SOCIAL SCIENCE IN BLACK AND WHITE: RETHINKING THE DISCIPLINES IN THE JIM CROW EMPIRE

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The rise of the social sciences in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America has been an especially fruitful topic for intellectual historians over the past four decades. An early, prominent explanation of the new levels of institutional power and intellectual authority achieved by the social sciences stressed the sense of interdependence created by the expansion of the market and the rise of new communications technologies.¹ Others have emphasized intellectual struggles for authority among religious, popular, and scientific approaches to knowledge. Still others have laid the credit, or blame, for the ascension of the social sciences on liberal elites’ consolidation of their power after the collapse of monarchical authority and the successful repression of Marxist challenges.² Two celebrated accounts have argued that ideological conditions, whether pervasive beliefs in American exceptionalism or visions of “scientific democracy,” shaped the development of the social sciences and their claims to intellectual authority.³ In the case of specific disciplines, like sociology and

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¹ Thomas L. Haskell, *The Emergence of Professional Social Science: The American Social Science Association and the Nineteenth-Century Crisis of Authority* (Urbana, 1977).


political science, the most supple histories have shown how broad changes in the structure of American capitalism created the conditions of possibility for new forms of knowledge about the social world, while more subtle intellectual shifts created openings for particular practices.

In most of these accounts, race and racism feature in two ways. They are either the *subjects* of certain social-scientific investigations under study, or *externalities* in the American social environment—peculiarities that have affected the particular shape, but not the general development, of the social sciences in America. Yet the scholars commonly acknowledged as founders of the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, and political science (not to mention history) offered visions of the world divided hierarchically between white people and people of color. They frequently deployed their intellectual labor in direct service to projects of racial segregation, disfranchisement, and imperialism. Aldon Morris and Robert Vitalis, in their reconsiderations of the histories of sociology and international relations, take these racial projects as constitutive of rather than incidental to the development of social science in the United States. The methods, concepts, and legitimating narratives of sociology and international relations, they argue, developed as part of an effort to manage the racialized subject populations of the modern world. Morris and Vitalis show how the processes of racial formation that have defined the American social structure helped to draw the boundaries of legitimate knowledge and scientific authority, and how, in turn, theories of race rebounded on the social world to provide new justifications for hierarchy that matched the ever-changing structure of racial capitalism in the twentieth century. At the same time, the authors tell the stories of black intellectuals who shaped the histories of sociology and international relations in unacknowledged ways, and who repurposed the intellectual tools of their disciplines to understand and ultimately to challenge racial inequality on national and global scales.

Aldon D. Morris’s *The Scholar Denied: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Birth of Modern Sociology* retells the story of the founding of American sociology from the point of view of Du Bois and his colleagues at Atlanta University. Robert Vitalis’s *White World Order, Black Power Politics: The Birth of American International Relations* overturns the myth that international relations developed as a field dedicated to the study of interactions among sovereign and formally independent states, illustrating its roots in attempts to support regimes of imperial governance and racial segregation. Beyond exposing the deep roots of racism in their disciplines, Morris and Vitalis highlight two underappreciated groups of African American scholars working at historically black universities: the “Atlanta school” of sociology, built up by W. E. B. Du Bois in his first stint at Atlanta University from 1897 to 1910, and the “Howard school” of international relations, a more loosely affiliated collection of black scholars writing on imperialism, colonialism,
and international trusteeship between World War I and the 1960s. Morris wants to claim primacy for the Atlanta school as the “first school of scientific sociology” in America (1), arguing that their insights into social research were selectively plagiarized by members of the Chicago school. Vitalis, on the other hand, reconstructs the arguments of the Howard school to tell a story not of intellectual theft but of willful ignorance by the international-relations elite. What unites Morris and Vitalis is a belief that these marginalized scholars captured the workings of American racial hierarchy and global power struggles more accurately than their colleagues in Hyde Park or at the Council on Foreign Relations.

