absence of both class and gender conflict from the analysis. I conclude by stressing the primacy of the political in our approach to these simultaneously overlapping and distinct sociopolitical cleavages. I call for a political sociology much more attentive to the variety and profundity of popular struggles, what Robin Kelley has called 'freedom dreams'. I argue against the claims of the nomothetic, deductive approach that Wimmer proposes for the comprehensive study of REN, and appeal to an alternative, idiographic and radical pragmatist orientation in tackling these themes.

Theory and method

The social sciences have never been able effectively to address race and racism. This is not a mysterious thing; it is a result of the deep implication of the disciplines in the organization of racial oppression. Not only were the nascent social science disciplines core components of running the empires and managing the natives, the slavocracies, and the depredations fundamental to the rise of Europe and the development of the USA, but they were also vital explicators and rationalizers of these systems. All the fundamental assumptions and all the methodologies of all the social sciences had their origins, and still operate today, in the effort to manage 'race relations'. Qualitative research began with the ethnology of the 'primitive'; quantitative research owes its foundations to eugenics (Zuberi 2001; Marks 1995); the *homo oeconomicus* began with the plunder of Africa and the Americas (and with the enclosure movement); modern psychology with social Darwinism. This list could be extended much further: to the humanities, the professions, and the arts. But space is limited here.

Because of this complicity, which is not only historic but ongoing, there can be no such thing as a social *science* of REN, no elision of race into ethnicity or nation, or class for that matter – that is if by 'science' we mean nomothetic, replicable, falsifiable, Popperian methods. On the other hand, if we include under the heading of 'science' the idiographic methods practised by Marx, Weber, Durkheim and Du Bois, and carried forward in the present by such scholars as Michel Foucault, David Harvey, Richard Lewontin, Cheryl Harris and Ann Laura Stoler, then perhaps we have something to discuss.[1]

All of my criticisms of Andreas Wimmer's *Ethnic Boundary Making* proceed from his resolutely nomothetic theoretical and methodological commitments. He begins with a chapter titled 'Herder's Heritage'. Quite properly, he dismisses Herder's claims about nations and peoples – the existence of intrinsic 'national characteristics' most notably – as 'How Not to Think About Ethnicity'. And indeed, this kind of thinking, although discredited in social scientific circles, may still be observed at large: the 'German character' of orderliness and deference to authority, the 'American character' of pragmatism and innocence, and so on. All sorts of stereotypes trace back to Herder, by no means only national ones. If 'Herderism' is taken to mean that there are essential (i.e. permanent, primordial, etc.) features that particular forms of peoplehood exhibit, no one can disagree with the critique. Even Geertz's primordialism, although much more nuanced and ethnographic, was properly criticized for flattening out variations within ethnonational groupings. And beyond that, there is a culturalist bias in most essentialisms that works to undermine the political dynamics of REN, notably political self-activity (I shall have more to say about that below).

But if the critique of Herderism is extended to an argument that there is *no such thing* as peoplehood – no collective identity, no groups – then I must disagree. This position has been associated with Brubaker's work (Brubaker, Loveman, and Stamatov 2004), but is shared by numerous scholars. It begins in social psychological territory, with the recognition that identities are flexible, at least to some extent, and ends up reducing matters of collective identity to social psychological phenomena. To be sure, all such identities are at least to some extent matters of choice, as Meadian views or symbolic interactionism would suggest. They are flexible and contingent, and often politically mediated, and they vary over time. So far we are in territory that Wimmer would describe as 'constructivist'. The limits to such views are first, that identity is often imposed by the authoritarian state or authoritarian movements: consider racial profiling, consider Althusserian interpellation, consider national liberation struggles; second, arguments against groupism readily collapse into a de facto groupism of their own. You simply cannot discuss REN without doing this. When Brubaker analyzes Romania, Hungarians, Serbs and Moldovans necessarily appear, as do Catholics, Orthodox Christians and others. When Wimmer examines Swiss hostility to immigrants, he wants to distinguish between 'residents' and 'newcomers', but he still has to discuss his cases in terms of Arabs or Turks or Italians. He brushes aside 'Muslim identity discourse' as an artefact of 'American style ethnic studies', cursorily dismissing both the Islamophobia issue – arguably a racial matter of long historic provenance as well as pressing contemporary interest – and the unfortunate (to him) prominence of 'ethnic studies' as an academic approach to race and racism in the USA (EBM 20–21).[2] But these themes cannot be ruled out or assumed away; they are social facts in the Durkheimian sense; they are given by politics.

