Reflections on the Continuing Denial of the Centrality of 'Race' in Management and Organization Studies

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Sometimes the governing paradigms which have structured all our lives are so powerful that we can think we are doing progressive work when in fact we are reinforcing the paradigms. These paradigms are so powerful that sometimes we find ourselves unable to talk at all, even or especially about those things closest to our hearts (Grillo, 1995: 16).

1. Introduction

Twenty-nine years ago, my article, *The Emperor Has No Clothes: Rewriting "race in organizations"*, was published in the *Academy of Management Review* (Nkomo, 1992). I used a Eurocentric fairy tale to discuss the exclusion of race in the study of organizations. The 'emperor' metaphorically represents the embodiment of the assumed universality of Western knowledge and the myth of race-neutral organizations. I wrote about the absence of race as a core analytical category in the study of management and organizations (MOS).

What prompted the article was the rejection of a request to the editor of the *Academy of Management Journal* (AMJ) to consider a special issue on the Black experience in corporate America. Bolstered by a symposium presentation at the 1987 Academy of Management annual meeting, presenters had hoped the papers could be published. The rejection letter stated, "*To be completely candid, even if a decision were made to devote an issue of AMJ to a specific topic, I am not sure race is a research question that would be of greatest interest to the Academy membership . . . the fact that few people are working in this area indicates that race may be a poor candidate for a special issue, at least with respect to a criterion of having AMJ serve the broadest interests of Academy members. I wish I had an easy solution to this dilemma but I don't.*"[1] Typically, an unexplored topic is a sign of novelty but the problem was the topic itself. Rejections are always disappointing but the dismissal of race as an important topic questioned its significance to the discipline. I realized it was not a mere rejection, but an act of epistemic violence—silencing race and the Black voices who sought to bring it into the academy (Spivak, 1988).

I decided to write back, not to the editor but to the discipline to challenge the ongoing exclusion of race and the potential erasure of Black voices in MOS. Since the editor's decision was based on a belief that race was not a topic that would serve the broadest interests of Academy members, I implored my colleagues to recognize that MOS theories are not race neutral. Race is and has always been constitutive of organizations even if the idea of race had not been explicitly acknowledged as being deeply embedded in the very core of management and organization theory. I also called for the emperor to be dethroned by disrupting the universal power of Western knowledge.

I also argued it was important to de-center White males as the dominant producers and gatekeepers of knowledge. Their hegemonic position places all other race and gender groups at the margins, outside the center of MOS, only able to gain admission with the permission of the dominant group. To *re*write race, I argued MOS scholars should not condone the emperor's procession by remaining silent about race or studying it within the narrowly defined ethnicity-based paradigm that dominated much of the research published at the time. I concluded with suggestions about how we might move forward.

Nearly thirty years later, dethroning the emperor remains a challenge. In a dynamic world, it is never accurate to say nothing has changed but I must say change remains slow. In this commentary, I first offer reflections about progress towards the inclusion of race as a core analytical concept in MOS. Second, I engage in critical reflexivity and acknowledge my subject position in what has transpired, even at times acquiescing to the very problems I identified in the article in the hope of change. As the Grillo quote at the beginning of this article suggests, challenging the mainstream from within is not an easy undertaking. Finally, I share some thoughts about what we need to do to elevate race to a core theoretical concept in MOS.

2. The Past

When I look back over the past twenty-nine years, I am struck by the lack of significant progress in making race a core analytical concept in MOS. My conclusion is not based on a systematic bibliometric analysis but from reading what has been published. Of course, I have not read everything but enough to share some general observations. I also relied on writings and relevant reviews from other scholars (e.g. Liu, 2018; Liu, 2021; van Laer and Zanoni, 2020). For the most part, the study of race continues to occupy a marginal place in MOS knowledge. Even when one might expect race to be included, it may not.

