Why Historical Research Frameworks Matter for Sociological Methods and Decolonial Approaches? Empire and Nation Compared with Intra- and Inter-Imperiality

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Abstract

Sociology faces many obstacles in coming to terms with its so-called imperial entanglements. In this article, I address one of the dimensions of this problem. Much like archival sources present their own histories of making and organization that researchers should be aware of, so too do disciplinary research frameworks carry their own histories and historical metaprinciples of organization. I juxtapose two different ways of organizing and framing sociology's disciplinary focus historically. I call these the empire and nation framework and the intra- and inter-imperial framework. Through this juxtaposition, I argue for the importance of methodologically explicitly recognizing and justifying our choice of different historical research frameworks with which sociology can operate.

KEYWORDS: decolonial, methodology, inter-imperial, historical sociology, research design

Introduction

Historical research frameworks are sets of ideas and emphases about the drivers, struggles, and power relations behind historical transformations that connect distinct and distant events and processes under the assumption of shared or similar social problems.

Besides a historical guide for research trajectories, a way of telling us what to look for and why it is interesting, research frameworks can inform us about underlying problems and questions behind the discipline's own advancement. In this way, their importance is heightened in sociology's historical self-reflexivity and especially in research that aims to uncover and analyze power relations embedded in definitional, symbolic, and narrative constructions.

One of the most common of such frameworks is that of empire and nation, which is based on the assumption of various entanglements between nationalism and national struggles against imperial and colonial structures across metropoles and peripheries, and has historically been theorized largely based on Western Atlantic empires.

To demonstrate the methodological importance of choosing with which historical research framework we operate, I juxtapose the empire and nation framework with an alternative choice of an intra- and inter-imperial framework that is theorized based on the recent empirical research of Eurasian borderlands empires.

The intra- and inter-imperial framework is chosen as the contrasting alternative especially due to its focus on similar political processes of national and imperial dynamics in the making of the 20th century, but from a perspective that has historically been overshadowed by the empire and nation focus. As is discussed in detail below, much of the new empirical research on Eurasian borderlands empire has emerged to address these blind spots (see, e.g. Amzi-Erdogdular 2017; Bavbek & Korhonen 2024; Dalle Mulle et al. 2023). To provide a concise account, my examples here will focus on research around states and sovereignty in the transitions from empires to nation-states, one of the main research interests of historical sociology particularly.

Other known historical research frameworks commonly relied on in sociology are, for example, the purely methodologically nationalist framework, the modernization framework, the civilizationalist framework, the world-systems framework, the longue durée framework, the Marxist and uneven development framework, and what could be termed the glocalist framework.[1] In most cases, a mix of two or more frameworks is applied in a largely implicit manner.

Based on the two frameworks juxtaposed here, I ask, what are the consequences of choosing one historical research framework over another? I then argue that focusing implicitly on one or more historical research frameworks without making the choice over different possible frameworks explicit in the research design and justifications can be detrimental to practicing a globally pluralist sociology.

Making our choice of historical research frameworks a clearer part of any sociological study's research design – as no sociological research operates without historical context – can advance efforts to move away from Eurocentric or metrocentric sociology and towards a more decolonial disciplinary methodology. This is especially true for recent political and comparative-historical sociology that looks at the role of knowledge-actors and knowledge in relation to politics, often in colonial and racialized contexts (e.g. Graizbord & Lotesta Forthcoming).

The main driver of the earlier dismissals of alternative frameworks can be summed up as Atlantic-centrism, or a methodologically unaddressed and unexplained focus on the intra-imperial dynamics of Western Atlantic empires in much of globally, highly influential sociology.

This focus overlooks other modes of social change, such as the theorizations of societal dynamics taken from research on Eurasian borderlands empires. The Atlantic-centric and post-1919[2] foci of especially historical, political, postcolonial, and the new sociology of empires do not fit much of the rest of the world. The current enthusiasm for sociological accounts focusing on empire in an effort to advance more decolonial approaches can thereby become misguided as the models and assumptions are driven by just one particular historical research framework, primarily an At-

1 For example, Sebastian Conrad (2017) offers a fairly extensive summary of various frameworks from a social science oriented historical perspective.

2 This includes research on pre-1919 developments through a retrospectively constructed historical understanding based on the blinkers of a post-1919 worldview.

lanticist one. While very successful in explaining certain dynamics, as will be outlined below, these models and assumptions perform inadequately and cannot be directly applied to others, such as the intra- and inter-imperial framework derived here from Eurasian borderlands examples.

Next, I will first discuss what historical research frameworks are in general and what the two frameworks juxtaposed here look like specifically. To answer my question regarding the consequences of choosing one framework over another, I will then describe the two frameworks with empirical examples, focusing on what each of them brings to the table for sociological research, especially from the perspective of historical, global, and political sociology, and to a lesser extent, concerning specifically decolonial approaches. I will then discuss the occlusions made by the empire and nation framework revealed through this juxtaposition in order to highlight aspects that are missed. Finally, I argue that making our choice of historical research frameworks methodologically more explicit can account for inadvertent occlusions and advance a more globally pluralist disciplinary practice.