Despite the book's emphasis on boundaries instead of groups, and despite its Barthian insistence on the flexibility of boundaries, the idea that there can be boundaries *without* groups, that is, without something to bound in or out, is inherently problematic. Wimmer acknowledges this in passing: 'Contrary to Barth's famed dictum that it is the boundary that matters and not the "cultural stuff" they enclose … this stuff may indeed make a difference' (EBM 86). The problem with this is not so

much a failure to recognize the 'stuff' that is REN, but the relegation of it to the cultural realm. Ethnicity theory is always prone to cultural reductionism.[3]

So we can agree that there is no validity to essentialist frameworks à la Herder, but the social scientific stigmatization of 'groupism' does not hold up either. Constructivism, another critical term in Wimmer (he uses it contra Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, for example) turns out to be essential too, so to speak, and social science has to deal with that idiographic reality. This introduces significant problems of construct validity into the kind of analytical work that Wimmer tries to do.

From a methods point of view, Wimmer is an orthodox empirical political sociologist (or political anthropologist, a distinction without a difference in my view). His heroic quest is for a comparative historical method that can synthesize the wide range of cases of ethnic identification, ethnic conflict and ethnic exclusion (including state-making) that have created and recreated the modern world. In other work, his larger project is stateoriented and interstate oriented, focusing intensively on nationalism and ethnic conflict as the engines of state-building through war (Wimmer 2013b). Although critical of constructivism, in *Ethnic Boundary Making* Wimmer emphasizes the dynamics of ethnic identity, of the social construction of ethnicity.

Empirically, Wimmer employs a lot of data – largely survey data and network analysis – to develop his two case studies: of Swiss immigration politics, and US racial classification and closure. In respect to Swiss subjects, he finds that anti-immigrant attitudes, movements, parties and policies do not derive from racism but instead from 'perceived cultural distance'. After all, he claims, 'racial logic … lacks public legitimacy on the European continent' (EMB 137). In respect to his US subjects – college-student friendship networks on Facebook – he finds that 'friending' is considerably more complex than straightforward hypotheses of racial homophily would lead us to expect. Ethnic factors cut across racial ones: hence Jews friend other Jews, Korean Americans friend other Korean Americans, Afro-Caribbeans friend other Afro-Caribbeans and so on, with greater networking salience than mere racial identification as white, Asian or black would predict. 'Networking happens across racial boundaries', Wimmer announces (EBM 172). 'Propinquity' matters; in other words, students friend each other because they meet in classrooms or dorms, not because they share a racial identity. Finally, if we could only control for racial segregation and extreme stratification in US society, we would likely find that collective racial identifications would diminish even more:

> Properly considering the marked forms of spatial segregation along racial lines in American society and the unequal distribution of educational opportunities would lead researchers to attribute more of the racial homogeneity of networks to these forces, rather than to homophily alone. (EMB 172)

In other words, in order to achieve the requisite degree of analytical rigor, we must get race out of the picture. It may be 'folk knowledge,' but it has no scientific relevance.

Ethnicity

So what is this ethnicity that Wimmer and most of the commentators in the *ERS Review* symposium are talking about? He and the other authors largely endorse the

conflation of REN categories, viewing these three descriptors as names for roughly the same thing. Wimmer adopts the Weberian definition: '… a subjectively felt belonging to a particular group that is distinguished by a shared culture and common ancestry.' Race is a type of ethnicity, at most a special case. This belief in shared culture and ancestry rests on cultural practices perceived as "typical" for the community, or on phenotypical similarities indicating common descent. Placing the word in inverted commas, Wimmer continues: 'In this broad understanding of ethnicity, "race" is treated as a subtype of ethnicity, as is nationhood' (EBM 7). For Wimmer then, 'race' involves the addition of an 'ethnosomatic' or 'phenotypical' dimension to ethnicity: the body comes into the picture, but only as another signifier of ethnicity, perhaps on the same level of salience as an accent, a distinct cuisine, or style of dress.[4] This is a claim that he acknowledges 'runs against the folk use of these terms in the United States', and 'is inconvenient for its students', because of the 'different fate that the descendants of African slaves and European immigrants experienced over the past two centuries' (EBM 8). Yes, quite.

