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Rethinking the ‘everyday’ in ‘ethnicity and everyday life’

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While ‘ethnicity and everyday life’ is a familiar collocation, sociologists concerned with racism and ethnicity have not engaged very much with the extensive body of social theory that takes the ‘everyday’ as its central problematic. In this essay, I consider some of the ways in which the sociology of the everyday might be of use to those concerned with investigating ethnicity and racism. For its part, however, the sociology of the everyday has tended to be remarkably blind to the role played by racism and racialization in the modern world. It is thus no less crucial to consider how the experiences of racialized groups might help us rethink influential accounts of the everyday. To this end, I provide a discussion of pioneering texts by C. L. R. James and W. E. B. du Bois, both of whom were driven by their reflections on racism and resistance to recognize the everyday not as an unremarked context, but as, precisely, a problematic one.

Keywords: racism; ethnicity; everyday life; W. E. B. du Bois; C. L. R. James; Georg Simmel

Introduction

Within sociological discussion, the conjunction ‘ethnicity and everyday life’ has become, itself, ‘everyday’. Familiar and under-considered at once, it is consigned to exactly the kind of pre-reflective obviousness that has been taken to be characteristic of ‘everyday’ phenomena more generally. Thus, there is, on the one hand, no shortage of research studying the ways in which ethnic identities are claimed, ascribed or resisted in everyday situations. Dan Swanton (2008) and John Clayton (2008), for example, have explored the ways in which ‘race’ is produced in and through the everyday use of local spaces; Andreas Wimmer’s (2004) work has used network analysis to examine the ‘everyday praxis of group formation’ in diverse Swiss neighbourhoods; and a whole range of studies have, for the most part, used ethnographic approaches in order to consider how mundane activities such as shopping (e.g. Everts 2010), cooking and eating (e.g. Highmore 2009), or simply having ‘fun’ (e.g. Werbner 2002, chapter 7) are implicated in the formation and negotiation of ethnicity.

On the other hand, however, the ‘everyday’ in ethnicities research tends to be taken as describing a ‘background’ of ordinary practices in a relatively straightforward or self-explanatory sense. The everyday is a context: what is of interest is how ethnicity ‘happens’ there, so to speak. Consequently, sociologists concerned with racism and ethnicity, even those concerned with those things in their banal manifestations, have not engaged all that much with the extensive body of social theory that specifically

refused to take the everyday for granted, but took it rather as its central problematic, as a problem worth reflecting upon because it had the potential to shed a different, revealing light back onto the wider social world and the historical processes that shape that world. As Henri Lefebvre (1987, 9), one of the key figures in this tradition puts it: the possibility of ‘decoding the modern world, that bloody riddle, according to the everyday’.

This essay therefore seeks to make a theoretical contribution in two directions. On the one hand, I want to consider some of the ways in which the sociology of everyday life might be of significance for sociologists engaged in research on ethnicity. But this cannot be done without turning the question around because, for the most part, the ‘classical’ sociology of everyday life has been remarkably blind to the role played by racism and processes of racialization in modernity’s ‘bloody riddle’. It is therefore crucial to consider how the experiences of racialized groups might help us rethink influential accounts of the everyday, and to this end I turn back to texts by C. L. R. James and W. E. B. du Bois, both of whom were driven by their reflections on racism and resistance to recognize the everyday not as an unremarked context, but as, precisely, a problematic one.

The Unruly?

From the perspective of one dominant strand in the theorizing of the everyday, the concern with ‘ethnicity and everyday life’ might well appear puzzling. Much of that discussion, after all, has been motivated by the sense that the everyday is the realm of what Harvie Ferguson (2009) calls ‘unruly’ experience. ‘Unruly’ here means neither wildness nor rebellion, necessarily, because a great deal of our ordinary life is obviously characterized by habit and routine. ‘Unruly’ refers rather to the status of experiences that are not immediately reconciled to, or structured by, the intellectual regimes or the institutional practices that patrol and define much of our social life. Everyday life, on this reckoning, has a peculiarly unbounded or disorderly quality.