Historical Research Frameworks

Much like research programs for theoretical adjudication (see, e.g. Burawoy 1989; Emigh 1997), historical research frameworks provide guiding questions and problems about meaningful social, political, power, and especially epistemic relations. Then, another reason for analyzing these historical principles of disciplinary organization is that "even where records are plentiful, sociology as a field may refuse engagement" (Skarpelis 2019). Such methodological occlusions are an equal reason for considering historical frameworks that organize sociological research. Anna Skarpelis (2019) points to two severe examples. First, the silences of the sociological discipline regarding the expansion of sociology under Nazi Germany, and second, "American sociology's failure to engage with the history of slavery" (ibid.). The latter is a matter of programmatic rejection. The former, a matter of historical anchoring, intentional misrecognition, if you will, of sociology's self-understanding of its own historical force and agency.

Thus, there are two interrelated aspects for why we should pay attention to this kind of metaprinciples organizing the discipline's historical account. First, there is the initial historical moment of an analytical force and, second, there is the continued failure to analyze and approach cases that would undermine the force of explanation gained from that act. Processes of occlusion are built on the relation between these two aspects, whereby sociology lends itself societal credibility by turning our collective gaze towards certain processes and explanations and away from others. For example, a focus on anticolonial nationalism through postcolonial and Marxist perspectives helped explain global transformations after the Second World War, but also occluded the continuity of imperialism in the making of nation-states, i.e., the continued coloniality of sovereignty (see, e.g. Bhambra 2016; Birla Forthcoming; Korhonen 2023; Manela 2007).

In the examples that Skarpelis (2019) offers, slavery and its legacies would undermine the explanatory force of sociology as part of the liberal national project, especially in the American context. While the initial historical force of the civil society's capacity to self-reflect and to organically overcome problems, which sociology is anchored to, occludes the imperiality of nationalism, i.e., Nazi sociology is misrecognized to be a historical oxymoron. One can find many other more or less drastic cases of occlusion. For example, in the Nordic countries only recently, sociology's role in ignoring minorities, such as the Sami, over nationally framed social problems has been considered more seriously (see, e.g. Tlostanova 2023).

Skarpelis (2019) talks of this kind of historical memory as structured remembering and forgetfulness. Historical research frameworks are then ultimately about disciplinary remembering and forgetfulness. What are the historical frameworks we use to retrieve interesting research questions, unsolved puzzles, and how do we historically organize existing knowledge regarding those questions and puzzles in sociology? This is especially pertinent to historical, global, and political sociology, but it applies indirectly to all sociology in determining what we ask and in which contexts we seek the answers to our questions, both empirically and as researchers in terms of personal and disciplinary self-reflexivity.

Juxtaposing Two Historical Research Frameworks

As a discipline, sociologists organize research around different historical frameworks that form the skeletons of meaningfulness in evaluating and positioning sociological inquiry historically. These frameworks have developed together with the discipline's growth, dominated by certain "model cases" and overlooking others (Krause 2021). I outline the prevalent, perhaps dominant empire and nation framework against an alternative one. I derive the alternative intra- and inter-imperial framework from the historical politics of the Eastern European borderlands region that stretched roughly from Finland to the Peloponnisos before 1919.

I have two reasons for choosing this region. First, in the last decade or two, there has been a proliferation of new research that has attempted to go beyond critiquing the inadequacies of an empire and nation centered framework in analyzing this region and has argued for a focus on a different configuration of historical forces (see, e.g. Amzi-Erdogdular 2017; Bavbek & Korhonen 2024; Blumi 2011; Gerasimov 2017; Göcek 2013; Kieser 2011; Riga 2006; 2008; Snyder & Younger 2018).

Second, this region perhaps best highlights the importance of thinking about our research frameworks when contrasted against the empire and nation framework because it is where the historical anchoring, the original show of the historical force of the empire and nation framework was perhaps most felt in the making of modern nation-states after the First World War. The transformation from a localized into a globalized political force of the empire and nation centered understanding of the forces of history was initially made for Eastern Europe after the fall of the Russian, German, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman empires, as the intra-imperial politics of Atlantic empires became the dominant form of international politics (see, e.g. Wolff 1994; 2020). In other words, this provides a constitutive account of the emergence of the empire and nation framework and the external validity of its explanatory power. This addresses the continued failure to approach cases that would undermine the force of explanation gained from that act, such as Finnish democratization under the Russian Empire (discussed below), which was discounted, for example, by historical sociologist Charles Tilly (2007) due to his reliance on the empire and nation framework.

The separation of the historical origin and the explanatory power of the empire and nation framework could not be achieved solely from within that particular framework of historical forces, which is why we need to methodologically make the choices between historical research frameworks more explicit.[3] A different framework, focusing on

3 "Hirschman and Reed (2014, 274) argue, rightly, that accounts of social formations are often analytically inseparable from their historical origin story because phenomena acquire characteristics and qualities due to the way that they are formed" (Pacewicz 2022, 938).

the same region's political strategies towards empires beyond nationhood, suggests an alternative understanding that moves our focus from empire and nation to intra- and inter-imperial historical forces and their continuities. This decenters the nation and its relation to imperial power as a reference point and a unit of analysis.