The complementary aims of their authors should not obscure some crucial differences in these two books. Aldon Morris’s work is driven by a singular desire to expose the racial erasures in the history of American sociology and reorient this history around Du Bois and the Atlanta school. Robert Vitalis’s work similarly attempts to combat the “norm against noticing”—a phrase he borrows from Toni Morrison—that characterizes the dominant attitude toward race in American international relations, but he explores a wider variety of narrative threads, and does not always tie them together into a single argument. Whereas The Scholar Denied reads as a definitive reassessment of American sociology’s inception and constitutive exclusions, White World Order, Black Power Politics is a tremendous early salvo, opening doors to a necessary reassessment of international thought and its relation to America’s history of racial inequality.

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W. E. B. Du Bois arrived at Atlanta University in 1897, after spending a single year in a contingent position at the University of Pennsylvania, where he conducted research for The Philadelphia Negro but was prevented from teaching. Influenced by American pragmatism and German political economy, he was suspicious of the abstract conceptions of society as an organic whole promoted by Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer. Evoking Du Bois’s silent presence at the gathering of prominent sociologists at the International Congress of Arts and Science at the 1904 St Louis World’s Fair—a decisive moment in the consolidation of the discipline, to which Du Bois was not invited to participate, but attended

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anyway—Aldon Morris illustrates Du Bois’s break with the sociological consensus of the very first years of the twentieth century. Even Lester Frank Ward, known for his support for social intervention and state-directed reform, defined sociology as the study of “true natural forces, which . . . are found to be as regular and reliable as are the forces of gravitation, chemical affinity, or organic growth” (27).\(^5\) Du Bois, on the other hand, articulated an understanding of sociology as “a vast and fruitful inquiry into the mysterious phenomena of human action” (29). His definition exhibited a Jamesian sense of the provisional nature of human insights and a skepticism, rooted in his training in the German historical school of economics, about the possibility of generating natural laws for the social world. Natural forces versus mysterious phenomena, organic growth versus human action: Morris portrays Du Bois’s conception of sociology, which emphasized human agency and worked outward from close analysis of human behavior, as sharply divergent from the view of the discipline as an outgrowth of the natural sciences.

Later Chicago school sociologists’ celebrated departure from the vision of society as an organically developing whole, Morris argues, derived from their uncredited appropriation of the work of Du Bois and his colleagues in Atlanta. Acknowledging the difficulty of assessing the frequency of this “subterranean” practice, Morris nonetheless offers two striking examples (147). W. I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki were familiar with *The Philadelphia Negro*, yet they offered it no credit for pioneering the survey methodology they recapitulated in their 1920 work *The Polish Peasant*, which subsequently became enshrined as the first work to use an inductive approach in American sociology. Morris further argues that Robert Park developed his concept of the “marginal man” through his reading of Du Bois’s famed idea of “double consciousness.” Though Park credited Georg Simmel’s more generic social type of the “stranger” for inspiration, Morris shows that the “marginal man,” affected by ethnic or racial prejudice and forced to operate between two cultures, much more resembles Du Bois’s concept. Park evinced familiarity with the idea of “double consciousness” five years prior to his first articulation of the idea of the “marginal man,” and he frequently invoked Du Bois in his teaching as well.

Morris further revises the often cited but poorly understood relationship between Du Bois and Max Weber. Whereas other scholars have portrayed Weber as Du Bois’s mentor during the latter’s time studying in Germany, Morris shows that their relationship was neither so close nor so asymmetrical; Weber once

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Morris instead focuses on their developing connection after Du Bois’s time in Germany, portraying them as intellectual allies with a shared interest in the settlement-house movement and a shared concern for “minority problems” in industrializing societies (153). He further asserts that Weber’s views on race were affected by his encounter with Du Bois, an argument supported by Weber’s enthusiastic response to *The Souls of Black Folk.* Citing the debate between Weber and eugenicist Alfred Ploetz in 1910, Morris argues that Du Bois’s article “The Conservation of Races” pushed Weber toward a sociohistorical, rather than biological, understanding of racial difference. Yet, in the service of his case against the Chicago school, Morris overstates Weber’s transformation. Morris not only contrasts the German sociologist who respected Du Bois with the Americans who did not, but goes on to assert that “Weber, who once exclaimed that superior Germans had ‘turned the Poles into human beings,’ was influenced by Du Bois to revise his views on inequality and square them with democratic values” (167).