It is precisely the everyday’s lack of conformity that makes it a problem. At the same time, it is also this lack of conformity that, for a number of its most prominent theorists, invests the everyday with a provisionally hopeful quality. For Maurice Blanchot (1987), for example, the everyday was where we might yet encounter spontaneity or pre-reflective experience – a ‘living in the moment’ – freed from the tyranny of ‘abstract systems’. Not dissimilarly, but more famously, Michel de Certeau (1984, xvii) described the everyday as the realm of a practical making-do that was not resolved into a discipline and that revealed the resilient creativity that ‘flourishes at the very point where practice ceases to have its own language’. Even Henri Lefebvre (2002, 196), whose account of the everyday is more sceptical of claims about its autonomy from the wider organizing practices of social life, nevertheless used the term to describe a ‘level’ of social reality that was subject to, but always partially evaded, the ‘accumulative’ rationalities of modernity: ‘it is in the everyday... that possibilities are born.’

Moreover, for a number of theorists, the unruliness of the everyday is taken to be intimately associated with its diversity, with the heterogeneous nature of everyday experiences and encounters. Ben Highmore (2001, chapter 6) points out that this is part of what the original Mass Observations project sought to capture with its day

surveys: the discontinuous and indiscriminate quality of ordinary doings, events and beliefs. In part, Highmore notes, the project was motivated by an avant-gardist belief that, by bringing to attention this ‘simultaneity of difference within the everyday’ (94), it might be possible to unsettle the taken-for-granted quality of daily life. This interest in the potentially de-familiarizing power of the juxtapositions of the everyday is prominent for many other theorists also. The great ‘knots’ of Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* (1999) are in part, of course, an attempt to turn the flotsam generated by modern life to radical effect. By disclosing the co-presence of unreconciled and divergent histories amid the detritus of everyday life, Benjamin aimed to jolt his reader out of any sense of modernity as a triumphant itinerary of progress. Not dissimilarly, Lefebvre, particularly in his later writings, emphasized the potential of the ‘encounter’ with ‘difference’ in everyday space and the possibilities for social renewal that emerged from what he called everyday life’s ‘time of unexpectedness’ (Lefebvre 2007, 190).

In short, there is a prominent strand in the theorizing of the everyday that takes the variety and immediacy of everyday experience as something not easily conformed to modernity’s dominant conceptual ordering, and which therefore seeks within the everyday for the resources that might enable a critical questioning of that order. A famous formulation of this is offered by Girard and de Certeau (1998, 256) when they describe ordinary culture as ‘a practical science of the singular, which takes in reverse our thinking habits in which scientific rationality is knowledge of the general’. A point of unity in much of the theory of everyday life has been, in this regard, the desire to allow the unruly quality of everyday experience to shake our confidence in the seemingly clear-cut intellectual categories and stories by which we go about making sense of things. The ‘tenacious’ way in which ordinary culture refers knowledge back to the ‘singular’ instance and the concrete context, Girard and de Certeau conclude, necessarily ‘puts on trial’ our scientific practices and epistemologies.

What, then, are we to make of this? The focus on the unruliness of the everyday would appear to make the collocation ‘ethnicity and everyday life’ an unlikely one. If we accept that racialized identities are precisely among the dominant epistemological categories of the modern social world and that they operate, at least in part, through a process of generalization (what Albert Memmi called the ‘mark of the plural’ 1965, 85) and if, moreover, we accept that they are often central to practices intended to order and control those they designate, then on this account it would appear to be a mistake to look for the active construction or perpetuation of ethnic identities in everyday life. If everyday activity is governed by a practical science of the singular, then it should be where racialized and ethnic identities come undone, rather than being asserted, imposed or lived out. Yet there is, of course, plenty of research showing the prevalence of forms of racism in what one can only call everyday contexts and the ascription and, indeed, self-assertion of ethnic identities in those same contexts (inter alia Essed 1991; Lewis 2003; Fields and Fields 2012). A view of the everyday as the space of the unruly or un-conformed experience makes it hard to account for the evident perpetuation of racism and racialization within that space itself.

In response to this apparent disjuncture, I want to make three arguments. First, it seems to me that, partial as it is, this focus on the unruliness of everyday life does

help define a necessary concern for ethnicities research. While much crucial work in this area gets done through the investigation of census and survey data, or through qualitative work focused on particular communities, the sociology of everyday life is salient because it teaches us to keep an eye on the ways in which generalized categories of identity may be disrupted by ordinary relations and practices. And, in this regard, studies of ethnicity in such contexts have indeed revealed the everyday instability and renegotiation of ethnicity (Karner 2007) just as they have often demonstrated that mundane practices and relationships can proceed in ways that are neither attentive to, nor significantly ordered by, beliefs about ‘race’ or ethnicity (e.g. Everts 2010; Kramvig 2005). It is important, in this respect, that we *are* attentive, as John Clayton (2009, 484) puts it, to the opportunities for conceptual ‘disorder’ that are present in everyday situations, as well as to the ways in which the sheer substantive force of real-life encounters between people can destabilize presumptions about categories of identity (see e.g. Byrne 2006).