Anxious to avoid any projection of North American raciology onto the rest of the world, Wimmer endorses the appalling claim of Bourdieu and Wacquant (1999; see also French 2000) that seeing race and racism as global dimensions of the modern world-system constitutes a peculiar and pernicious feature of US 'cultural imperialism' (EBM 9). In other words, outside the USA (notably in Brazil, but also in Western Europe and the 'darker nations' more generally), race is not that important.[5]

To see 'race' as the unfortunate and illusory somaticization of ethnicity, to dismiss the corporeal dimensions of race as social scientifically indistinct or as folk knowledge (see Wacquant 1997), to downgrade the racial components of imperialism in the modern world-system, to ignore the prevalence of racial dimensions in various fascisms and genocides (although not all), seems to me the result of an excess of zeal on Wimmer's part for a comprehensive theory. I do not mean to suggest that he is insufficiently anti-racist or something like that. I just think that, as Thomas Dolby (1982) might say, he is 'blinded by science'.

In Wimmer's account, ethnicity is seen as an artefact of culture, a cognitive, representational phenomenon. Its effectivity lies in the 'boundarymaking' processes that it enables. Drawing ethnic boundaries creates 'groups', but it is the practice of boundarymaking, he suggests, not the particular collective subjects enclosed within those boundaries, with which we should be concerned. In fact the collectivity of all such groups is suspect, an effect of 'groupism' (Brubaker 2004). With this de-ontologization of groups in mind, he thinks that we can study ethnicity comparatively and historically, and indeed ground our political sociology on it. What happens to Verstehen under these conditions?

In this approach, *class* lies outside the REN social categories; it is somewhat more objective, less cognitive, although – following both Tilly and Bourdieu – class too has cultural components and reference points. It is, however, not 'ethnic', and in significant ways also not 'groupist'. Rather, class is a component of the social structure, whether seen in a Durkheimian or Marxist way as generated by the division of labour in society, or in a Weberian way as an outcome of the distribution of resources, that is, varying 'life-chances'. Where ethnicity and class intersect is through the culturally based boundary-making process, through which 'closure' can be effected, and exclusion can

take place. Classes are made and remade through 'opportunity hoarding' (Tilly 1999; Massey 2007). Racism is just a variety of this process, which can manifest itself in a wide variety of social practices: examples include discrimination, 'nativism' (exclusion of immigrants), and stereotyping and prejudice of various kinds. Since self-reproducing, or let us say institutionalized or 'structural' forms of opportunity hoarding, characterize all modern societies, and since the criteria for the boundarymaking that curtails opportunity for some and awards it to others are not necessarily racial, attention paid to race and racism is overblown, especially in the USA.

Gender receives little attention in *Ethnic Boundary Making*; Wimmer apparently does not feel compelled to disaggregate his data on Swiss nativism, or on US Facebook friending, along gender lines. If pressed, he might apply his model to gender as well, since he is at pains to inform us how other – ostensibly non-racial – variables intervene in and cut across the boundaries of REN, and especially supposedly racial boundaries.

After all, cultural norms almost everywhere exclude women from full access to opportunities. Women suffer from what De Beauvoir ([1952] 1989) – following Marx's early writings and Sartre's arguments about 'seriality' – termed 'isolation effects': unlike the (putatively male) workers in a factory or on a farm, women are alone in a way that men are not, constrained by the demands of reproduction to the narrow world of *Kinder, Kirche, Küche*, as the Nazi slogan had it. An extensive series of objections can be raised here, regarding the question of reproduction, the presence of women in the labour force, the chattelization of women and its relation to the legacies of primitive accumulation, slavery and empire (Federici 2004), and the general question that has become known as *intersectionality*, the confluence of the social relations and structures of difference, oppression and exploitation across race/class/gender lines. None of these matters figures into Wimmer's account.