As Andrew Zimmerman has shown, Weber’s interest in the “Polish problem” was tied closely to his vision of “internal colonization”—securing loyalty and submission from national minorities within the recently consolidated German territory to enable the German state to focus its energies on external colonization. Even after his encounter with Du Bois, Weber viewed the “Polish problem” as a problem of colonial population management, not of “democratic values.”

Morris’s illumination of the careers of three of Du Bois’s students and colleagues in Atlanta—Monroe Work, Richard R. Wright Jr, and George Edmund Haynes—further upsets the canon of American sociology. Work, Wright, and Haynes, who went on to prominent careers in ministry and advocacy, produced original investigations of crime, migration, employment, and the black church in the mold of *The Philadelphia Negro.* Morris, in his analysis of *The Philadelphia Negro,* downplays Du Bois’s descriptions of black Philadelphians’ “low condition of morals,” and the middle-class norms of family and social organization

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undergirding the text. Nonetheless, his emphasis on the work’s radical thrust in assigning the causes of poverty to the extractive character of American racial capitalism is appropriate. As Du Bois wrote, “a slum is not a simple fact, it is a symptom, and . . . to know the removable causes of the Negro slums of Philadelphia requires a study that takes one far beyond the slum districts.”

Morris extends this emphasis in his assessment of the Atlanta school as a whole, arguing that the contributions of Work, Wright, and Haynes helped build a tradition “on the scholarly principle[s] that race inequality stemmed from white racism . . . and that sociological research was the scientific weapon that could dismantle white racism” (58–9).

Morris further highlights the scholarly debts that later, better-known black sociologists—many of whom were trained by Park in Chicago—racked up to Du Bois and his collaborators in Atlanta. E. Franklin Frazier noted in a letter to Du Bois that his own studies were “building upon a tradition inaugurated by you in the Atlanta Studies,” just as St Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, in their magisterial study of Chicago, *Black Metropolis* (1944), acknowledged their dependence on Du Bois’s conceptions of the color line and the racial caste system (197). By placing Du Bois firmly at the center of early twentieth-century American sociology, Morris helps to repay a crucial historical debt. If he puts forth a not entirely persuasive view of the field as defined by a single figure at its center, he also—and more importantly—offers an utterly convincing account of the reliance of American sociology’s growth on intellectual theft and erasure.

Morris insists that Du Bois was marginalized from the circuits of early twentieth-century sociology not only because of his race, but also because of his radicalism. Morris contends that Robert Park formed a “conservative alliance” with Booker T. Washington—for whom he worked for nearly a decade before taking his position at Chicago—that shaped the intellectual history of race and the social sciences in the early twentieth-century United States (100). In the aftermath of the publication of Du Bois’s sustained critique of Washington’s style of black politics in *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903 and the founding of the Niagara movement in 1905, which Washington considered “a direct attack on his leadership,” Washington enlisted Park as a press agent and ghostwriter in his campaign against Du Bois (105).

Washington’s positions on industrial education, civil rights activism, and migration shaped the theoretical principles of Chicago school sociology profoundly. Park’s conservative outlook shaped both the way he defined the sociologist’s professional obligation and his theory of the social world. Park

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10 Ibid., 6.
defined scientific objectivity in opposition to the social reform ethos of “do-gooders” Charles Booth, Jane Addams, and Du Bois (114). In his celebrated concept of the “race relations cycle,” he located the process of change principally in the attitudes of racialized minorities toward the dominant society. Park’s reliance on a naturalized paradigm of racial hierarchy further constrained what this “cycle” could mean for black Americans. Through an analysis of Park’s concept of “racial temperaments,” Morris interrogates the contradiction in Park’s theory. The processes of social integration understood in Park’s “race relations cycle,” Morris points out, are preemptively shaped by a group’s “racial temperaments,” which “function as biological switches that channel the abilities and cultural propensities of races” (118). Park’s sociology thus combined a definition of objectivity as political passivity, a theory of change that emphasized gradualism, and a qualified acceptance of biological theories of European racial superiority. This reinterpretation of Park’s theory occupies such a central place in Morris’s work because he insists that the sociological legacy of Du Bois is best understood in view of its complex tension with Park’s. Du Bois’s sociology contained both the insights that Park silently appropriated and the broad vision of an activist, antiracist science that he denied.