At least as importantly, a concern with the everyday should have a monitory effect for us, as researchers, as well. Rather than thinking of the everyday as the dirty straw from which we spin conceptual gold, we need to think of how far that work of ours relies on a settling or fixing-in-time of categories that may often be at odds with their day-to-day instability, or which abstracts those categories ‘out’ of the phenomenological messiness and irresolution of ordinary relations and practices. In that regard, it seems to me, we would be wise to accept de Certeau and Girard’s suggestion (1998, 251–256) that we think of the everyday not simply as a context or ‘fodder’ for analysis, but also as a presence that ‘puts on trial’ the purity of the concepts by which we organize such analysis, and as a standing reminder of the extent to which that purity is won by ridding itself of the disorderliness of what it purports to describe.

Racism and the theory of everyday life

Having said this, however, the disjuncture that I outlined above remains a real one. What one might call the ‘heroic’ tradition of everyday life studies has been much criticized for its ability to construe any ordinary action, no matter how equivocal, as a form of ‘resistance’. More pertinent in this context, however, is the tendency of that tradition to celebrate the resilience and autonomy of ordinary cultural practices in a fashion that seems to disregard questions of ‘race’ and racism altogether. Pierre Mayol’s brilliant ethnography of a working-class district in Lyons, for example, in the second volume of *The Practice of Everyday Life*, describes the way in which daily life in the neighbourhood is governed by an ethic of ‘propriety’, in which the proper thing is to be present and involved, but unremarkable. Mayol describes how this mundane surveillance comes to be routed through the body, making considerable demands on individuals’ management of their public selves. Submission to this propriety is, he argues, what licenses ‘belonging’ in the space of the neighbourhood.

What Mayol (1998, 118) does not discuss, however, is how this presumed ‘transparency of everyday life’, as he calls it, might obviously become complicit with racism. He goes on to consider the ways in which, through gestures and forms of subtle irony, those living in the neighbourhood ‘confront the limits of freedom in the relational game’ (27) and find ways in which to ‘disrupt the rigid monument of

seemliness' (33). But one step prior to this, prior to the disclosure of the ways in which improvisation can disrupt the everyday order, that 'seemliness' has already been construed in a way that makes it perfectly conformable to the logic of racism. Mayol offers no significant comment on this, but when he describes the extent to which everyday life is governed by the demand of 'immediate legibility' (18) on the part of those it encloses, and when he describes the body as a record of 'signs of recognition... which manifests the effectiveness of its insertion in the neighbourhood' (22), one cannot help thinking of Frantz Fanon's (1986, 116) response to racism as he encountered it on the streets in France (including Lyons, of course): 'I slip into corners, I remain silent, I strive for anonymity, for invisibility. Look, I will accept the lot, as long as no one notices me!' One might risk paraphrasing this as a plea on Fanon's part: let me no longer be subject to the racializing propriety of the everyday encounter.

The appropriate response to this lack of attention in the canonical theory of everyday life, it seems to me, is critical reconsideration, rather than wholesale junking. In this respect, it is important to remember that the theory of everyday life includes currents that associate the quotidian less with un-conformed or unruly experience and more with ingrained routines, passivity and critical inattention: the accomplice of, rather than the absconder from, modernity's ordering epistemologies. My second argument, then, is that the 'canonical' sociology of everyday life, despite its frequent inattention to such questions, does contain resources that could be useful in helping us make sense of the ways in which everyday life might be implicated in processes of racialization.

A striking example here is the work of Georg Simmel, for whom the multifarious and indiscriminate nature of everyday encounters, far from provoking critical reflection, gave rise precisely to a dehumanizing vision. Urban life, in particular, Simmel argued, inwardly shaped as it is by the processes and practices of the money economy, and requiring as it does the psychological management of 'continuous discontinuity', leads to a heightened intellectualism but also to a discounting of the characterful individuality of people and things. Simmel, in common with other theorists of the everyday, recognizes that practical, daily life often necessitates a focus on the specific rather than the general (e.g. Simmel [1900] 1991, 135). Nevertheless, it is clear that for him the tendential thrust of modern society is away from this concern with the quiddity of things and people in themselves, and towards the dominance of 'reified abstractions' (186) or what he called 'secondary symbols'. The extension of social relations mediated by money, in particular, leads to the 'utmost reduction of the specific qualities and the one-sided character of all empirical forms' (221). While Simmel is overwhelmingly (and understandably) known in ethnicities research for his essay on the stranger, his wider discussion on the effects of a money economy on social relations offers a largely untapped theoretical resource for making sense of the sociological conditions that might sustain racialization. The 'merciless objectivity' of money makes of everyday life a domain governed by an 'inner image of reality' (445) in which others appear not as qualitative individuals, but in the form of abstractions.