Making such a methodological choice explicit can also contribute to decolonial approaches. Such a contribution does not lie directly in the historical experience upon which the alternative is based on, but in the disciplinary problematizations that the juxtaposition of different frameworks of historical understanding about the location and role of the "forces of imperialism" affords (Edwards & Go 2019; see also Bavbek & Korhonen 2024; Göcek 2013).

I outline the prevalent empire and nation framework based on the works of a leading sociologist of empires and historical sociology, Julian Go. The new wave of historical sociology that Go represents, informed by a nation and empire dichotomy stemming from the history of Atlantic empires, has been successful in contributing to sociology a better understanding of the historical power relations inherent in Atlantic empires and their global influence. Outlining the empire and nation framework around Go's successful enterprise is not meant as a critique but rather to emphasize that I do not propose one framework as better than the other, but want to highlight the value of methodologically explicitly recognizing different aspects of historical power, agency, political visions, etc., that different frameworks excel at analyzing, beyond any dominant or default form of organizing and understanding historical forces.

The two examples of historical research frameworks here are both concerned with posing questions regarding imperialism to further expand the wider disciplinary research program in sociology (especially historical, political, and global sociology) and its previous historical biases. Importantly, they are also concerned with disciplinary bias and the imperial, racialized baggage that is present in all of sociology through its historical embeddedness with imperial power, Eurocentrism, nation-centrism, and modernization projects. It is through the latter that this effort also methodologically talks to decolonial approaches.

The Empire and Nation Research Framework

Zophia Edwards and Julian Go (2019) offer an analysis of what they consider the most important theories regarding the "forces of imperialism". In approaching this large synthesis, they apply the empire and nation framework to study formal Western imperialism between 1750 and 1960. They consider the explanatory factors of formal imperialism to stem from and be divided into two groups, those based on the metropolitan national core and those based on imperial relations.

Through the empire and nation framework, Go and Edwards are able to discuss and compare how the expansion of empires has been a product of considerations by national metropoles of economic, military, and power relations between each other and how peripheries and colonies have been the victim of such considerations. For Go and Edwards, the way to adjudicate between the "forces of imperialism" of the past two centuries is to consider colonies as controllable locations subject to acquisition by active nations. In inquiring about this type of "forces of imperialism", Go and Edwards are building a framework of knowledge about the variations in the geographical spread and historical advance of the effects of national interactions with empire (ibid.).

They define changes of empires over a two-hundred-year period, presenting the forces of empire and nation as the shared denominator that mean-

ingfully connects otherwise distinct events, such as the cession of the Faroe Islands to Denmark with the making of the mandates system. In this framework, the nation is held constant vis-à-vis the empire and the authors do not need to offer a discussion of how, for example, Prussian acquisitions in Europe, the Risorgimento or, say, the swapping of Zanzibar with Heligoland together map onto their empire and nation framework and into the way it organizes and interprets historical data. Rather, the metropole-periphery divide is unified across the two centuries through the constants of a European nation against its imperial possessions and changes in the constellations of metropoles vis-à-vis peripheries are explained through forces that are either internal to the nation or external to it as imperial relations.

In other words, relations and historical questions that problematize, cut across, or transform the empire and nation opposition itself are beyond the reach of Go and Edwards' modeling. This is perhaps best captured by their exclusion of what they term non-Western empires, such as the Ottomans and Russia, because their comparability to Western empires is debatable under the empire and nation framework.[4]

Thus, for example, they would register the purchase of Alaska by the US but not its colonization by Russia. Yet, under the empire and nation rubric, Go and Edwards do not need to debate the comparability of, for example, 18th century Norway and post-WWII United States. As such, the empire and nation framework consciously creates explanations and makes meanings through certain historical comparisons but steers clear of others.

The overall research program of the so-called new sociology of empires (Go 2009; see also Steinmetz 2013) is based on the expansion of the empire and nation framework that holds in it a critical analysis of the power relations of metropoles and peripheries to "help critically reorient some of traditional sociology's limiting lenses and assumptions" (Go 2009, 775). In other words, this type of sociological research reveals power hierarchies around the empire and nation that sociology has historically been blind to due to its own entanglements with Western empires and the liberal national project. Go writes that "it permits us to overcome analytic bifurcations and analytically piece together that which has been torn asunder by the imperial episteme and its substantialist assumption of a pristine metropolitan identity" (Go 2016, 140).

Go (2014, 127) argues against analytically bifurcating "into distinct domains the 'national state and 'empire' – 'internal' and 'external', 'inside' and 'outside' – that were never really separated in practice," which creates a categorical elision occluding imperial relations. Go formulates a specific solution to the separation of metropole and periphery that is built upon the postcolonial analyses of Western imperial domination and is sensitive to methodological and historical perspectives that argued for the separation of metropole and periphery within that same imperial formation. It is these historical dynamics that are at the core of the empire and nation framework.

This framework's strongest applicability is with research that looks at the origins of an imperial rule of difference based on national distinctions within empires. These are cases where historical or interdisciplinary research has already proven the inherent power relations in the occlusions of the metropole and periphery's connections, but are often not yet fully included in the general sociological framework. The source for these new cases for sociology has largely been postcolonial studies (Go 2016).