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The history of international-relations thought in the United States is equally characterized by the erasure of black intellectual production. Robert Vitalis’s narrative of this history in White World Order, Black Power Politics unfolds across two timelines. First, he recounts how the field of international relations originated in the interwar period’s conversation about “race development” and empire. Second, he shows how modern international-relations scholarship denied these origins in order to create its self-image as a field dedicated to the maintenance of order in a world of formally equal, sovereign states. Vitalis’s central claim is that international relations arose in the early twentieth century in order to aid in the maintenance of global white supremacy amidst rising anxieties about antiracist and anticolonial movements. The Journal of Race Development, founded at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts in 1910, published early scholars

11 Several other scholars have begun the work of uncovering this institutional and intellectual history. See David Long and Brian C. Schmidt, eds., Imperialism and Internationalism in the Discipline of International Relations (Albany, 2005); Duncan Bell, “Writing the World: Disciplinary History and Beyond,” International Affairs, 85/1 (2009), 3–22; Nicholas Guilhot, ed., The Invention of International Relations Theory: Realism, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the 1954 Conference on Theory (New York, 2011); and Joel Isaac and Duncan Bell, eds., Uncertain Empire: American History and the Idea of the Cold War (New York, 2012).
of international relations like Ellsworth Huntington alongside G. Stanley Hall’s explications of his “child race” concept and W. E. B. Du Bois’s essay “Of the Culture of White Folk.” This journal, which became the *Journal of International Relations* in 1919 and *Foreign Affairs* beginning in 1922, is a perfect illustration of Vitalis’s point. The most respected and prestigious publication in the field of international relations today has its origins in early twentieth-century race science.

Vitalis further examines the substantial overlaps between the categories of the international, the interracial, and the imperial in the decades between World War I and the era of decolonization. The intellectuals and institutions that defined and promoted international relations in the United States considered the “Negro problem”—still principally located in the “underdeveloped” South—a natural component of the problems of imperial governance faced by Euro-American powers in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and the Pacific. Vitalis’s examination of the work of scholars like John William Burgess, Paul Reinsch, and Alleyne Ireland demonstrates the importance of race and imperialism to their analyses of global politics. His exploration of this intellectual milieu offers, among other things, a new context for examining and the thought and policy of its most prominent participant, Woodrow Wilson. A scholar and critic of Reconstruction in the mold of the Dunning school, Wilson’s commitment to racial hierarchy limited the expansiveness of his postwar vision, even as anticolonial movements welcomed his proclamation of self-determination as a fundamental principle in international affairs.\(^{12}\)

If Aldon Morris describes the scholars of the Atlanta school as the overlooked founders of American sociology, Vitalis casts the Howard school—less a cohort of researchers than a multigenerational group of African American intellectuals engaged with international questions—in a different light. This school, which in Vitalis’s account includes Du Bois (an honorary member, given that he never worked at Howard University), Alain Locke, Ralph Bunche, Rayford Logan, Eric Williams, and Merze Tate, “represent[ed] a critical counternetwork to the networks dedicated to upgrading the institutions of colonial rule that white professors forged with the so-called Geneva institutions in the era of the League of Nations” (12). Other than Bunche and Tate, these figures are best known now for their writings on topics other than twentieth-century imperialism and colonialism. While Vitalis does not examine the relation between these writings and more famous work authored by these figures (Locke’s literary and

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philosophical writings, for example), his book opens a door to future scholarship in that direction.