Yet, to be clear, Simmel himself makes no such connection explicit. Although he discusses in passing, in *The Philosophy of Money*, the extent to which the presumed

racial characteristics of Jews have their historical roots in their positioning as the bearers of a money economy (e.g. Simmel [1900] 1991, 225 ff), for the most part, his thesis pays no particular attention to questions of ‘race’ or racism. Much of his core argument, for example, was anticipated in a famous dispatch on his experience attending the Berlin Trade Exhibition in 1896. Here he reflects, powerfully, on how the sheer heterogeneousness of the objects gathered in the exhibition, while appearing at first glance to present an ‘outward unity’ (Simmel [1896] 1991a, 120) ultimately gives rise to a form of disenchantment. The money-mediated inter-exchangeability of these objects renders the viewer indifferent to their qualitative distinctions so that quantity – how many and how much? – becomes the only meaningful measure of what is encountered. Hence, in the end, the self-aggrandizing accumulation of material wealth in the exhibition has the bathetic effect of calling attention only to the ‘shop-window quality of things’ (122) under such conditions. And for Simmel, of course, this ‘shop-window’ quality clearly extends to our encounter with people as well as with objects. Yet, he makes no mention of the presence, in the same exhibition, of ‘living exhibits’ from colonized societies, nor what their presence might suggest about the ways in which such perceptual indifference might come to be affixed to particular bodies. Simmel opens up the possibility of thinking through the ways in which our everyday reliance on the ‘inherently qualityless presence of money’ ([1896] 1991b, 18) could be implicated in the consolidation of ideas of racial difference as a specific form of ‘secondary symbol’ ([1900] 1991, 151), but his own account presumes ‘race’ as something existing prior to, not constituted through, the everyday.

It seems important to me to insist, then, that there are overlooked intellectual resources in the sociology of everyday life that are of potential use for the investigation of racism and ethnicity. But these resources are profoundly incomplete. Therefore, my third argument is that if we are to think through the relation between the everyday and racism, we need to pay attention to the work of theorists whose concern to respond critically to the latter led them to reflect in important ways on the former.

In moving in this direction, I am deliberately following the lead of feminist scholars of the everyday, such as Rita Felski (1999/2000) and Dorothy E. Smith (1988). Smith’s powerful argument, in particular, emphasizes the necessity of taking the everyday as a problematic, and for reasons very similar to those I discussed at the start of this essay. She starts by recognizing the everyday as a domain that is construed as being the unruly opposite of the bloodless, ‘Archimedean’ point from which institutional forms of knowledge production claim to proceed. By paying close critical attention to the heavily gendered nature of this opposition – the extent to which the everyday is construed as the merely subjective realm of women’s experience – Smith raises the question of how far one can really understand ‘the everyday’ without thinking through its implication in relations of social power.

Smith also argues, however, that it is precisely by reclaiming the perspective of the everyday and learning to rethink the relations of knowledge production from the standpoint of the overwhelmingly feminized labour that ‘articulates’ between abstract, general thinking and ordinary life that a critical perspective on those relations themselves becomes possible. In a brilliant application of Hegel’s master-slave ‘parable’, she argues that it is only from the perspective of this everyday labour that

the gendering of the everyday is discernible and can be seen for what it is. She thus emphasizes the extent to which a critical ‘making-sense’ of social relations already proceeds in the everyday, however much that understanding is concealed from expert view by the definition of such space as somewhere in which only personal or parochial things happen.

With this double lesson in mind, I move to consider two accounts that take the everyday as a problematic in just the sense that Smith proposes, but which do so with a particular focus on its entailment in processes of racialization. Both of the texts I want to consider deserve, it seems to me, more recognition than they have received hitherto as profound and pioneering theorizations of the everyday.