Race and racism are generally not on the radar screen of MOS. It is rarely employed as an analytical concept or theorized as I argued for in 1992 (Yadav and Lenka, 2020; van Lear and Zanoni, 2020). I did a quick search for the word race and/or racism in the *Academy of Review* for the period from January 1993 to December 2020. During that period 1,329 articles were published. Four articles contained a reference to race and two to racism. Race was theorized as a category to explain its impact on individual or group outcomes of racial minorities. Racism was theorized as discrimination in one article; while the other referred to racism in a call for greater attention to the history of management and organization studies.

However, my prime observation, and one that I am implicated in as well, is how the study of diversity largely supplanted attention to race and constrained how it was studied. The emergence of the concept of diversity coincided with the publication of my article. While I called for rewriting race in MOS, others were calling for going beyond it even though it was largely invisible (see Cox and Nkomo, 1990). Roosevelt Thomas first called for moving beyond race and gender in a *Harvard Business Review* article in 1990 following up in 1992 with a ground-breaking book, *Beyond Race and Gender: Unleashing the Power of Your Total Workforce by Managing Diversity*. The publication of the book was followed by

several influential contributions to the importance of a diversity lens (e.g. Cox, 1993; Milliken and Martins, 1996; Thomas and Ely, 1996).

Despite critiques at the time that diversity would dilute attention to the pursuit of racial equality, it became the new paradigm for the study of social differences in organizations (e.g. Cavanaugh, 1997; Linnehan and Konrad, 1999; Litvin, 1997; Prasad and Mills, 1997). The study of race was rendered outdated and narrow (Oswick and Noon, 2014; Thomas, 1992) and the new diversity paradigm became the neoliberal solution to the problem of the 'other'. By embracing diversity, capitalist organizations were able to absorb the forecasted increase of women and racial minorities into existing unequal structures while appearing progressive and non-racist (Lorbiecki and Jack, 2000). The concept of diversity achieved what race could not—a special topic forum in the *Academy of Management Review* in 1996 and divisional status in the Academy of Management when the Gender and Diversity Division was established in 1998 (Nkomo *et al.,* 2019). Earlier efforts to establish the Research on Women and Minorities Division were unsuccessful (Nkomo *et al.,* 2019).

I was reluctant to join the diversity bandwagon, arguing for a narrow definition of the concept to restrict its focus to race and gender in organizations (Nkomo, 1995). After completing my doctoral research on human resource planning, my research turned to my true interest and I focused on race as well as race and gender in organizations. I was worried diversity would become nothing more than a benign, meaningless concept that overlooked issues of racism in organizations (Nkomo, 1995:248). Despite my reluctance, I acquiesced and started writing about diversity in organizations (see Nkomo and Cox, 1996). And a question I have been asking myself ever since is, Why did I latch on to the diversity paradigm and locate my scholarship within it?

I had been dissuaded from focusing on race starting with my doctoral studies and early in my career senior academics cautioned me that pursuing it might jeopardize getting tenure. I was not prepared to abandon my interest in race so I placed my work under the diversity umbrella. Having been stung many times by journal editors who did not believe research on race was important (along with many others who had similar experiences—see Cox, 1990), I believed having some voice was better than having no voice. But there was doubt because of Audrey Lorde's powerful words about the impossibility of dismantling the master's house using the master's tools' (Lorde, 1984). She also argued, the master's tools may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring genuine change. By joining the diversity bandwagon even with a critical voice, I was giving it more legitimacy.

The Grillo quote also speaks to the seductive power of the desire to belong to an accepted field of research. His words point to the difficulty of being an outsider within and whether one can claim to speak from the margins without being suspect or compromised (Ellis *et al*., 2020; Hill-Collins, 1986; Spivak, 1988). Yet, what I am clear about is that in its current dominant paradigmatic form, diversity sustains the power of the 'emperor' (Ahmed, 2007; Bell and Hartmann, 2007; Nadiv and Kuna, 2020; Zanoni, *et al.,* 2010). It seems the detour to diversity did not help the 'emperor' recognize that MOS is not race neutral. Instead, diversity scholarship had to accept the conditions set by the 'emperor' for its inclusion in the academy (Nkomo, *et al.,* 2019).

