

Solving Empire

Introduction by Monica Prasad, Northwestern University



Two sets of discussions have emerged in recent sociology. Several comparative historical scholars, in sociology as well as neighboring disciplines, have shown how legacies of empire, colonialism, and settler colonialism are central to the structuring of contemporary societies (Go 2008, 2011, 2013; Immerwahr 2016, 2019; Quisumbing King 2019). At the same time, other sociologists have wondered whether sociology can solve, not just describe, social problems (Watts 2017, DiPrete and Fox-Williams 2021, Prasad 2021).

On October 15, 2021, the Problem-Solving Sociology Workshop and the Comparative Historical Social Science Workshop at Northwestern University held an event on “Solving Empire” to bring these two developments within the discipline into dialogue. Julian Go, Daniel Immerwahr, and Katrina Quisumbing King were asked to respond to this prompt: “does sociology have a role to play in addressing the legacies of

empire? Is description enough, or should scholars explicitly ask how these imperial legacies can be overcome? Is changing society too dangerous a prospect, and if so then how should we think about emancipation?”

Three graduate students from the Northwestern Sociology Department, Yannick Coenders, Pepe Roswally, and Luna Vincent, then responded to the panelists’ comments.

Solving Empire?

Julian Go

University of Chicago

Can empire be “solved”? My intuition is that it is impossible to solve empire. I say this for various reasons. First, empire is so embedded in our lives that it doesn’t constitute a singular “problem.” Empire is a transnational constitutive system; a formation of power and relations that has shaped and continues to shape nearly everything, from global economic inequality to the weak capacities of postcolonial states to

domestic race relations to even the very idea of “race” itself. The historical legacies and effects of empire are everywhere. This is, after all, one of the points of postcolonial thought: to acknowledge the constitutive nature of empire as it has existed in the past and as it persists into the present. And it means that “solving empire” is probably not the best way to think about it. I recognize the term has rhetorical value. But my point is that empire needs to be understood for its vast complexity; its long-ranging layered effects and legacies. Empire does not pose itself to use as a single “problem.” It is a formation of multiplicities. The so-called refugee problem or migration problem: these are not disconnected from the logics of informal imperialism or histories of colonialism. The question of critical race theory in schools, or monuments and statues, whether in the US or in England – such as the Rhodes statue – these are all about empire and its legacies. And here we are on the Northwestern campus on the traditional homelands of the people of the Council of Three Fires, the Ojibwe, Potawatomi, and Odawa nations, among others. This is a legacy of empire too. We can’t even *talk* about solving empire without reproducing it.

The second difficulty is this: the very subject position of the authoritative paternalistic knower capable of solving society’s problems has itself been, if not a product of, at least firmly tethered to the imperial episteme; intimately connected to empire itself. This is another example of empire’s far reaching and deep effects: our system of sociological knowledge was born as a mode of thought in, of and for empire. The idea of the ‘social’ as a space of action and determination between the religious/spiritual realm and the biological realm first emerged in the nineteenth century and first resonated with European white male elites in imperial metropolises because it offered a way of explaining and hopefully “solving” the so-called “problems” of social disorder, revolution, workers’ uprisings, recalcitrant women, and, yes, those teeming masses of brown, black and

yellow people in Europe’s colonies who needed to be regulated, managed if not repressed.

I have written about this elsewhere, and about how American sociology in particular was born in, of and for empire. The early US sociologists, many of them located in my own institution – the University of Chicago – spent much of their time supporting US imperialism, not least as a possible solution to the so-called ‘race problem’ that was for them not only domestic but also global. It is a fundamental misconception that the early US sociologists were abstract theorizers only. To the contrary, they dived deeply into issues of imperial and colonial administration in a concerted effort with other rising disciplines at the time to “solve” empire.