C. L. R. James and the battleground of everyday life

My first example is *American Civilization*, the sprawling, part-formed result of C. L. R. James’s (1993) decade-long effort to come to terms with mass culture as he encountered it in America. Scott McLemee (1994, 226), one of James’s most careful readers, describes the book aptly as ‘magnificent ruins’. Yet, the ruination is the mark of an achievement as much as a failure, emerging as it does from James’s characteristic concern to seek out the hidden relations in seemingly diverse histories, practices and experiences. In this regard, the form of the text is, in part, an echo of the very thing that it describes: for James, popular culture in America was just that, half-built, both ruin and blueprint simultaneously. And it was only by seeing it as both of these things at once that one could properly understand it.

James was no postmodernist *avant la lettre* and he maintains, in *American Civilization*, a focus on the relations of production as a pivotal site of political struggle. Nevertheless, informed by his reflections on the particular dynamics of oppression faced by women and by black Americans, he had come to understand such struggle in something like humanist terms: that is, as driven by a desire for freedom, flourishing and the search for an individuality realized with, and not against, others. And it is in this regard that everyday life emerges in *American Civilization* as being, in its own right, a site of politics. James opens the study by emphasizing that he will take the ‘pursuit of happiness’ as his theme, both as a historical question and as he has observed it in the ‘actual lives of American people’ (James 1993, 30). Good to his word, the book repeatedly focuses on the longings and frustrations that he found conjoined in the most mundane contexts and practices: film-going, reading the comic strips, the journey to work, and so on.

As part of his rethinking of Marxism in this period, James ([1947] 1980, 79) had come to reject the idea that it offered any ‘theological certainty’ about the direction and destination of history, proposing instead a dialectical method of inquiry focused on a search for the ‘affirmation that is contained in every negation, the future that is in the present’. It is in just this sense that James approaches ordinary life in America as an *unresolved* domain. Thus, on the one hand, he was explicit about the homogenizing effects of ‘mass society’ and insisted on the extent to which day-to-day life for ordinary Americans was subject to the unifying imperatives of a capitalist economy: ‘the whole social arrangement of life bears the stamp of this mechanization’ (James 1993, 116). Yet, if this was a negation, it was necessarily a negation of

something, and it was that smothered potentiality, revealed in and through the very ‘negativities’ of popular life itself (see Larsen 1996), of which James refused to lose sight. In a letter to Constance Webb in 1944, he writes:

The average advanced worker accepts as legitimate certain human and social values which make him as a human being infinitely superior to men of past ages... the thoughts of great philosophers, which they could only hold often as ideals, are now the common property as a *matter of every-day life* of millions upon millions of ordinary people. (James 1996, 192–193 original emphasis)

He ends the *American Civilization* with a spellbinding passage, imagining such an ‘ordinary American’ ‘as he sits in the evening listening to his radio’ (James 1993, 272), heir to these historical promises of freedom, and alive in a world that makes possible forms of social collaboration and a broadening of imaginative horizons unthinkable in the past:

Speak to the poorest mother in the park, or to a sharecropper’s wife in the depths of the South. More often than not, through the radio and the newspaper, they are acquainted with the latest theories on vitamins, child-care, etc. Man and woman have a passion to master technical things, to know about them, to do, to tackle a concrete difficulty and solve it. (James 1993, 273)

This then was the question that ran in high-tensile lines through America’s everyday: whether such men and women could secure for themselves an existence that would allow adequate expression of this passion to know, to do, to tackle and to solve. It was this desire that James took to be the ‘elemental sociological force’ (James 1993, 226) expressed in popular dissatisfaction with the lived experience of American modernity and in the struggle, imposed for the most part upon women, to make ‘something tolerable and interesting out of this formidable apparatus of mechanized routinized living’ (219). Everyday life, then, is not to be characterized by its repetition or inertia, but is rather, for James, a profoundly unstable space where the contradictions of ‘American civilization’, the contradictions between a historical promise of freedom (the blueprint) and lived experience (the ruin), were at their most volatile.

Crucially, James arrives at this account in no small part as a result of his effort to understand the particular politics of racism and anti-racism as he found these in America. It was during the first years of his time in America that James worked most concertedly to develop what he came to call a ‘dialectical’ understanding of ‘race’ – an account that treated ‘race’ and the politics of racism as things only worth considering as they play out in particular contextual and relational ways, and which dismissed what we would now call an essentializing view of these relations: ‘People who only see the black man in general being oppressed by the white man in general... do not understand anything’ (*Socialist Appeal*, December 1, 1939). His alternative account explicitly puts the politics of blackness ‘in motion’, as it were: if we want to understand the “race” question, like any other question, James insists, we must ‘see it from all sides and particularly see in what direction it is moving, what is likely to happen tomorrow’ (*Socialist Appeal*, November 7, 1939).