4 Whereas the intra- to inter-imperial framework invites such comparison.

The empire and nation framework responds to criticisms of not treating the metropole and periphery as a unified or entangled field of analysis. It deconstructs their separation through critical historical analysis of the intra-imperial politics of Western Atlantic empires in order to turn the separation from an a priori assumption into a research question. This existence of the historical and political division to metropole and periphery has long been recognized as a necessary object of analysis rather than treating it as an analytical approach (Mongia 2007, 384–385). The overall solution taken by what I call the empire and nation framework was to explore the co-production of this imposed difference. It is an understanding of history that shifts "the analytical framework from one that functions, implicitly or explicitly, on the basis of comparison, to one that operates on the basis of co-production" (ibid., 384) and thus solves, for example, the question of methodological nationalism, by historicizing the comparative logic behind it as co-produced by nation and empire.

What was it that portrayed the metropole separate from the periphery? What, shared by them both, produced the separation? The multiple contradictions between empire and nation are identified in this framework as the shared denominator across history. Historically, this framework's political force lies in the solution to these contradictions that separated empire from nation through the political process started at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 and expanded into anticolonial nationalism in its Wilsonian and Leninist versions (Korhonen 2018; 2022a). The analytical lens that replaces the original separation is then one that is itself a particular political and historical diagnosis of it. One of the major successes of this framework has been in analyzing the entanglement of sociology itself in the original production of the imperial difference between metropole and periphery.

So far so good, it is important to trace the historicity and politics of the framework, both regarding the nation-states that it is a part and parcel of as the historical solution to the contradictions of empire and nation, as well as to the historical origins of this solution and the original diagnosis of the issue in the Atlantic empires. In this manner, we can effectively organize and link historical connections originating, for example, from the slave trade and settler colonialism and manifesting as the European racialized notions of nation, together with its intersections with civilizational and patriarchal logics of various kinds used to justify the hierarchies of nations and races within global structures, including also in the present-day (see, e.g. Korhonen 2023). For example, based on this framework, scholars have analyzed how democratization processes were connected to the construction of national metropolitan states that specifically exclude colonies and colonial relations from the democratic polity (see, e.g. Balibar & Wallerstein 1991; Hammer 2017; Hammer & White 2019).

Following Go's agenda, the approach that Ricarda Hammer and Jose Itzigsohn (2021) lay out is based on the Atlantic dichotomy of empire and nation in two ways. First, Hammer and Itzigsohn argue that a decolonial reconstitution of sociology must take place through an inquiry embedded in the history of Atlantic imperialism since it produced the global forms of racism and colonialism that have most dominantly structured sociology and the modern world. Second, Hammer and Itzigsohn focus on the silences and occlusions of anticolonial thought that occurred within that dominant framework. They write that "In many ways, this call to grapple with colonial modernity can build on important advances made in Atlantic History" (ibid., 25). They hone in on the ahistorical analytical separation of the global idea of nationhood from Atlantic imperial relations and suggest a new foundation based on anticolonial thought

directed against the occlusions created by those relations.

However, in their call to focus on what they see as the "concrete historical" instead of the universalized theory, the problems and alternatives of the history of historiography itself are not featured. In other words, the methodological choice of historical frameworks of analysis is left by Hammer and Itzigsohn at the mercy of existing global power relations, that they themselves recognize and argue to stem mainly from Atlantic imperialism. They give good reasons for their choice of historical context, yet they do not discuss that choice in relation to other historically existing options, not to mention the relationality and co-constitutiveness of their Atlantic choice with other options.

This omission then runs the risk of undermining their initial objective of recognizing and analyzing colonialism central to both historical processes, as well as the analytical and conceptual categories with which we approach them. Yet, one of course must begin from somewhere and the usual suspect is a good intuitive starting point. However, a more methodological and systematic reflection concerning our choice between historical frameworks is more beneficial for efforts to formulate more decolonial approaches.

Critique from a Borderland Peripheries' Perspective

The empire and nation framework overlooks the type of anticolonial nationalism witnessed in Eastern Europe and Eurasia before 1919, while it does appropriate the region after 1919 (see Go & Watson 2019). As such, it follows closely the diffusion of political structures and historiographical interpretations built upon on the politics offered in 1917 through 1919 by Wilson and the US. This closeness occludes many Eastern European peripheral developments before their subsumption under nation-state politics. Under empire, they do not count as anticolonial, as independent, they equally disappear since independence is achieved. This projects onto nation-states what historical sociologist Fatma Müge Göcek has called the ontology of drawing "strict official and unofficial lines between the European colonizer and the non-European colonized" (2013, 73). This logic, according to Göcek (ibid.), does not hold for the Ottoman Empire and its peers, such as the Habsburg and Russian empires, which tend to cut across this strict divide.

Sociologically, we should be able to analyze anti-imperial struggles in these cases too, especially "in order to recover the nature of their resistance to or negotiation with the West on the one side and the dynamics of the local processes independent of the West on the other" (ibid., 77). The risk is that we perpetually follow the histories of Western imperial rule, rather than intersect them from a different perspective. We anachronically map cases "onto the empire[s] binarisms introduced much later by European colonial rule" (ibid., 86).