Sociology thus emerged in Europe and in the US as indeed a problem-solving discipline - but it was one with an imperial subjectivity shaped by the imperial episteme. The founders of social science were white male metropolitans (some of whom were actual colonial administrators) studying revolting mobs and crowds, thereby producing our present-day crowd control theories, so as to best figure out how colonial states can maintain white supremacy – or what was simply called at the time (and was later called by Parsonian sociology) “social order” or “social stability.” These were men in the US desperately trying to make sociology relevant by figuring out how to best “solve” the so-called “Negro Problem” (which meant for them “assimilation” or keeping African Americans separate but orderly). These were men contemplating how the Filipino was similar to or different from the “Malay” or “Indo-Malay” so that they could better know how to rule them. These were men seeking ways to intervene into colonial and imperial policy, not to reject it but to make it “better” – viz., to make it best serve the interests of the imperial metropole.

In this sense, the idea of the objective problem-solver, full of hubris, who sits atop or somehow outside the world, views its problems, and seeks to solve them through policies was not only a

part of imperialism; it was – and to a certain degree still is – an expression of empire’s subjectivity, a manifestation of the imperial episteme and its will to know in order to control. So for these reasons, I find this prompt about “solving empire” exceedingly difficult to address.

All of that said, I don’t want to take the easy way out and just throw up my hands. So let me here lay down some thoughts for how, if we are to take on this task of solving empire, we might begin to approach it. And here I have two thoughts.

First, we must recall that there has always been an alternative tradition in sociology to the imperial and colonialist one I’ve referred to. In the US, there was DuBois and Jane Addams, among others, who did not seek to sit on high and objectively solve problems, but rather to explore problems from the ground-up; to see the world through the eyes of the victims of empire rather than the eyes of the colonial administrator. These are the traditions discussed by ASA Presidents Mary Romero and Aldon Morris in their recent Presidential addresses; I find it a shame and a loss for sociology that such traditions too easily get dismissed by critics as unserious unscientific ‘social justice’ sociology, identity politics or the sociology of complainers (sometimes, what seems like ‘complaint sociology’ is really just a sociology that is willing to acknowledge and describe the full depth of systems of power and see social issues as products of those systems, thereby revealing that the only way to solve problems is to abolish the systems that produce them). I think that, when it comes to solving social problems, we still have much to learn from these traditions; traditions that recognize that knowledge is not only the domain of the university professional but also the domain of subaltern subjects offering subjugated knowledges that the expert derides as inferior.

I don’t want to be an epistemic relativist about this; I do believe in rigorous “scientific” methods. But I also think we might learn as much

if not more from the knowledge and experiences of subjugated populations - as a starting point for “solving problems” - than we do from the expert-on-high.

I also include here anticolonial and postcolonial thought as part of those traditions, which leads to my second and final point. It has to do with “description” as a mode of sociological analysis for addressing problems.

I certainly agree with Professor Prasad that causal explanation is one part of solving problems. I myself have adopted explanation as a crucial part of sociological analysis, and I agree completely that addressing any problems requires a specification of “causes.” But I don’t agree with the implication one might get from this; that is that “description” is of lesser value, or that it isn’t also a form of explanation. The thing we call “description,” I submit, often allows us to see things that conventional causal explanation does not. And it is description that allows us to do what causal explanation might not be able to do: warn us of pernicious effects, and even alert us to “problems” to which we might have been blind amidst our eager efforts to solve a problem we think we already know.

One example comes from my experiences in studying and researching American empire. It all began with my dissertation in 2000, which was on the US colonial empire in Puerto Rico and the Philippines. This was a very difficult project for me. It was a time when historical sociology was so firmly Eurocentric and methodologically-nationalist that it had barely noticed that empires were things. Many historians at the time too still operated from the assumption of American exceptionalism, and vehemently rejected any notion that the US is or ever was an empire (they also worked from the asociological and frankly weird assumption that if political actors don’t *intend* to create an empire or call what they’ve created an “empire”, it’s not an empire).

One of the things this meant for me was that graduate school was tough. Graduate school is

lonely enough. Studying American empire as a grad student in the late 1990s was even lonelier. I therefore spent a lot of time at the University of Wisconsin where there were important historians of Puerto Rico and the Philippines. Because they were historians of Puerto Rico and the Philippines, they of course *already knew* that the US is and has been an empire.