The incorporation of race into the diversity paradigm placed strictures on how it should be studied. Race was relegated to a 'surface-level' difference compared to those that were 'deep-level' (Harrison *et al.,* 1998). The preferred theories to study race were the very same ones I had criticized in my article (i.e. social psychology theories). The price of inclusion is also reflected in testimonies from those who pursue diversity research about

pressures to cloak their interests within mainstream topics, to defend the value of their research under heavy scrutiny, to fend off accusations of engaging in identity politics, and many other unwarranted, racialized criticisms and commentary (e.g. Blake-Beard, *et al.,* 2008; Bell, *et al.,* (2020); Settles, *et al.,* 2019; King, *et al.,* 2018; Liu, 2021; Miller, *et al.,* 2020). Yet, one of the benefits of the emergence of the diversity paradigm is that we know more about the organizational experiences of racial and ethnic minorities than when they were largely invisible in the MOS literature at the time I wrote the article (e.g. Cheng and Thatchenkery, 1997; Cox and Nkomo, 1990).

3. Where to From Here

There is still much to do to elevate race to a significant analytical concept in MOS. The confluence of a violent resurgent White supremacy, the stark global racial inequalities revealed by the COVID-19 pandemic, and calls to end systemic racism by the Black Lives Matter Movement underscore the immense importance of race in every aspect of society including organizations (Leigh and Melwani, 2019). Racial inequality remains a grand societal challenge (Gümüsay, *et al.,* 2020). In addition to these social forces, I believe there are other signs that perhaps the time has never been more opportune to dethrone the 'emperor'—to dismantle Eurocentric MOS knowledge as universal, superior, and race neutral. First, some journals have recently published special issues in response to calls to end systemic racism (e.g., *Equality, Diversity & Inclusion, Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Journal of Business and Psychology, Journal of Management*). Hopefully, this is not a superficial gesture but a genuine realization that race matters in organizations. Second, the last twenty years have seen the emergence of alternative theoretical lenses that challenge mainstream theorizing in MOS.

Rewriting race into MOS is a much larger project than the one I envisioned in 1992. Theorizing race in organizations requires a contextual, multi-level approach and attending to its historical, cultural, subjective, power, and structural manifestations. Realizing this approach implores us to draw from multiple theoretical perspectives. We have an opportunity to build upon the contributions already being used to interrogate race from theoretical perspectives beyond the dominant ones I critiqued in 1992 (e.g. Al Ariss *et al.,* 2014; Cooke, 2003; Grimes, 2001; Leonard, 2010; Liu, 2017; Liu, 2018; Liu, 2021; Swan, 2017). This body of work draws largely upon postcolonial theory and whiteness studies.

3.1 Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial theory comprises a vast body of literature whose complexity cannot be briefly summarized (Loomba, 1998). My intent here is to highlight its core elements with a focus on its implications for theorizing race in organizations. The interest in postcolonial theory in MOS is a recent development (e.g. Banerjee and Prasad, 2008; Jack *et al.,* 2011; Özkazanç-Pan, 2008; Prasad, 2003; Westwood and Jack, 2007) compared to its earlier emergence in the humanities and other social sciences (Jack *et al.,* 2011). Postcolonial theory is not a singular theory but is more appropriately understood as an extensive and diverse range of intellectual perspectives and epistemological stances due to its interdisciplinary scope (Loomba, 1998; Young 2001).