In this sense, the domination of Western imperialism, especially as sociology's own West-centric historical standpoint, has also been a reason for the successes of the empire and nation framework built on Atlantic intra-imperial rule. One could simplify it as a critique from within. But in that success is the hidden fact that it "privileges the vantage point and ensuing narrative of the Western European and later American hegemony in approaching the analysis of power inequalities" (ibid.), even when it aims to undermine that hegemony. Because the focus has remained within the intra-imperial relations of Atlantic-centric imperial states, it has prompted some historical sociologists to call for work delinking from those theories and thereby the original Eurocentric canon's standpoint (Alatas 2007; Bhambra 2007; Rodriquez et al. 2013; Göcek 2013; 2016; Mignolo

2008; Tlostanova 2007). One way to contribute to this project is to make the methodological choice between different frameworks for historical forces an explicit part of our research design.

In a discussion around these often-occluded peripheral histories, historian Timothy Snyder points out that "one way to write European or global history, after all, is to begin from a region such as the Balkans, not only where the grander levels of historical causality were understood and manipulated, but also where important concepts – the nation-state and anticolonialism – were invented" (Snyder 2018, 9). By occluding other historical diagnoses of the problem of comparison between metropole and periphery, the empire and nation framework also hides from sight ways to analyze its own historical contingency: "it is possible to see European history not just as a competition between nations and empires but as a field of projects of integration and disintegration – of course, integration from one perspective means disintegration from another" (ibid., 3).

We can then ask, what is the extent of historical alternatives made visible through the empire and nation framework? An alternative perspective, such as the one derived from the historical experience of the Eurasian borderlands, that I will outline next, does not claim to provide universally better answers. It is a different framework that highlights a different set of power relations. It specifically addresses and speaks to historical connections, or shared denominators, through the politics of pre-1919 Eastern European borderlands. It is focused on analyzing the entanglements of intra- and inter-imperial relations globally, as well as their continuity following 20th century national self-determination and anticolonial nationalism. Then, we can also better analyze the founding historical moment of the empire and nation framework and provide a critique not just from within but also from without.

Intra- and Inter-Imperial Research Framework

At the borderland peripheries of Eastern Europe, "to many contemporaries, the nation did not necessarily define itself in opposition to empire" (Adelman 2008, 320). Up until the First World War, the lands from Finland to the Peloponnisos formed a borderland of four contiguous empires, the Ottoman, Russian, Habsburg, and German. After the First World War, these borderlands were the reason for the reformulation of sovereign statehood on the bases of national self-determination by the Paris Peace Conference.

The coloniality of this restructuring, sometimes called the Wilsonian moment, has been extensively discussed (see, e.g. Manela 2007; Mazower 2009; 2012; Weitz 2015). Yet, sociology is very entangled with the framework of empire and nation as drivers of history that this form of political sovereignty imposed[5] (see, e.g. Kumar 2010; Li & Hicks 2016; Wimmer & Feinstein 2010; Wimmer & Min 2006). Especially so regarding the disciplinary historical account propelled forward based on the problematizations and questions we derive from the relation of nation and empire in thinking about states and sovereignty (Bhambra 2016; Steinmetz 2017).

In contrast, the borderlands from Finland to the Peloponnisos took various stances towards imperial politics and sovereignty and attempted to navigate them not only through resistance but also through transformation. For example, we can detect concerted efforts to mobilize inter-imperial struggles in intra-imperial politics or to mobilize intra-imperial struggles for inter-imperial politics, cutting at will across empire and nation divides.

5 Both the Wilsonian and Leninist visions focused on the conflict and contradictions between nation and empire in opposition to some of their socialist and liberal rivals.

Both of these two positions mobilize politics through the interconnections and contradictions that the politics of sovereign empires and their non-sovereign peripheries and colonies create. Politics that were sensitive to the changing configurations of intra- and inter-imperial struggles.

For example, in the war in Ukraine today, supported by authoritarian leaders elsewhere Russia puts forth historical propaganda that sees Ukraine as an intra-imperial question of Russian politics, whereas many in the West portray the conflict as an inter-imperial struggle between democratic and authoritarian blocs. A proper analysis then cannot fall victim to either political project but needs to include both of these historical impositions and consider their relation, i.e., the intra- to inter-imperial configurations. This borderlands framework does not separate empire from another and delineate intra-imperial politics from one another. These borderlands were "rooted in an awareness of living on the margins where one state ends and another begins" (Bartov & Weitz 2013, 8).

Intra- to Inter-Imperial Relations in the Balkans

In the 19th century, Balkan states pioneered the projection of domestic social policy into the realm of empires. "Their undertakings showed the limits of Great Power's power and facilitated small states' entry into the international system as forces with remarkable gravity" (Case 2018, 110). They projected intra-imperial considerations successfully onto the inter-imperial stage. As historian Holly Case discusses, here, "national relations" could not be contained within borders (ibid., 114). Through low-level activities the newly independent states of the Balkans inserted their national policies into the sphere of sovereign empires. Case shows that we encounter a lively and dynamic sphere of innovation and "new kind of high-stakes diplomacy in the form of social policy" that has remained "grossly underappreciated" for its "transformative role at the level of the European state system" (ibid., 117).