Conclusion: the primacy of the political

With this theoretical edifice in place, Wimmer argues, we can proceed to a fairly comprehensive comparative analysis of ethnicity on a global scale. I am deeply unconvinced, although I do see some possibilities for redemption in Wimmer's overall project.

Let me first give credit to the scale of his ambition. Although significant renovation will have to take place to shore up the architecture of *Ethnic Boundary Making*, once the reductionism of that work is repaired, an expanded and deepened vision may be glimpsed in Wimmer's overall enterprise, which aims to account for social cleavage, warfare, nationalism and the crisis of the nationstate in the modern era. Whatever its limits, the scope and daring of such a project demands respect. But the limits are severe, at least in the single text that I have been discussing here.

The problems I have adduced thus far relate most centrally to Wimmer's scientism, his nomothetic commitments, and his willingness to dismiss the deeply racial structures of the modern world – and of social science too – in consequence of those commitments. I would venture to say that these positions owe a great deal to the influence of Bourdieu, whose greatness I hereby acknowledge, but whose resolute commitment to the separation between scientific knowledge and folk knowledge I reject. This distinction pervades Wimmer's work. From this standpoint our obligation as social

scientists is clear: we have to distinguish our knowledge from that of everyday people, which is ideological, impressionistic and unreliable. We frame and test hypotheses; we measure things. As a sociological Weltanschaung this is depoliticizing and positivist; it dismisses Verstehen, as well as such ideas as Duboisian double consciousness,[6] Deweyan situated creativity, Gramscian hegemony, and democratic self-activity overall. The depoliticizing implications of such a position are clear: from this viewpoint, how opposition movements take shape, how social conflicts take place, and how states are made and remade through such conflicts, cannot be properly understood in terms of such popular frameworks as anti-racist politics have to offer. Nor are anti-imperialist or feminist projects likely to be taken seriously from this perspective. The ability of 'ordinary people' to think for themselves and act accordingly is called into question.

I do not mean to cast aside mainstream social science. I do not mean that nomothetic methodologies have no place in our technical toolbox. Of course, measuring things retains importance or validity. But:

(1) One must carefully constitute one's empirical object; good theoretical framing (aka construct validity) is central.
(2) One must practise Verstehen in the deep sense – attempting to render faithfully the experience and interpretations of the subjects of one's research. In my view Bourdieu's taxonomic proclivities and concepts of habitus and doxa undermine Verstehen. Social science is no less subject to ideology and hazardous assumptions than popular knowledge is.
(3) Thus without dismissing the empirical, and with respect for what survey research and network analysis can sometimes do, I suggest that all research on race (and probably ethnicity too) has to have a significant idiographic dimension.

What sort of repairs and renovations would be needed to render Wimmer's approach adequate to the study of race and racism? First, there would have to be more respect for the particularities of those themes. The dismissal of the 'somatic' as a mere wrinkle in the ethnic paradigm would have to be avoided. A fuller comprehension of the role of the body, and of the ocular dimensions of racial oppression, would have to be attained. Today's 'racial profiling' and the policing of racial, immigrant and presumptively criminal bodies – not only in the USA but in Latin America, the Caribbean, the Mediterranean, Europe at large, the Middle East, South Africa, and even Russia and China (Law 2012) – would have to be recognized and analyzed. The question of racial 'science' and the biopolitics of race would have to be addressed: the oscillations and resonances between eugenics and genomics (Duster 2003); the developing field of implicit bias studies in cognitive psychology (Markus et al. 2012; Eberhardt and Hetey 2014); the Foucauldian account of the racial dynamism of 'civilization' and empire would have to be considered (Foucault 2003; Stoler 1995).