Despite different theoretical agendas and debates among proponents, its core proposition is that colonialism and slavery are not just epochal events of the past. Colonialism entrenched the sovereignty of Western epistemological, economic, political, and cultural categories, and ideologies (Prasad, 2003). This domination was not just central to the development of modern societies. The effects of colonialism and slavery persist today (e.g. Mignolo, 2007; Pierce and Snyder 2019; Quijano, 2007). For example, global economic inequalities forged during colonialism are reflected in the divide between the world's

wealthiest and poorest nations, Western domination of knowledge production (Go, 2018; Grosfoguel, 2011; Said, 1978), and necrocapitalist practices that negatively impact 'developing' countries (Banerjee, 2008)

Another enduring legacy and one most relevant to this article is the invention of races and racial stratification of the world's peoples. Capitalism, the trans-Atlantic slave trade, race, and racism are inextricably linked (Loomba, 1998; Schermerhorn, 2015; Williams, 2014). The enslavement of and conquest of the lands of 'non-white' races by European imperialists and colonizers were justified by declaring colonization a civilizing mission undertaken by a superior White race (Loomba, 1998). As noted by Go (2018,) the colonial encounter and colonialism made race central to the world. Race was constructed and deployed as a tool of colonial power to subjugate and oppress the 'other.'

The dangerous ideology of White supremacy—the false idea of superior and inferior races—placed the so-called inferior races below the human line—codifying an anti-blackness that persists today (Grosfoguel, 2016; Fanon, 2004). As noted by McKittrick (2007:8), the world is "underwritten by a refusal of black humanity" which manifests in all sectors of society. White supremacy legitimized the enslavement of Black and indigenous people as well as the appropriation of their lands and resources. The invention of White supremacy came to structure all geographies of the world, not just those colonized by Europeans (Christian, 2019; du Bois, 1920/2004).

Other related theories are postcolonial feminism and decolonial theory. There are many varieties of postcolonial feminisms (e.g. Black Feminism, African feminism). Overall, postcolonial feminist approaches critique postcolonial theory for its exclusion of gender and focus on explicating the integral relationship between colonialism and patriarchy (i.e. Harasym, 1990; Özkazanç–Pan, 2012; Spivak, 1988). At the same time, scholars challenge traditional white feminism for its neglect of the racial, cultural, social, and political

specificities of women's marginalization and oppression during colonialism as well as its continuing effects today (e.g.; Collins, 1986; Mama, 2011; Mohanty, 1991).

Postcolonial scholars have also turned their attention to decolonization. Decolonial perspectives focus on the construction of alternative knowledge and practices to disrupt the effects of colonialism and imperialism (Grosfoguel, 2007). It is a forward-thinking project of disrupting the continuing effects of colonialism to build possible new futures. Specifically, scholars focus on proposing alternative futures that move towards a pluriversal versus a universal world dominated by the West/North (Faria, 2015). Such a movement requires taking seriously the epistemologies, political-economies, and subjectivities of the rest of the world. The work of anti-colonial theorist and psychiatrist, Frantz Fanon, who called for a new way of thinking about humanity is particularly relevant to disrupting White supremacy—extinguishing the idea of superior and inferior races (Fanon, 2004: 239).

Drawing from Go (2018), there are four main implications of postcolonial perspectives for theorizing race in organizations. First, it is important to understand the colonial production of racialized structures and practices in organizations. This means paying greater attention to the colonial and slavery origins of management theory and practices (e.g. Cooke, 2003; Roedegier and Esch, 2012; Reuf and Harness, 2009). Roediger and Esch (2012) offer a compelling analysis of the confluence of race thinking and the development of management practices during the industrialization era. They capture the constitutive relationship of race and management with the term "race management."

Cooke (2003) demonstrated how the management of enslaved people was incorporated into the development of modern management practices. Further, Reuf and Harness (2009) offer an analysis of antebellum management discourse; while Nkomo and Ariss (2014) link the origins of white (ethnic) privilege in organizations to European global expansion and colonization. In general, there is room for much more research on the history

of colonialism, slavery, and capitalism in the understanding race and racism in organizations today. It is also important not to assume simple continuities or linkages between this history but instead understand it as the context in which contemporary racialization unfolds (Ahonen *et al.,* 2014; Godfrey *et al.*, 2016; Greedharry *et al.,* 2020).