This also meant that I had to spend a lot of my time “proving” to my fellow social scientists that the US is and has been an empire. When I did my job talks, for example, I unfortunately could not get into the nitty-gritty of my examination of the dynamics of colonial meaning-making in Puerto Rico and the Philippines because most of the questions I got were about whether or not the US was “really” an empire. In other words, most people, including historians and American political scientists, did not even recognize the “problem” of American empire, because they could not *see* American empire at all. And ‘proving’ to them that American empire is a thing and that it is connected to problems meant *description*. Description, albeit informed by concepts and theories of empire, was thus crucial for even beginning to identify something called “American empire,” much less something that created “problems” to be solved.

Let me give another example, after which I promise I will conclude. Here I also want to discuss the importance of description, but I want to discuss the importance of describing not American empire specifically but something more broadly: *the connectedness of being*.

You all know that in the 1970s and 1980s a big part of the feminist movement in the US was aimed at solving women’s “problems.” And to solve some of those problems, no small part of the feminist movement sought policies and programs in the corporate sphere that would give them economic independence. Rightfully, these feminists pushed for liberation from the confines of the home and domestic labor (the domestic labor that their husbands, probably well-meaning but ultimately clueless, refused to do). Feminists

wanted freedom. And one part of that meant freedom from domestic labor.

Black feminists of course pointed out how “white” this movement was: black women had been in the workforce for centuries, and they knew that paid work is not necessarily liberatory. But another movement offered new descriptions that highlighted the possibly pernicious effects of this movement to escape domestic labor. This was the movement of postcolonial feminists coming from the perspective of the global south; the inheritors of the anticolonial tradition. Their critique highlighted how white women’s liberation in the US was not untethered from the exploitation and oppression of women in and from postcolonial societies. For as women moved into the workforce, husbands still refused to do domestic labor, and so who was to step up and do the domestic labor instead? And who was *cheap* enough to make the arrangement profitable for families? You all know the answer by now: brown, black and yellow women, most of them from the former colonies of the very metropolises wherein women’s “liberation” was to occur.

What postcolonial feminists did, therefore, was *describe*, and what they did in particular was describe the *connections* that empire generates; the connections between the women’s movement “here” and the unequal conditions in the ex-colonies over “there” that made the exploitation of brown, black and yellow women’s domestic labor possible and indeed desirable. This is what postcolonial thought does, after all, or at least one of the things it does: it illuminates the sprawling connections between metropole and colony, colonized and colonizer, the domestic and the foreign. It stresses the interconnectedness of power relations and the relationality, extending across time and space, of our social practices. And by these kinds of *descriptions*, postcolonial feminists were able to pinpoint a new “problem” – the exploitation of postcolonial labor – that many in the metropole did not even know about or see, much less know

or see how their own movements were part of the problem and contributing to it.

In short, *description* is crucial; if only to reveal what is too often overlooked: our connectedness.

I think sketching the connectedness of being is a vital part of the sociological imagination, if not definitive of it. I'm also suggesting here that it is one way in which we must think about something like "solving empire." The issue arises when sociology dismisses description or does not take it seriously enough. In our desperate attempt to scientize our knowledge and narrow our task to identifying so-called causal variables as we try to solve problems we think we fully understand already, we end up controlling for variables and ignoring the variables we so eagerly "controlled" for. Yet often those variables are important causes; often they are necessary conditions of outcomes and investigating them is what can lead us to see previously unseen connections around the globe. Sometimes, causal explanation is good. But sometimes it is bad, blinding us to the things that description can illuminate and which are critical for causal explanation anyway.

And who has been *better* about description and illuminating the connections that empire has wrought? The answer is plain: anticolonial, antimperial thinkers whose work has largely been ignored by sociology. After all, it was postcolonial feminists working in the humanistic tradition or working *in* and *from* the colonial world who sketched how women's liberation in the metropole was facilitated by colonial exploitation. (Similarly, it was not Arlie Hochschild who discovered the "care chain" of migration; it took her student, Rhacel Parreñas, a woman of color from one of America's former colonies, the Philippines, to show it to her, describe it to her, help her see it).

In sum and to conclude, if we do want sociology to solve problems of empire, we need to start with descriptions that allow us to better see the connectedness of being. And for that, I submit

we might do well to look beyond the confines of traditional sociology, with its blinders of methodological nationalism, its ignorance of imperial relations, and its dismissal of thinkers who don't engage with Parsons or Bourdieu. For 'solving' empire, we might fare best to look to anticolonial and postcolonial thinkers; those thinkers rooted in the subjugated knowledges of peoples who have struggled for centuries against empire. For thinking about "solving empire," who better to turn to than those thinkers?