In the borderlands, states were the opposite of how a state was understood in Europe, Case suggests: The idea of Greece, was "projected from abroad by those leveling themselves Greeks, and by others" and similar institutional developments were true of Serbia (ibid., 119). The peripheral nation was built on and leveraged, or "agentified," through inter-imperial connections. This transformation of state dynamics into a joint domestic and international, or intra- and inter-imperial affair, faded "the distinction between foreign policy strategy and domestic social policy" and, from a traditional perspective, turned "the state inside out and outside" (ibid., 126).

In post-WWI Albania, the local resistance to elites was brushed aside in favor of nationalism that occluded a more complex and intra- to inter-imperially mediated experience (Blumi 2011, xvi–xvii). This forgotten history includes, among other things, imperial soldiers and elites joining with local nationals in the peripheries against imperial rule. Based on these relations historian Isa Blumi suggests, that rather than national division and strife in the face of empire, "there may be a new set of analytical principles for us to develop" (ibid., 3).

Blumi recounts the story of Albanian national movements working together with others in favor of the empire not against it and in order to reform, not to dismantle, to reorganize power relations around and across the empire and nation divide, not to confirm or deepen the divide. This was a case of politics as imperial subjects first, and national second, Blumi describes. The imperial subjects "navigated their complex worlds by using different strategies and articulations of group solidarity at different times," taking advantage of

the entanglements and diversity arising from the relations of metropoles and peripheries (ibid., 5).

In nearby Bosnia Herzegovina, the story was similar and cut across the Ottoman and Habsburg realms. Historian Amzi-Erdogdular argues that Muslim intellectuals there envisioned not only an alternative to national modernity's narrative, but also an alternative to the contemporaneous understanding of modernity in imperial Ottoman and Habsburg visions that cut across "intellectual currents extending across southeastern Europe and the Middle East," connections that enabled them "to envision themselves as part of overlapping global communities of Muslims, Slavs, and citizens of the "civilized" world" (Amzi-Erdogdular 2017, 912, 938).

Importantly, analytically, this calls for a focus that places the intellectual environment "at the intersection of imperial and national, as well as European, Ottoman, Balkan, and Muslim intellectual trajectories, which are often considered separate and even contradictory" (ibid., 938). Thus, Amzi-Erdogdular sums up the importance of seeing intra- to inter-imperial entanglements for peripheral actors rather than opposing them: "These alternative modernities developed out of intellectuals utilizing the potentials of their intersecting but delineated environments" (ibid., 938–939).

These historical struggles are occluded by a focus on the resistance or domination arising from the historical forces identified by the empire and nation framework. In a recent article, we show how this holds for post-Ottoman Turkey and emphasize the importance of an inter-imperial perspective for understanding the making of post-WWI nationalism (Bavbek & Korhonen 2024). Similarly, considering Transylvania, Anca Parvulescu and Manuela Boatca (2023) write that a more inter-imperial approach means the retrieval of histories and experiences of colonial and imperial situations that have been overlooked and reinscribing them into social theory.

From the Balkans to the Grand Duchy of Finland

At the other end of the borderlands, the Grand Duchy of Finland championed democratization to bolster its non-sovereign intra-imperial position. Considering the Russian Empire and the events leading to its dissolution, Ilya Gerasimov (2017, 25) has pointed out the "conspicuous invisibility of "empire" in the political imaginary of all the parties involved," highlighting the incongruence between our analytical concepts of empire with the perceptions of historical actors and the formal norms and institutions that existed.

Congruent with the case of the Grand Duchy of Finland of the Russian Empire, Gerasimov points to the multiple entanglements between national and imperial perspectives and their different manifestations, depending on the particular dynamics of intra- and inter-imperial relations. These dynamics reinforced each other, and the successful mobilization of colonial and peripheral actors meant a consolidation of their projects as imperial projects: "It was the very entangled nature of their collective identification that unwittingly reinforced the fundamental imperial situation, despite the determination to do away with empire as an ideology or a socioeconomic structure" (ibid., 36–37).

In the Grand Duchy, resistance took place through the imperial situation. In a bid to leverage inter-imperial dynamics for their intra-imperial position, Finns democratized the country. In this manner, the Russian imperial situation produced the most democratic state in the world in 1906. In other words, it produced national recognition through a democratic agency within the empire,

instead of democracy through the recognition of national independence. The sociology of democracy has been hard-pressed to recognize this case due to its reliance on the empire and nation framework (Korhonen 2019).

An early 20th century analysis of Finland, by the German legal scholar Wolf Baron von der Osten-Sacken (1912), reveals a situation similarly complicated as that in the Balkans. Looking at the Grand Duchy of Finland, Osten-Sacken argues that political communities now exist that, though legally dependent on (imperial) States, exercise functions "which otherwise belong only to the [imperial] States and to no other combinations" (ibid., 23). Osten-Sacken argues against the legal assumption of a necessary connection between statehood and sovereignty, and especially against a rigid, non-flexible conception of sovereignty. "The political relations of to-day have already far outgrown the narrow bounds, which had been set to the conception of a State by the intransigent theory of sovereignty" (ibid., 23). If we were to take Osten-Sacken's thinking as our yardstick, then the post-1917–1919 ideas of self-determination would seem to have regressed back to the narrow bounds of statehood's "intransigent sovereignty."

