

Valentina Cano
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Prof. Aarti Sethi

Reading Reflection 4:

***Race and Reflexivity*, by Mustafa Emirbayer and Matthew Desmond**

Emirbayer and Desmond's paper *Race and Reflexivity* talks about the importance of scholarly reflexivity. Even though they focus on racial studies, they emphasize that their analysis sheds light on theoretical issues across all social sciences.¹ They divide their analysis into three levels of the unconscious that one must consider: the *social* which concerns the 'occupation of a position in a social space, and the particular trajectory that has led to it,' the *disciplinary* which concerns 'the positioning in fields of cultural production', and the *scholastic* which concerns the 'invisible determinations inherent in the intellectual posture itself.'² While I was reading this paper, my main thought was how crucial this text and the concept of reflexivity are for my future Capstone project, which will research on race relations in Venezuela, focusing on the Afro Venezuelan and Indigenous populations. In this reflection, I will focus on some of the ways in which Emirbayer and Desmond's analysis can inform my research moving forward.

The social unconscious: Even though I do not aim to inject my personal opinion into the discussion of race in Venezuela, it is inevitable that my personal experience as a white Venezuelan, and member of neither the Afro Venezuelan nor the Indigenous community, will, in some way or another, affect the work I produce. This paper gave me the language to question the many ways in which my personal experience might affect my scholarly work, given my

¹ Emirbayer, Mustafa, and Matthew Desmond. "Race and reflexivity." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 35, no. 4 (2012): 576

² *Ibid.*, 590

internalization of the racial order, and my location within it.³ Emirbayer and Desmond emphasized that only acknowledging one's personal experience is insufficient, and that reflexivity should not purely serve as an "empathetic understanding" of individuals, but as a way to truly inquire the way that institutions shape society's assumptions.⁴ In a nutshell, it taught me that in acknowledging my position as a researcher simply stating "as I white Venezuelan..." is not enough. If I were to stay at a merely personal level of reflexivity, and not fully focus on all three levels of prenotions then my study would be limited. In the words of Emirbayer and Desmond:

"Analysts who fail to cast a critical eye back upon their own presuppositions, taking up research projects without systematically questioning the epistemological foundations upon which they rest, as well as scholars who approach reflexivity in a monochromatic fashion directing attention to the social unconscious while neglecting the disciplinary and scholastic unconscious severely limit their own possibilities for advancing inquiry."⁵

Emirbayer and Desmond also mention *standpoint epistemology*, which I believe will be an important framework to look further into.

The disciplinary unconscious: At the second level, it is important to acknowledge the biases that exist in different fields in the social sciences. For Emirbayer and Desmond, one must devote attention simultaneously to social-organizational dimension of a discipline (in this case, the social relations underlying the production of racial knowledge), and the different intellectual or scholarly currents (position-takings) prevailing within that space.⁶ In my case, I should truly question the ways in which knowledge in the fields of mainly history, anthropology, and sociology, that mention the topic of race, were historically created in Venezuela, but also situate them within a global context.

³ Ibid., 578

⁴ Ibid., 591

⁵ Ibid., 592

⁶ Ibid., 593

When looking at this level, I remembered a paper I recently read in which a well-known Venezuelan sociologist, Laureano Vallenilla Lanz,⁷ mentioned a justification for increasing White European immigration and miscegenation: that Venezuelans of African or Indigenous descent were unable to achieve progress. This remark was characteristic of the first half of the twentieth century in Venezuela, in which the elites had a "*Whitening*" campaign for the Venezuelan population. This is just one example of how someone who influenced the field of sociology in Venezuela, had clear assumptions about race, that are political in nature. Another important aspect that Emirbayer and Desmond talked about— and key to any analysis of Venezuela given the mixture of many different racial groups in the population— was *overspecialization*; by focusing on a specific issue and/or a specific racial or ethnic group, one can propagate a distorted view of the social world wherein racial groups exist in relative isolation from one another.⁸

The scholastic unconscious: The last level that Emirbayer and Desmond analyzed is the level of scholastic life itself, 'with its characteristic attitude of pure, disinterested thought, of detached intellectuality, unconstrained by social and economic necessity and drawn to a playful, 'as-if' mode of engagement with the world and its problems.'⁹

This particular section of the paper reminded me of a debate I have had with my friends living in Venezuela, about the use of the term *Latinx*. In the United States, Latinx was coined as a gender inclusive word that included male, female and non-binary Latinos, but without following the rule of Spanish that feminine is the "weak gender," and that in the presence of both male and

⁷ Lanz, Laureano Vallenilla. *Cesarismo democrático: estudios sobre las bases sociológicas de la constitución efectiva de Venezuela*. Cremonese, 1929.

⁸ Emirbayer and Desmond, 585

⁹ Ibid., 585

female one must use masculine gender. At Brown, most groups that represent Latin American culture and heritage use the term Latinx. Yet, in Venezuela, I have never seen this word being used. I mentioned this to my friends back home, and they responded that "given the political situation, it is not in Venezuelans' headspace to discuss the issue of gender-inclusive language." This led me to the conclusion that being able to have this debate was a privilege in and of itself. Having said that, it does not make the debate any less valuable.

When applied to my research, I must acknowledge that the fact that I am able to withdraw myself from the social world in Venezuela, and analyze a particular question in an Ivy League institution, has implications for the type of work I can produce. Thus, I should be very wary of two attitudes: condescension toward the putatively inferior 'popular culture' of stigmatized minorities, and, inversely, of cult-like celebration or affirmation of the 'authenticity' of those same racial groups.¹⁰

Reflexivity should be a part of every scholarly work in the topic of race given it will help us gain a better way of understanding of racial structures and practices, thinking about racial injustice, and appreciating racial differences.¹¹ The *Race and Reflexivity* paper truly made me reflect on the unconscious biases that I may have, at multiple levels, when conducting research. Moreover, it provided me a framework on how to look at and think about these biases, as well as with an immense bibliography on the topic of race relations. I know I have a long way to go in understanding how to conduct research in the field of race, but Emirbayer and Desmond's paper was very important for this process.

¹⁰ Emirbayer and Desmond, 588

¹¹ Ibid., 590