Debates within the Howard school occupy a central place in Vitalis’s story. He carefully reconstructs the ways thinkers articulated understandings of American racial hierarchy in relation to international institutions and regimes of imperial governance alongside, and at times in competition with, more familiar frameworks of transnational racial solidarity. In the 1920s and 1930s, the dispute between those like Ralph Bunche, who advocated interracial workers’ solidarity, and those who supported black self-determination through economic cooperatives, was shaped by the international scene and carried international implications. In particular, the League of Nations’ “minority rights regime” led some writers to reframe the struggle of African Americans at home as a problem of “minority rights,” drawing analogies with national minorities in Eastern Europe whose protection became a central obligation of the League of Nations (96). Both the Marxian yearning for interracial working-class alliances and the liberal internationalist desire for the protection of African American rights within a League of Nations framework sat uneasily next to the Communist Party’s short-lived call, adopted in 1928, for black self-determination in the South. Vitalis’s exploration of this ideological diversity represents a substantial advance in our understanding of the impact of the international scene on African American political thought between the world wars.

A major accomplishment of Vitalis’s book is its bridging of the interwar and Cold War periods, which are too often bifurcated in international history. His discussion of the important 1942 document The Atlantic Charter and Africa from an American Standpoint, written by an interracial group of intellectuals that included both Ralph Bunche and Rayford Logan, illustrates how debates over the League of Nations mandates shaped visions of the postwar world order.13 Logan, a believer in the potential of an internationalized mandates system to represent the interests of colonized people, became a strong critic of trusteeship, which he believed would grant too much autonomy to the colonizing powers and offer nothing other than “white supremacy, segregation and the continued effective disfranchisement of the native peoples” (111). Logan’s evolving position on African independence rendered him something of an

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outcast in postwar debates. His hopes for an international administration of colonial territories went the way of other attempts to find a middle ground between the continuation of colonialism by other means and the immediate independence demanded by increasingly militant movements across the colonial world.

Logan’s simultaneous embrace of anticommunism, his anger at the effects of McCarthyism on the Howard campus, and his role in marginalizing Merze Tate further complicate historical understandings of his role in the postwar period. Tate, one of the few women to appear in Vitalis’s story and in the mid-century history of international-relations scholarship in the United States, swam against several tides in the postwar landscape of Howard. The first African American woman to attend Oxford and to receive a Ph.D. in international relations from Radcliffe, Tate wrote on topics ranging from US imperialism in the Pacific and the history of the Hawaiian kingdom to the contemporary problem of international disarmament, and her work was received favorably by Hans Morgenthau and other establishment luminaries. Yet her status, as Vitalis puts it, as “a woman, decidedly not a radical . . . whose cosmopolitanism was out of step with developments in black thought” has pushed her out of accounts of international thought up to the present day (166).14

White social scientists’ and policy analysts’ preoccupation with the possibility of race war represents another continuous thread spanning the interwar and Cold War periods. Tracing the concept of realism in international affairs not to E. H. Carr or Morgenthau but to T. Lothrop Stoddard, who used the term in two works in 1932, Vitalis illustrates the imbrication of Stoddard’s vision of “biracialism”—a perfected system of Jim Crow segregation extending across the entire country—with his critiques of imperialism and internationalism as threats to Anglo-Saxon hegemony. In Stoddard’s account, the “delusion of international cooperation” promoted by his Wilsonian colleagues led inexorably to the surrender of sovereignty and the “sacrifice of race” (84). This sense of the interdependence of American racial politics and the global colonial order shaped policy intellectuals’ responses to decolonization a generation later. Some international-relations scholars veered away from questions of colonialism altogether as they coalesced around a “realist” self-identification, while others grew anxious about what the fall of white sovereignty on a global scale might

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14 The historian who has done most to restore interest in Tate is Barbara Savage, who is currently writing her biography. For an early sample of this work see Barbara D. Savage, “Professor Merze Tate: Diplomatic Historian, Cosmopolitan Woman,” in Mia Bay, Farah J. Griffin, Martha S. Jones, and Barbara D. Savage, eds., Toward an Intellectual History of Black Women (Chapel Hill, 2015), 252–70.
produce domestically: a mirror image of the hopes of some black radicals that the end of European empires would herald a radical reconstruction of American politics.\(^{15}\)