A Puzzle or a Power Struggle: What Type of Problem is Empire?

Daniel Immerwahr

Northwestern University

The question is whether the social sciences should solve, rather than just describe, social problems. And whether, in particular, we should solve the problem of empire rather than merely complaining about it.

Karl Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* ends with a famous line: "Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it." I remember first reading that, as an aspiring intellectual, and feeling the weight of its accusation. It suggests that, by dealing in description, we intellectuals are evading a more important task. Cue, in my young mind, stereotyped visions of scatterbrained and chalk-dusted professors debating Lacan while an insurrection is taking place in the streets.

And I've felt the weight of that accusation more recently. I spent years working on a book about empire, but I did so really as a scholar, not as an activist. It was only after the book came out that I got closer to people working on similar issues outside of academia. They pulled me into their orbit somewhat, and as they did it became clear to me how unprepared I was to enter the realm of policymaking. I'd studied the U.S. empire for years without focusing on making recommendations. It's not as if academics are incapable of such things; there are many among us who excel at crafting policies, weighing the

evidence for their efficacy, and advising decisionmakers on their implementation. It's just that scholars of empire don't tend to do those things—certainly I don't. Still, maybe we should. "Let's stop grumbling about empire and solve it," would be the thinking.

It's tempting, but I have hesitations about that model, which assumes a known, agreed-on problem with an unknown solution. When you're facing that sort of puzzle, it makes good sense to assemble a team of researchers to, say, develop a vaccine for a virus. If the research succeeds, you get a cure for the malady, which you can then bring to the attention of the relevant authorities. The underlying assumption there is that this is a problem that people in power want to see solved. And, when it comes to empire, I'm not sure that they do.

I'd like to sketch for you my understanding of what kind of a problem empire is, because I think that has serious implications for how we should address it. *Empire* can be a nebulous concept. Canonically, it refers to a country with colonies. By that narrow definition, empire is a retreating problem worldwide, because the number of people living in colonies is far smaller than it used to be (though the United States maintains five inhabited territories with 3.5 million inhabitants!). But if, like many scholars, you accept a broader definition, perhaps thinking of empire as an enforced international hierarchy in which some countries exert commanding power over others (and there are other, still broader definitions), empire remains very much with us.

Empire, in this broader understanding, is visible most of all in the outside global power of the United States. It's not an accident that one country has the world's largest armed forces, possesses more overseas bases than all other countries combined, has the headquarters of global governance institutions on its soil, secures worldwide adoption for its language, sees its currency used worldwide, and has its norms and standards taken up everywhere. It is, the "indispensable nation," as Bill Clinton, Barack

Obama, and Joe Biden have all put it—a polite term for the United States' centrality within the world system.

Polite terms abound. The e-word, which is the less polite way of saying it, is virtually taboo among U.S. leaders, and the country's five inhabited territories are something of an embarrassing subject. Instead, politicians speak of "American leadership" or "American exceptionalism," invoking the unique fitness of the United States to superintend world affairs (or, as they more commonly put it, maintain global "security"). Whatever name you want to call it, there is a bipartisan consensus within the policy elite around the notion that there should be an international hierarchy with Washington atop it.

Such are the unshakeable assumptions of "the Blob," as Barack Obama's aide Ben Rhodes referred to the decisionmakers of U.S. foreign policy. Among that set, there are real and important disagreements—such as about whether the United States should have invaded Iraq or left Afghanistan. Within the Beltway you'll find hawks and doves. But what you won't find in that aviary is anyone suggesting that the United States should sit anywhere but at "the head of the table," as Joe Biden has repeatedly put it.

It's understandable that the Blob would not want to see the United States relinquish its global position in support of a more level international playing field. In fact, its members have whatever the political equivalent of a fiduciary responsibility is to *prevent* that from happening, because global equality would by definition mean a loss of U.S. power. Empire for them is thus not a "problem" but a presupposition. A feature, not a bug.