This implied, for James, a deliberate two-sidedness in any attempt to understand the historical and political significance of black struggle. On the one hand, he argued with increasing vehemence against the tendency to treat anti-racist struggle as merely an 'episodic' moment on the highway to a 'true' class politics (James 1996 [1948], 138). In no small part it was this insistence on the historical specificity of the experience of racism and of anti-racist struggle that led him to a redefinition of Marxism around the concept of freedom or a search for 'happiness'. Rather than packing anti-racist politics back into a proprietorial box called 'socialism', James allowed that politics to open up the question of what was postulated by the term socialism in the first place. At the same time, however, James rejected just as vehemently any attempt to treat the history of black struggle as self-contained or organized around the defence of some 'real' thing called blackness. Thus, when he talks about seeing that struggle 'from all sides', or when he stresses the importance of seeing it as something in motion, his point is partly about the need to situate it within the wider history of popular struggle in America and beyond. Through the course of a series of articles, produced with extraordinary rapidity in the first years of his period in America, he explored the way in which resistance to slavery and segregation intervened in pivotal confrontations in American history and helped push the outcome of those events in more progressive directions. Hence, for James, the politics of blackness in America had to be understood both in its own terms, shaped as it was by a particular history and modality of oppression, but was at the same time an inextricable part of wider histories of popular discontent, giving exemplary indication of what a politics built from such discontent might attain.

It was in just this two-sided sense that James discussed racism and everyday life in America. What he recognized, in one direction, was that the contradictions of everyday life took particular shape for black Americans: the extent to which 'ordinary experience' itself was, as it were, written through by racism meant that for those subject to it, the everyday was something known only in its absence. There could be no 'merely' mundane or everyday experience when a core part of the modality of racism involved the potentially violent regulation of ordinary encounters, relations and practices. In this respect, black Americans faced a condition that one might call the 'unimaginable everyday', a condition that found its indicative echo for James, as did so many things, in the eloquent 'silences' of popular culture:

A comic strip which dealt realistically with the life a Negro family, living in various parts of the United States, and travelling abroad, could easily wreck great chains of newspapers if they dared to print it and could result in violence, bloodshed and riots in a dozen cities. (James 1993, 158)

It is not too much to say, in this regard, that for James, the condition of everydayness – the possibility or impossibility of imagining oneself as part of a merely mundane world – was itself a part of the way in which racialization happened in America.

Yet, James emphasized no less the critical insight that this experience made possible. He repeatedly argued with comrades on the left that communities subject to racism, far from being rendered dumb by the experience, understood with a greater

sense of concrete immediacy what was at stake for *everyone* in the politics of everyday American life:

The twisted bitterness of the Negro people is an index of the suppressed angers which permeate the vast majority of the nation. In the passion of the church services and singing of the very poor, in the responses to the great Negro bands in dance-halls and sometimes in theatres in Negro districts, can be felt a passion, a tremendous elemental social force, which many who note it, like to fancy is primitive, of the jungle. It is nothing of the kind. It is modern Americanism, a profoundly social passion of frustration and violence, characteristic of the nation as a whole. (James 1993, 209)

As this quote makes clear, James develops his argument not least as a counter to the tendency of popular commentators and academics to interpret the tension evident in black popular culture and church traditions as proof of the ‘jungle’ nature of ‘the Negro’. James’s ‘dialectical’ interpretation of the everyday politics of ‘race’ in America is thus partly a response to the familiar act of ‘racecraft’ (Fields and Fields 2012) by which the historical consequences of racism are converted back into a self-justifying claim about apparently timeless racial difference. By deliberate contrast, James emphasizes the ways in which the relations of racism and segregation led black communities to define and defend specific forms of freedom in those spaces that were available to them, while also insisting on the extent to which such struggles offered an exemplary instance of the wider and unresolved struggle for popular freedom in America.