Second, we tend to theorize racial identities from a social identity perspective. A postcolonial perspective would focus on the role of colonialism in the construction and negotiation of racial identities (e.g. Leonard, 2010; Liu, 2017). That is, researchers would pay attention to the dynamic interaction between subjectivity and colonialism (e.g. Fanon, 2004; Jack, 2015). Fanon (2004) in particular explored the relationship between human psychology and socio-political and historical forces. A postcolonial lens would also push us beyond binary conceptions of race (Blacks vs. Whites) and to understand that racism can be marked by color, ethnicity, language, culture, and religion (Grosfoguel, 2016:10). We need to be cognizant of the national specificities of the colonial encounter on the construction of the 'other'. Consequently, we need to think of racisms, not racism in the singular.

Third, understanding the complexity of race in organizations cannot be achieved in isolation from its gendered and classed construction (e.g. Acker, 2009). Research could benefit from a transversal framing of racism that incorporates a postcolonial feminist perspective. Finally, approaches to ending systemic racism would be conceptualized as a decolonizing project. Ending racism is not just about changing the minds of biased individuals or increasing the representation of marginalized groups. At present, there is very little theorizing on how to undo racialization and racial hierarchies in organizations. A lot more work is needed on understanding anti-blackness and its eradication in the construction of a new vision of humanity to supplant a racialized conception that casts White people as superior humans.

3.2 Whiteness

Although much of the current research on race has focused on 'people of color' (implicitly suggesting White people are raceless), MOS scholars have begun to explore whiteness in organizations. This work has explored the absence of research on whiteness in MOS (e.g. Grimes, 2001); the origins of racial (ethnic) power and privilege (Nkomo and Al Ariss, 2014); whiteness as racial identity (e.g. Chrobot-Mason, 2004); the responsibilities of those privileged by whiteness (e.g. Swan, 2017) and the intimate relationship between whiteness, anti-racism, and White supremacy and practice (Liu, 2017; Liu, 2021). For example, Grimes (2001) illustrated how whiteness is unmarked in organization studies and challenged scholars to 'get their own house in order' by revealing the hidden assumptions about race in the field.

Nkomo and Al Ariss (2014) trace the historical formation of racial (ethnic) privilege in US organizations and its continuing significance in organizations today. Liu (2021) demonstrates how white power and privilege are enacted in diversity research through three practices: the commodification of difference, the denial of white power, and chasing racial comfort. Focusing on the responsibilities of white people in challenging whiteness, Swan (2017) proposes listening as a key form of white praxis. She argues for a progressive white praxis to counter —collective white ignorance that blocks White people from understanding their complicity in racism and colonialism.

There is growing recognition that whiteness is more than a property of white people and should be studied at multiple levels, focusing on how it is institutionalized, practiced and its power to produce and reproduce racial inequality in organizations. For example, Liu's (2021) analysis of White supremacy suggests the need for research on practices of white power and privilege in organizations and how they become institutionalized. Al Ariss *et al*., (2014) offer a relational framework for deepening the conceptualization of whiteness and

how to study it in organizations. Their framework positions whiteness as a contextual, multilevel, and intersectional concept that captures the interplay between individual subjectivity and the structures that produce and reproduce it in organizations (Al Ariss, *et al.,* 2014:364).

3.3 Sociology of Race

In addition to these two perspectives, MOS scholars could benefit by exploring contributions to theorizing race in organizations within the sociology of race literature (e.g. Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Bryon and Roscigno, 2019; Feagin, 2013; Ray, 2019; Rojas, 2019; Wooten, 2019; Wooten and Couloute, 2017). While sociologists have generally paid little attention to management and organizations, some recent contributions appear to be motivated by the silence on race in organization theory (Ray, 2019; Rojas, 2019; Wooten, 2019). At its core, sociology of race perspectives focus on how race shapes organizations and their ability to acquire the cultural, political, and material resources needed for survival (Wooten, 2019:1). By assuming organizations are social actors, sociology of race scholars shift the conversation about race in organizations from its dominant focus on people to organizations (Wooten, 2019).