And that makes talk of "solving" it sound, to my ears, not quite right. That language suits afflictions where everyone agrees that there's a problem but no one knows the solution. For

empire, the opposite is almost true: we know the solution, we just can't agree that it's a problem.

Empire isn't the only problem of this sort. There is a whole class of issues where just acknowledging the problem is halfway there to identifying a solution. Mass incarceration? Stop locking so many people up. Firearms everywhere? Make guns harder to acquire and own. Economic inequality? Tax the rich, distribute the revenues.

I don't mean to minimize these problems by suggesting that their solutions are straightforward. Rather, I want to distinguish them from puzzles like developing a vaccine for COVID-19. Addressing mass incarceration is indeed difficult, it's just that what's difficult isn't finding a solution. It's difficult, for those who regard it as a problem, because it's a power struggle. Puzzles are problems we don't know how to solve. Power struggles crop up where we don't agree on whether they *should* be solved.

Of course, I'm naming ideal types and thus trucking in caricature. And, of course, even for problems where the solution seems apparent, there are second- and third-order problems we'll need to puzzle out. For gun control, we might ask the way to win legislators or voters over, or whether it's better to prohibit firearm sales or restrict ownership. Yet despite all this, I think we can still meaningfully distinguish puzzles from power struggles, and categorize empire as the latter.

We scholars don't always talk about empire this way, as an easy problem. At times, we almost fetishize its inconceivable vastness, emphasizing its deep traumas, enduring afterlives, and cascading effects, to the point where it seems so complex, so insidious, so immovable, that we can't address it, just bear inadequate witness to it. Occasionally, in our telling, empire becomes almost metaphysical, a force that taints all it touches, so that even the act of scholarly inquiry becomes a further perpetuation of empire—and

decolonization becomes an eternally fraught, never-complete form of soulcraft.

It's indisputably true that the harms of empire are many, that they are not merely economic or even material but psychological and spiritual, too. But I believe it would be a mistake to let this lead us to the conclusion that empire is too ineffably vast to comprehend—or to coherently oppose. There's a long and productive history of colonized intellectuals pointing to empire not as an all-pervasive field from which there can be no escape but as an identifiable set of actions, laws, and practices by powerful people in powerful countries. For Kwame Nkrumah, empire instantiated in coups and other U.S. attempts to control African politics; for Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart in the torrent of propaganda with which the United States flooded Latin America; for Pedro Albizu Campos doctors' use of Puerto Ricans as unwitting test subjects. In all these cases, the solution isn't elusive but rather almost painfully obvious: *stop doing empire*.

In the case of the U.S. empire today, that would include dismantling the United States' basing structure, ceasing its airstrikes and drone flights in foreign countries, sharply shrinking its military, stopping its indiscriminate global arms sales, allowing binding status referenda in its inhabited territories, stopping its surveillance of global communications, ceasing its covert action programs in foreign countries—and many things besides. I don't expect that, even if the United States stopped all this, we'd be living in a fully equal world. Nor would ending empire's active impositions thereby heal the damage it has done in the past. But I do expect that this de-imperialized world would be significantly fairer, in material ways, than the one we inhabit.

Is such a world possible? We may despair, but recent history is full of victories over empire, including most notably the global decolonization movement that nearly drove the colonial form of empire to extinction. We have that movement to thank for the fact that imperialism, once a proud ideology, is now a dirty word.

What is more, I think there's every reason to be hopeful about anti-imperialism today. There are many ways forward in our broad struggle to beat back empire, but I want to focus on just one—one that seems to my eyes especially promising for scholars in U.S. universities.

The foreign policy elite in Washington remains committed to empire, in whatever sanitized terms (“exceptionalism,” “leadership,” “indispensability,” etc.). But in a country with representative government, that elite requires at least some acquiescence of the public for its projects, and that's where I think it's weak. Voters appear to be increasingly apathetic about empire. The idea that the United States is the world's greatest country, once an article of exceptionalist faith, is now affirmed by only a bare majority of U.S. inhabitants; younger adults, especially those under thirty, find it particularly hard to agree. Most voters—indeed, most *veterans*—now think that the Iraq and Afghanistan wars were mistakes. And at the presidential level, running against the Blob is good politics. In 2008, Barack Obama defeated Hillary Clinton in part by pointing out that he'd opposed the Iraq War while she supported it. In 2016, Donald Trump also defeated Hillary Clinton, also claiming (far less credibly) to have been an Iraq War opponent. It would be wrong to conflate retrospective disapproval for an unpopular war with a wholesale rejection of the U.S. hegemonic project, but it would also be shortsighted not to recognize the sprouts of anti-imperialism growing within the U.S. populace.