W. E. B. du Bois and everyday racism

My second example is W. E. B. du Bois’ ([1903] 1995) *The Souls of Black Folk*. Du Bois’ classic text has, of course, been the subject of a vast body of secondary consideration and so my interest here is to insist only on the usefulness of reading it as a work of everyday life. I do not mean by this to refer only to what du Bois wrote *about*. It is, of course, also a matter of how he wrote. The better part of a century before many of the texts that are now considered ‘classics’ of everyday life, du Bois’ formal experimentation in *Souls* – the diversity of registers and themes, the conjunction of the personal and the historical, the shift from poetry to factual data to polemic to vernacular – had already broken a path to a way of speaking about the ‘daily lives and longings’ of black communities that turned its back on ‘wholesale argument covering millions’ (164), just as it also refused the conventional oppositions between observer and observed, objective analysis and subjective experience.

Du Bois is absolutely explicit about his intentions in this regard and about the necessity of this approach, making clear both in his title and ‘Forethought’, his concern not simply to describe social structures or broad sociological patterns of inequality as these affected black communities – he had done both, of course, with assiduity in his studies at Atlanta – but to vivify ‘the spiritual world in which ten thousand thousand Americans live and strive’ (du Bois [1903] 1995, 41). In one respect, of course, this marked a break with conventional sociology on du Bois’ part. He explicitly contrasts his concern to bear witness to the world of black experience with the off-hand judgements of the ‘car window sociologist’ (179) and with a positivistic sociology that

went on 'gleefully' counting 'bastards' and 'prostitutes' (50) as if the resultant data contained its own explanation. Du Bois' phenomenological turn in *Souls*, and his concern with the meaningful worlds of everyday life, was clearly driven in no small part by a growing awareness of the potential complicity between merely 'enumerative' sociology and the 'mark of the general' upon which racist thinking relied.

At the same time, however, we should recognize that even in the writings he produced while he was a professional social scientist, du Bois was reaching for a practice that made use of rigorously gathered empirical evidence, revealing the depth and extent of racialized inequality in America, while also giving expression to the everyday suffering that underlay these figures. In his writings on 'The Black North in 1901', for example, he had argued that it was crucial to provide a 'picture of the Negro from without' (du Bois [1901] 1978, 150). At the same time, however, he went on to argue that it was no less necessary to 'place ourselves within the Negro group and by studying that inner life look with him upon the surrounding world' (151). So, in a sense, one might read *Souls* not so much as the point of du Bois' divorce from sociology, as the culmination of his search for a sociology sufficiently broad as to be able to describe, in mutually informing ways, both social structure *and* lived experience.

There are various places in *Souls* where du Bois makes all of this explicitly clear, but perhaps nowhere more so than towards the end of the chapter 'Of the Sons of Master and Man', where he writes:

I have thus far sought to make clear the physical, economic, and political relations of the Negroes and whites in the South... But after all that has been said on these more tangible matters of human contact, there still remains a part essential to a proper description of the South which it is difficult to describe or fix in terms easily understood by strangers. It is, in fine, the thousand and one little actions which go to make up life. In any community or nation it is these little things which are most elusive to grasp and yet most essential to any clear conception of the group life taken as a whole. (du Bois [1903] 1995, 203)

This, it seems to me, is as clear a manifesto for the importance of studying everyday life as one could find, and it is driven precisely by du Bois' sense that one could not adequately understand racism in America unless one understood how racist practices were threaded through mundane, daily existence. He goes on to make this clear by providing a short, imagined account of the experience of a 'casual observer visiting the South' (du Bois [1903] 1995, 203), aware only of how 'the days slip lazily on, the sun shines' and believing that 'this little world seems as happy and contented as other worlds he has visited' (204). To this white visitor, the 'Negro problem' appears invisible, a 'far-fetched academic' issue, unless it happens to be revealed in a sudden 'whirl of passion which leaves him gasping at its bitter intensity' or in the disconcertion of a moment when he finds himself 'in some strange assembly, where all faces are tinged brown or black, and where he has the vague, uncomfortable feeling of the stranger' (204). Only in such instances does this casual observer come to understand the truth about the ordering of the relations around him:

He realizes at last that silently, resistlessly, the world about flows by him in two great streams: they ripple on in the same sunshine, they approach and mingle their waters in

seeming carelessness – then they divide and flow wide apart. It is done quietly; no mistakes are made, or if one occurs, the swift arm of the law and of public opinion swings down for a moment. (du Bois [1903] 1995, 204)

This passage deserves careful consideration. At first glance, du Bois appears to be doing nothing more than revealing the violence that might at any moment interrupt ordinary life in the segregated South. Yet, on second glance the relationship he is describing is rather more complicated, because it is just the seeming ordinariness of the everyday – the quietness, the routine, the taken-for-granted patterns – that already provide the alibi, as it were, to that violence. In this respect, it seems to me, du Bois' insistence on understanding and giving an account of the everyday is not just motivated by the ethnographer's concern for detail, or by the novelist's concern for vividness; his insistence on the importance of recognizing the minutiae of the everyday – 'the thousand and one little actions' that are essential to any clear conception of 'the group life' – is born also of a sociological recognition that everydayness is itself partly constitutive of the relations that he describes. For du Bois, everyday experience is not just what both 'black' and 'white' are subsumed within; it is a significant part of the means by which that distinction is itself made real.