Osten-Sacken suggests that Finland can be considered an "under-state" or a by-state that is subject to a chief State (ibid., 106). Osten-Sacken further describes the general situation of places like Finland in the world as "intermediate semi-political formations" dependent on suzerain States (ibid., 109). "The public life of Finland is almost completely separated from that of Russia, and is almost exclusively regulated and conducted by the local authorities. All this, however, does not happen in consequence of Finland's own powers" (ibid., 115).

In 1906, the Grand Duchy had adopted universal suffrage and proceeded to elect nineteen female parliamentarians in 1907. Unlike the issues of representation in some other imperial contexts, Finns dreaded sending their representatives to the imperial Duma, where seats were reserved for them but never filled. Democratization and universal suffrage were forms of consolidating Finland's position within the global inter-imperial formation in direct relation to its intra-imperial status with Russia. Arguments for non-participation in the Duma and for the importance of Finland's own democratic politics were embedded and entangled with arguments about Finland as a part of the empire, but qualitatively different from the position of the metropole, as Osten-Sacken acutely observed.

Non-sovereign peripheral democracy promoted autonomous development and capacities. The recognition of subordination as the governing condition of democratization portrayed democracy as the equalization and eradication of hierarchies. This was an ingenious reversed mobilization of the logic of Western national democracy as the right of the most developed and proof of their sovereign position over others. In the Grand Duchy, democracy did not serve to legitimize the existing sovereignty, but to assert a right for autonomy within sovereignty.

Occlusions Revealed by the Intra- and Inter-Imperial Framework

At the eastern borderlands, the driving "forces of imperialism," as Go and Edwards (2019) put it, were not recognized as nation and empire. That was not the unifying framework that allowed for an understanding of the metropole and periphery as co-constituted. From the standpoint of Finland to the Peloponnisos, nation and empire were rather subject to and variously entwined with forces of imperialism. There, cutting across the four empires, the dynamics of inter-imperial against intra-imperial relations defined power, coloniality, and opportunity.

Intra-imperial relations and coalitions could combine with inter-imperial sources of power and vice versa. Inter-imperial relations could be mobilized for intra-imperial ambitions. What is distinct and "thus helpful to rethinking the entire question of modernity at large, is just how extraordinarily contentious and fluid the process was," Blumi (2011, 14) suggests and points out that the perpetual quest for local, regional, and transregional power gravitated around constituencies that were constantly adjusting to local factors". These relations are often misinterpreted from the perspective of nation and empire as overly complex, chaotic and irrational, as supposedly backwards, not modern. Yet, what could be more modern than to strive for full women's suffrage before anyone else despite being the poorest state in Europe and part of an autocratic empire, as Finland did. In the borderlands, politics and methods of self-orientation were developed that can better explain "both domestic forms of government [...] and international relations as the "Great Powers" tried to dictate the affairs of the region" (ibid., 20).

If we think of this as a difference of research programs, then, as Göcek (2016) points out, scholars often "prioritize the deconstruction of such [Western] hegemony rather than engaging, at the same time, the production of alternate sources of knowledge, meaning and eventually power". The awareness of these differences, and active engagement in scrutinizing them and developing a variety of alternatives in reference to historical forces, can give autonomy to problems and empirical connections that would seem questionable or impossible to address in reference to only one particular historical research framework in sociology.

This focus moves away from the sharpness of direct critique and towards the making and maintenance of several sources of critique that employ "locally generated sociological tools to survey what actually transpires on the ground" (Göcek 2013, 83). My alternative framework described here is formulated with this type of motivations, but moving beyond it in arguing for more methodological justifications in choosing and employing frameworks for historical meaning and conceptualizations.

We should recognize and analyze the different uses and consequences of alternative frameworks, especially when introducing non-Western cases into a sociological analysis to avoid "terms that were once again inherently set by the Western European experience of modernity" (ibid., 82). In this regard, as Walter Mignolo (2011) suggests, since historically coloniality has been the driver of Western modernization, decoloniality is not a mode of critique or replacement of that mode, but the making clear of alternatives. It requires the enunciation of ways of knowing that are not constructed just through the interrelatedness of Western modernity and coloniality (ibid.).

One strategy is to think about how the alternative frameworks of thought negotiated the impact of Western hegemony. Thus, we can find, for example, Finnish political actors rethinking their democratic gains in the process of drifting towards Wilsonian independent nation-statehood despite the American and British empires initially denying their right to national independence and democracy based on the racial arguments of inferiority and deficiency (Korhonen 2019). One of the points is to avoid "the traditional emphasis on the naturalized power of the imperial center at the expense of the periphery" (Göcek 2013, 90) and not just the periphery vis-à-vis the center, but the periphery as an autonomous agent. Where this paper moves beyond Göcek's call for considering alternative histories, is in suggesting that by making the choice between one or the other framework an explicit and transparent choice in the research design, can contribute towards a more decolonial sociology in general.