What can be done to nourish those sprouts? Right now, anti-imperialism is a strongly felt cause among scholars, but it is loose and diffuse in the public mind. There's a lot of translation work to do. We need to help people understand the United States' oft-euphemized forms of power as empire. And we need to explain, in terms that resonate with people who aren't of a scholarly bent and who don't share our political instincts, why we regard empire to be so pernicious. Academia, which prizes knowledge

acquisition over knowledge distribution, doesn't always reward us for this, as it tends to incentivize research above all else. But if you accept my proposition that empire is less a puzzle than a power struggle, then what we're really in search of isn't answers so much as an audience.

Which brings me back to Marx. In keeping with his final thesis on Feuerbach, Marx was an activist as well as a social scientist. He sought to change the world, not merely interpret it. Yet it is as an interpreter that he's best remembered. Marx's contributions as a leader in the International Workingmen's Association—the First International—pale in comparison to what he achieved during the same period by writing *Capital*. The *Communist Manifesto* is neatly divided into a historical section, in which he and Friedrich Engels describe capitalism, and three forward-looking sections, where they suggest tactics, issue demands, and criticize rivals. It's that first section, which offers a cogent analysis in legible (indeed, poetic) terms, not the three tactical sections that follow, that most endures.

The point is to change the world; but sometimes the way to do that is to interpret it.

Who Should Solve Empire?

Katrina Quisumbing King

Northwestern University

What does it mean or what would it take to solve empire? Reflecting on this led me to a series of questions:

- I. Do we know what kind of problem empire is?
- II. What can social science bring to the conversation?
- III. Who should be tasked with solving empire?

As I attempted to think through these questions, a few themes emerged: first, that problems of empire are many, but they are also global and interconnected. Second, which follows from this first point, that solving empire is a collaborative

task. And third, this may mean decentering our academic selves in the struggle for decolonization.

What kind of problem is empire? The answer to this question may depend on to whom we speak. The debates we have in academia about how to study empire and different imperial forms do not easily translate to how people recognize it in everyday life. Last year I taught an upper-level undergraduate course simply titled “Empire.” I asked students on the first day why they enrolled in the course. Despite the course description, some of them thought I would be teaching on Rome and Egypt, while others were more interested in what we call informal empire. What struck me was the range of interests in the classroom and a general recognition of the problem of power and domination across forms of empire.

Power and domination. I came to empire as someone interested in race, classification, boundaries, and citizenship. So perhaps it makes sense that I cannot think about empire and its problems without thinking about us—them divisions, closure, partitioning, power, and subordination. For me, the problem of empire is hierarchical, differentiated rule and exploitation that rests on such justifications (even when they are not or no longer explicitly racial).

The problems of empire are not always named as such. Even as more people may become critical of empire in name, the United States has a long history of erasing the explicitly hierarchical and racist language of empire. But the structure and roots remain. Nationalism or patriotism may seem less problematic to some than imperialism. Yet as we know the growth of the U.S. nation as one for white men was built on expansion and subjugation of nonwhite people on the continent and overseas. Implicit in empire is the idea that some people are entitled to conquer (or control global affairs), that they are better equipped to rule and teach others to govern. We see this very clearly in U.S. rule over American Indians and the Philippines. More recently, as we’ve been

reminded, we see this too in Afghanistan and Iraq.

There’s an entitlement that comes with empire, a profoundly hierarchical belief, an arrogance that, in these cases, the United States just knows best. This is something all too similar to what race scholars like W.E.B. Du Bois have diagnosed as the problem of whiteness. In “The Souls of White Folk,” Du Bois elegantly diagnoses white entitlement and its role in justifying war and exploitation around the world.