Like James, of course, du Bois also argued that those subject to this situation could not but develop a critical understanding of the complicity between ordinariness and the violence of racism. The everyday life that du Bois describes could never be merely habitual, nor characterized by the kind of absent-mindedness that various theorists have tended to associate with the everyday. That dubious privilege belongs, in his account, to the 'casual visitor' or to the 'car window sociologist', not to the person potentially subject to the 'swift arm of the law'. For the latter, pre-reflective action, living in the moment, is precisely what is precluded. In this regard, du Bois clearly understood *Souls* not merely as an act of *verstehen* in the Weberian sense, requiring an act of imaginative or empathetic projection outwards on the part of the sociologist, but as something rather more, an account built out of the ongoing work of self-reflection and self-understanding that racism forced upon those who were subject to it: a sociology grounded in the ongoing labour of everyday sense-making and critical awareness born of the 'double-ness' he so famously discussed.

Conclusion

Both of the texts that I have considered here, of course, emerge from reflection on particular historical situations. It would be a mistake to generalize from them wholesale. Nevertheless, it seems to me that both contain vital lessons for anyone concerned to research 'ethnicity and everyday life' contemporarily. Both du Bois and James came to approach the everyday as a problematic. To say this is to say more than just that they sought to pay attention to the ways in which racism occurred in mundane situations. They clearly were, of course, concerned with everyday racist practices, and it is possible to make the case that it was this concern that helped inform wider changes in their perspectives – towards a more expansive understanding of Marxism on James's part and of social science on that of du Bois. Yet, to describe the everyday as a problematic means more than just adumbrating a particular context

or field of inquiry, a particular background against which processes occur or relationships are formed: 'Defining the everyday world as the locus of a sociological problematic is not the same as making it an object of study' (Smith 1988, 90).

In the texts that I have discussed, James and du Bois do indeed approach the everyday as more than just an object of study. For one thing, both insisted on the importance of building an account that worked from, or in solidarity with, the struggles of men and women themselves to make sense of the unresolved tensions of their daily existence. For the racialized communities that they described, these tensions took a particular form, a rendering impossible of 'everydayness' as such. It was precisely because racism meant that black communities could not be reconciled to the normativity implicit in conceptions of everyday American life that it was true to say, as du Bois ([1926] 1986, 993) did, that: 'We who are dark can see America in a way that white Americans cannot.' James's discussion of the historical experiences of black communities in America emphasizes the same point, although his inflection is different, given that he understood these experiences as a particular aspect of a more general and unresolved tension that ran through day-to-day life for most Americans. The point, in any case, is that both writers sought to develop an account that would think from the *already* de-familiarized understanding of the everyday that emerged from the experiences of those subject to racism in America. It was this recognition that, importantly, places both du Bois and James at odds with accounts of the everyday that take it to be a site, only, of ideological defeat or conformity. Of course, the everyday could be implicated in such conformity, just as du Bois describes the way in which the seeming ordinariness of daily life in the segregated South provides the warrant for the 'casual visitor's' out-of-hand dismissal of the 'Negro problem'. But it could also be something more than this, and both James and du Bois moved to treat the 'everyday world as that in which questions originate' (Smith 1988, 91) – questions of the everyday from within the everyday, and which included a concern to understand the social organization and determinations of that world itself.

If James and du Bois thus came to take the everyday as a problematic, this was because it was already such from the standpoint of racialized communities in America. And in this regard, a crucial second lesson from both James and du Bois is the need to recognize that the everyday is not only *where* ethnicity happens; it is also part of *how* ethnicity or racialization happens. The everyday is not merely a scene for investigation because the ascription of everydayness itself plays a constitutive role in the making or sustaining of the boundaries of presumed or perceived difference. It is clearly true that we should not lose sight of the ways in which the unruly nature of ordinary encounters and experiences may upset the assertion of differences; but nor should we lose sight of what is involved when that very unruliness is reconverted into a demarcation or a form of rule.

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