Hence, race is not on the margins of organizations as MOS has generally positioned it. Nor is it just a characteristic of individuals. Instead, it permeates all aspects of organizations (Wooten and Couloute, 2017). Consequently, Wooten (2019: 4) argues for a focus on "how race informs the basis of the strategies that organizations enact, how race informs the logics that structure the everyday activities of and within organizations, and how race animates the processes used to distribute rewards." Further, capitalist organizations are dependent on anti-blackness to acquire resources and to accumulate profits. For example, Ray (2019:26) develops a theory that accounts for how racialized organizations enhance or diminish the

agency of racial groups, legitimate inequality in the distribution of resources, institutionalize whiteness as a credential, and position formal rules as race neutral.

The sociology of race literature challenges us as MOS scholars to reflect upon the unique perspective we can bring to theorizing and researching race in organizations. One thought running through my mind is that we need to interrogate constructs assumed to be race neutral and theorize how they are racialized. For example, if we embrace race as a characteristic of an organization (i.e. organizations as racial actors), then we might explore the racial identity of organizations (Smith, 2019; Wooten, 2019). Right now organizational identity is conceptualized as raceless. Following this idea, we might also want to explore the role and behaviors of managers in the formation (and dissolution) of racialized organizational identities as well as the structures for embedding them.

Combing insights from the sociology of race literature and postcolonial theory might push us to ask: If we start from a shared recognition that race and racism were built into management and organizations from their inception in both practice and formal theorizing, what kinds of research questions would we pursue? I believe reflecting on this question may assist us in moving beyond a race neutral view of organizations and also deepen our interrogation of taken-for-granted theoretical canons.

4. Final Thoughts for Now

I want to thank the editors of this special issue for asking me to share my reflections. I was reluctant at first but decided to take up the invitation. I have offered my thoughts about the progress towards elevating race to a core theoretical construct in MOS. Additionally, I highlighted three theoretical perspectives that I believe may accelerate theorizing race in MOS. I recognize these perspectives are not exhaustive of all possible approaches. Hopefully, they will point us in the right direction.

I end these reflections unsettled. I must admit I am angry about the slow pace of making race central to the study of management and organizations (Bell, *et al.,* 2020). The mere idea of or thinking about race continues to generate evasion or discomfort for some in MOS. Some of you may dismiss this sentiment as being overly emotional. I readily acknowledge that my subjective position as the author of an article declaring the significance of race in MOS and as a Black woman whose life and career has unfolded in a world of systemic racism shape my reflections.

Positioning organizations as race neutral denies the history of colonialism and slavery, their contemporary racial structures, the racialized subjects within them, and the persistence of anti-blackness (Wooten, 2019). However, the greatest cost of this denial is the everyday racism, micro-aggressions, and exploitation racially (and ethnically) marginalized employees continue to experience. The current pandemic amplifies the cost to them. Although declared 'essential' workers, data indicate they are disproportionally affected by its economic, social, and health devastation.

We need to seriously consider whether positioning race as a core analytical concept in MOS can be achieved under the diversity paradigm. Perhaps it is time for a new field of study—race in organizations. Theorizing race in organizations is central to undoing the continuing effects of racism. Otherwise, we will continue to offer strategies that do not get to the roots of racial inequality in organizations.

However, my most overwhelming emotion at this moment is anxiety. History suggests when progress is being made towards addressing racism, there is backlash—the 'emperor' strikes back (e.g. Anderson, 2017; Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 2004; Yancy, 2018). Will this moment of acknowledgment of anti-blackness, white supremacy, and systemic racism disappear into cleverly disguised opposition? Not frontal opposition but one clothed in the guise of keeping academic standards up or the importance

of preserving management theory cannons. Or, perhaps a new paradigm may emerge making it possible to evade difficult scholarly conversations about race in organizations, allowing the 'emperor's' procession to continue. Yet, I don't believe either of these scenarios is inevitable. My life-preserver right now is the hope MOS chooses a different future---one that is committed to theorizing race in organizations as a means of disrupting its power to oppress and marginalize.

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[1] Personal correspondence from the Associate Editor dated July 23, 1987.