Empire is not just a problem of white entitlement, but also one that is built on laws and policies. To understand how to solve empire, we must look to how law has been constructed. This is something that social science can bring to the problem of solving empire. We can ask: why have we passed racist, colonial, and unequal laws? With what kind of interests? I’ll give an example, one that scholars of US empire, like Julian and Daniel, are all too familiar with. But it’s a powerful illustration of how empire is built on law, and how these laws have profoundly hierarchical and racially motivated roots.

In 1901, the U.S. Supreme Court—the same court, save one justice, that heard *Plessy v. Ferguson*—heard a case about a crate of oranges to be imported from Puerto Rico. The question was whether the United States could collect taxes (per the terms of the Puerto Rican Organic Act, also known as the Foraker Act) on an import of oranges from Puerto Rico. Its implications would extend to other imports, including sugar. American Sugar actively opposed free trade for Puerto Rican imported sugar and therefore did not want the United States to annex the territories as states and give them free trade. If Puerto Rico were annexed and considered domestic, then the Foraker Act could not hold, meaning that imports would *not* be taxed. If it was foreign, imports would be taxed. How, you might wonder, is this case about race?

This case, *Downes v. Bidwell*, is one of the *Insular Cases*, which determined the relationship of Spain’s former colonies to the United States.

While most of the *Insular Cases* centered on the status of Puerto Rico and the rights of Puerto Ricans vis-à-vis the United States, the decisions extended to other territories and were haunted by debates over the Philippines and Filipinos' racial status. Virtually no one at the time thought Filipinos could be incorporated into the U.S. on equal terms. They were racially other and the thought of incorporating nonwhite people after the 14th Amendment was implausible to imperialists and nativists alike.

In their decision on *Downes*, justices argued that people in the former Spanish territories were "alien races" who were unaccustomed to "Anglo-Saxon principles." Recall that this was a case about the import of oranges. But racial concerns were front and center in deciding the territorial status of Puerto Rico. The USSC thus transformed existing concerns over race and nation into law that was not explicitly racial. Instead, *Downes* created a new legal category of an "unincorporated territory" so that imports from Puerto Rico would be taxed, which is what American sugar wanted. Puerto Rico and the other colonies would be "foreign" in this sense, but the territories would also be "domestic." In fact, one justice called it "foreign in a domestic sense." The territories "belonged to, but were not part of the United States." And while there were capitalist interests in this case, these were also racial.

Socio legal history isn't the only way social science can help us understand empire. What social science has to offer depends in part on what kind of social science we are talking about. Different subfields and disciplines encourage different approaches to the study of social problems. For example, even though my concern and interest in empire is motivated by concern for those who are excluded and subordinated, I have tended to focus on how people in power create social problems, define race, exclude unwanted populations. I've taken this approach because I believe it is powerful for demonstrating how we got to where we are, how race is socially constructed and the material

consequences that result from classification. I also believe in calling out and naming power. Nevertheless, often when I talk with my friends and colleagues in American or ethnic studies, this way of studying seems less popular today. Studying the subaltern, people on the ground, people engaged in everyday resistance is not only empirically important but empowering to those of us invested in changing the world.

I think most social scientists would agree that we aim to explain the world around us, and perhaps in this room, a related aim is to transform or affect the world. Of course, scholarship, whether it has explicit aims to transform the world does affect it, often not for the better. And here I'm thinking of histories of statistics and eugenics, the development of American sociology as a justification for slavery, the ethnographic study of colonial places and populations that helped justify rule.

Given this, what should our role be? My take is, perhaps, somewhat at odds with my investment in this profession and what brought me to it. If you'll indulge me a brief story about my changing understanding of sociology: The sociology department at my undergraduate institution was dedicated to social justice. At the time, it was a tagline of the program. I was also part of a student organization called the Global Justice Project, and our most dedicated supporters were by and large sociology faculty. They'd come to actions with us; several got arrested during protests. I understood sociology as deeply engaged in making the world a better place and sociologists as people willing to make sacrifices to do so.

In graduate school and in these early years of my career, I've been disciplined and socialized into a broader understanding of the field. Sociology—especially U.S. sociology—is, after all, a profession. I feel this acutely as I transitioned from graduate student to postdoc to faculty. And I've also learned about the problematic histories of our discipline. I hold my

young experience of sociology in tension with how I now see the field as a whole.