The white scholar Harold Isaacs, a former Trotskyist who joined MIT’s Center for International Studies in 1953, is Vitalis’s window into these debates in the Cold War era. Unlike most of his contemporaries (including those sanguine about the end of formal colonialism), Isaacs engaged directly with African American thinkers on decolonization. His book *The New World of Negro Americans* (1963) was driven by the conviction that the end of empire in Africa and Asia would hasten the end of Jim Crow, and pervaded by a Myrdalian understanding of both the “American creed” and the necessity of American international hegemony. Black intellectuals—including some of Isaacs’s own interlocutors—were split over his pessimistic portrayal of African American expatriates in Ghana, whom he characterized as culturally alienated and politically disillusioned. Isaacs’s fiercest opponents, though, were a group of scholars on the right associated with the journal *Mankind Quarterly*, an outpost of biological racism in the postwar era. These figures, particularly Nathaniel Weyl, Stefan Possony, and Robert Strausz-Hupé, occupy an unexpectedly prominent place in Vitalis’s reconstruction of international-relations scholars’ responses to decolonization. While William F. Buckley championed these figures, publishing favorable reviews of their work in *National Review*, their influence paled in comparison to that of the liberal modernization theorists who worked alongside Isaacs. Nonetheless, exhuming arguments of the “militant right” in the age of decolonization resonates in our contemporary moment of far-right revival on both sides of the Atlantic (179). No matter how far beyond the pale of liberal sensibilities, the *Mankind Quarterly* authors’ fears of Western decline and of a world ruled by people of color marked a moment in a seemingly endless recurrence, reprising an earlier generation’s fears of “race suicide” and foreshadowing the ideas embraced by the rising tide of white supremacy in our own time.

Morris and Vitalis aim their books squarely at the regnant myths in their respective disciplines, and they perform a crucial service in doing so. Each of them also unfurls a strand in the broader stories of the formation of the social sciences, the management of racialized populations at home and abroad, and the

\(^{15}\) Nicholas Guilhot argues that some international-relations theorists’ silence on questions of decolonization stemmed from both the institutional bifurcation of “realist” thought from modernization theory and the critique of nationalism—including anticolonial nationalism—that was built into the conceptual architecture of international-relations theory. See Nicholas Guilhot, “Imperial Realism: Post-war IR Theory and Decolonisation,” *International History Review*, 36/4 (2014), 678–720.
making of insurgent traditions of black thought in the first half of the twentieth century. The histories of sociology and international relations, moreover, are not parallel; they are connected. As historical sociologist Julian Go has emphasized, the imperial expansion of the United States was crucial in facilitating the rise of sociology, a context Morris largely ignores.¹⁶ Many characters examined in these books spent their lives crossing national as well as disciplinary borders, from Booker T. Washington’s attempts to establish a Tuskegee model of agricultural education in Togo to E. Franklin Frazier’s work with UNESCO and his largely unexamined writings on colonialism.¹⁷ Further, the language of decolonization entered American sociology’s discussions of racism, immigration, and the urban crisis in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as sociologists associated with the New Left drew on both dependency theory and Black Power thought to examine the parallels between colonial rule and the exploitation and oppression of Chicanos and African Americans in the United States.¹⁸ The concepts of colonialism—from uneven development to indirect rule—continued to resonate with Americans thinking through their own country’s systems of racial hierarchy and capitalist inequality.

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“A rare phenomenon occurred at the dawn of the twentieth century: the leaders of an oppressed people one generation removed from slavery embraced an intellectual discipline as a weapon of liberation” (Morris, 59). In this description of the political project of the Atlanta school sociologists, Morris offers a rejoinder to those who would argue that scholarship can only reflect or reproduce the oppressive values of the political system in which it is contained. Both Morris and Vitalis demonstrate that more work is necessary to comprehend the traditions that have sought to forge their intellectual tools into weapons of liberation. Quietly, they also challenge the notion that the precepts of social-scientific analysis are


fundamentally the instruments of oppression. Rather, they present a brief for the idea that scholars from oppressed and colonized groups need not disown the tools of rigorous, even scientific, analysis to contribute to their struggles for liberation. The history of the social sciences would be richer if we acknowledged such contributions.