In Conclusion: Towards a Globally Pluralist Sociology

Historical research frameworks determine what we consider as meaningful connections and points of interest for sociological questions and empirical analyses. They determine which developments are seen as having more explanatory power over others. However, the juxtaposition of two research frameworks here – especially around the making of 20th century nationalism, sovereignty and the transition from empires – shows that no one historical research framework can be considered sufficient. Different frameworks offer different perspectives and fit certain cases or societal dynamics better. Similarly, they fail at explaining others and often occlude from our sight certain processes altogether.

A globally pluralist sociology should explore the making of modernity from the perspective of imperial relations' role in modernization processes also of the Eurasian empires, as well as other historical frameworks of the "forces of imperialism." Traditionally depicted as more or less inconsequential, these alternative views on historical change and global politics were not only different from their Western variant, but also shaped the making of what has since been depicted as the universal, or Atlantic forms of modernization and imperialism. Sociology's methodological shortcoming in explicitly explaining our choice of historical research frameworks has set Eurasian processes and relations outside the purview of even some of the most cutting-edge historical, political, and global sociology.

Concrete historical contexts always also include changing the understandings of historical forces and connections in themselves. A more methodological approach towards choosing historical research frameworks will better account for this, both in terms of the empirics we use, as well as in terms of our own self-reflexivity as researchers operating within a specific historical context.

We could state that such alternative historical dynamics are unimportant because different peripheral and borderlands political and historical forces were marginal anyway at the time, and became even more marginal after the First World War. We could say that these other historical narratives and pathways are, in the end, incidental to the mainstream story of Atlantic modernity because they were extinguished or absorbed by it.

However, to reach this conclusion is profoundly wrong on both empirical and theoretical levels. Recent developments in global and transnational history warn against the methodological conflation of political and historical imaginaries of diffusion – such as the problematic idea of the slow spread of the capitalist world-system from the Atlantic to the rest of the world – with the historical processes and conditions that make such entanglements possible (Conrad 2017; Korhonen 2022b). What does make sense, is to transparently connect any given study or theory with the particular choice of a historical research framework with which we operate, and to reflect upon the consequences of that choice vis-à-vis other options, thus giving proper methodological justification to our choices.

Considering these options transparently not only tells us a story of different types of colonial and imperial relations, but a story of the relations and contestations on which they were based, that were co-constitutive and that enabled other historical frameworks, including the empire and nation one. And while we may accept sociology's focus on the dominant form of modernization, we should not let a particular historical interpretation, i.e., the politics of the history of Atlantic colonialism's narrative, be it dominant or not, define our historical epistemology by default. Especially if we

seek to understand its possible transformations in the future.

If democracy, for example, is today connected with nation-states, both empirically and in the sociological imagination, we should not assume that non-sovereign democracy, like in the Grand Duchy of Finland, could not or does not matter for analysis, no matter how marginal it may be as a political force today. And this is more than an argument for recognizing a plurality of pre-WW1 imperial relations. It is about explaining, within an inclusive theoretical frame, both a plurality and then a subsequent hegemony of Atlantic modernity. It means "to acknowledge from the outset that addressing particular sets of connections leads to particular understandings which are put in question through choosing other sets of connections" (Bhambra 2014, 5). A second premise is that these connections are not accidental or contingent but based on arguments and understandings "for why certain connections were initially chosen and why choosing others could lead to" different and sometimes "more adequate explanations" (ibid., 5).

In the case of the alternative example offered here, we see that in the Balkans, the many localized groups and actors who had relied politically on intra- to inter-imperial connections did not "survive the fall of the Ottoman Empire" and "in the process, lost their voice (for the rest of the world no longer had to engage them) and ultimately their role in history" (Blumi 2011, 176). In Finland, the foundational aspect of democratization was forgotten under national independence, and it took, for example, women's representation in the parliament half a century to recover from the shock that came from the imposition of sovereign nation-statehood to democratic politics.

Retrospectively, "the criteria for acknowledging what constituted a historical force have been established by the paradigm of the nation-state" (ibid., 178). Whereas, at the borderlands, "the entangled character of partisan interests explains why peripheral actors may be interested in restoring the empire's status quo even more than the metropole (Gerasimov 2017, 38), and why the "narratives about transitions from colonies to nations" should not necessarily follow "conventional accounts of redemptive struggles of oppressed nations seeking liberty" (Adelman 2008, 337).

In other words, "the empirical focus of critical studies of regional knowledge" has been on the Global Atlantic, which thereby fails to produce "a global analysis of the problem of global knowledge" (Krause 2021, 114). For sociology concerned both with the history of the theories and concepts of its knowledge production, as well as with the "concrete" histories of colonialism, and in particular, the relation between these two aspects, it would be crucial to consider both histories and theories of history also from non-Atlantic perspectives, whose occlusion has been an integral part of the rise of the historical influence of Atlantic imperial and colonial politics. To do so, we must be explicit about our choices of historical research frameworks as part of the research design and methodological justifications.

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