Wimmer would have to contemplate more seriously the geographic dimensions of race; although he notes the presence of spatial segregation (and presumably other forms of apartheid: 'reserve areas', the North–South divide, and the like), he treats these as exogenous variables, shaping culture and politics in various neutral ways (in Facebook friending on US college campuses, for example; or in political appeals to nativism in Switzerland), but not themselves *shaped by* endemic cultures and

politics of exclusion and exploitation. Why, after all, are Maghrebine, Turkish and Latin Europeans seeking entry into Switzerland? By what entitlement do Swiss citizens claim the right to exclude these 'others', who are supposedly so different that they cause the Swiss 'discomfort'? What educational, economic and political dynamics shape race-consciousness, not only among the elite students of colour who are friending each other in the USA, but also among the white students who are expected (although hardly required) to share the campus with them, and among the millions of youth for whom university education is unattainable?

'Once the big game has been fenced off,' Ta-Nehisi Coates writes (2014), 'then comes the real hunt.' Coates is referring to present-day exploitation of prison labour, slumlording and sub-prime loan sharking, educational segregation, the 'race tax', and so on, but there is a long history to hunting the 'big game' of the world's darker peoples. For example, Marx (1967, 351) refers to 'the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of blackskins' in the eighteenth century. Much of the gold (both literal and figurative gold) held in Switzerland was extracted from the Global South by means of the lash. Nor does Wimmer recognize that racial geography involves more than the spatiality of boundarymaking and closure; it involves not only space but place: collective identityformation and community-based political mobilization that seeks to breach these boundaries and redistribute these hoarded opportunities (Lipsitz 2014).

This is by no means a complete list of the modifications I would like to see in Wimmer's account. By reducing race to ethnicity, *Ethnic Boundary Making* offers a political sociology purged of racial politics, and thus sadly continues the incapacity of social science in this vital area.

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Notes

1. On this issue, see the special issue of the world-systems journal *Review* (1997).
2. And also, obviously enough, in the *ERS* journalplex, including in the titles of our two journals.
3. Wimmer does not cite Blumer, but a rereading of his classic 'Race Prejudice as a Sense of Group Position', would be useful here, since its underlying logic is political. Blumer's view is also dialectical: he emphasizes the pay-offs of 'race prejudice' for the power-holders who draw the boundaries (in neighbourhoods, for example). By emphasizing the difference of others, by 'othering', as the current parlance has it, you reinforce belonging (i.e. identity), which is often threatened by democratic and egalitarian political practices. Similar formulations can be found in Barth's work.
4. 'Nations' too are seen as the products of ethnic mobilizations; therefore national-ISM and national identities also lead back to ethnicity.

5. Wimmer makes a number of other provocative claims about race that cannot be addressed here with adequate depth. For example, he argues that enslaved Africans were not racialized in the USA until the end of the seventeenth century, and that phenotype is in any case just one marker of ethnic distinction; in other words, just because you're black doesn't mean you don't have a particular culture too. He notes that ethnic groups who are not phenotypically distinct from their oppressors can be oppressed anyway. Here he refers to familiar examples: the Balkan conflicts of the late twentieth century and the contemporaneous Hutu versus Tutsi bloodbath. He neglects to mention the English versus the Irish: half a millennium there – were there no racial dimensions? What about anti-Semitism, the Holocaust, or the racial dimensions of various fascisms, not just the German case …? Fascism does not come up in *Ethnic Boundary Making*. Indeed, what about the myriad other genocides that dot modern world history? If not all of them were decidedly racial – the Kulaks, the Great Leap Forward, Kampuchea – a whole lot of them arguably were: the 'American Holocaust' (Stannard 1992) of indigenous peoples, the Herero (Hull 2005; Arendt 1973; Steinmetz 2007; the Armenians [Suny 2015]) …. He also critiques my work (and that of others) for arguing: that subsuming race as a particular form of ethnicity is part of a sinister neoconservative agenda meant to negate the role that racist ideologies have played in the colonization of the world and to deny that racial exclusion continues to be relevant in contemporary American society and beyond. (EBM 9).

6. Wimmer's lack of engagement with the work of W. E. B. Du Bois is something of a scholarly problem in *Ethnic Boundary Making*.

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