As academia becomes more diverse, I am hopeful for the potential of seeing things from different points of vantage, as feminist, anti-colonial, and Black radical scholars have long advocated. This is important beyond representation, but the presence of people from different social positions can enrich and improve the ways we construct and understand social problems. Still, we're a part of the institution, and I'm not wholly sure we can escape its racist and imperial histories.

I'm hesitant to think that we—if not embedded in and taking guidance from communities and movements—should have power or voice in these matters. How we see empire and its problems in the academy may not reflect how people on the ground see it. We may be a voice, but we must be a voice among many. Our identification of empire's problems, our diagnoses, and the possible solutions can be refined not only through ethnographies, interviews, historical studies, but in conversation and in action with communities. Social action is a way of knowing. Learning in community helps us better understand the problems before us and how we might address them. Social scientists can participate in the project of solving empire, but they must also decenter their academic selves and knowledge.

This presents yet another challenge: should those most impacted by empire be charged with creating a new, more just world? It is easy to say that the subordinated, excluded, and dominated people of the world should guide our project. But how should we value their labor? And what should be the role of people who themselves or whose ancestors had a role in creating the problems in which we find ourselves today? Translating the concerns and needs of marginalized people into action items for broader society is difficult. How do we convince politicians, business owners, or ordinary Americans that empire is a problem? And that it is their problem to solve? Citing U.S. Supreme

Court cases from the early 1900s, as I have, is probably not the way to convince most people that empire is a problem to solve. We also know that xenophobia and racism prevent white Americans from seeing their struggles as bound to those of immigrants and non-white people.

Let me close with the last question asked of us: "how should we think about emancipation?" I'm curious what the phrase "solving empire" would conjure for third world solidarity movements, for organizers of the Bandung Conference, for Pan Asianists and Pan Africanists. Can we see their freedom dreams, in the language of Robin Kelley, as attempts to solve empire?

I think there are guides and lessons to be found in the work of organizers and activists engaged in experimenting and building other worlds, but I don't yet have a clear picture of what solving empire looks like. I think our guidance must come from global movements for decolonization. Not only can we study resistance and learn from their models, but we can listen to people actively engaged in the struggle. We can be thankful for all that they gave us while still recognizing the work yet to be done.

As a student of empire, I still have questions—ones that I wrestle with in scholarly venues, but also in organizing spaces: How should we think about the local and the global as they matter for models of social change? The well-worn phrase "think globally, act locally" comes to mind. But more than that, how can we bring local organization efforts into conversation with one another? How do we link and scale-up our struggles? I hope social science can lend a hand to answering these important questions in organizing and solving empire.

Solving the West

Yannick Coenders

Northwestern University

A solution to a problem suggests in many ways that we presuppose the thing to be solved to be an aberration and not a principle structure of

social and political life. As Julian Go helpfully clarifies, empire does not constitute a singular problem and indeed its deep embeddedness into our lives makes it seem to me unavailable for a “solution” in conventional policy sense. Yet, this does not mean that empire cannot be protested and challenged and thereby altered and even abolished. I will argue for one way in which scholarly knowledge production may be of assistance to anti-imperialists. Drawing on ideas from the three panelists, I argue that residues of methodological-nationalism may prevent a more comprehensive identification of “the problem” of empire and thereby of its challenge. I suggest decentering any one nation-state and centering “the West” as a political formation to account for the durability of the current imperial global order.

Katrina Quisumbing King points out that central to the functioning of modern empire is differentiated and hierarchical rule. This differentiated rule – perhaps better understood as racial rule – is in my understanding rooted in the project of Western colonialism that took off in the 15th century. To identify the problem of this rule, I think it is important to interrogate the “Western” element of this so that we can make it available for further analysis to aid its undoing. Crucial to any understanding of the West is Go’s suggested methodology of centering the connectedness of being. The interconnections between colonized and colonizer, metropole and colony need to be marked and highlighted to illuminate the very object of empire in similar ways that an analysis of capitalism demands the continuous uncovering of the relationships between the capitalist and exploited classes. Moreover, as Go mentions studying these relationships avoids the trap of methodological nationalism, by pointing out the transnational networks that ostensibly nationally operating elites depend on. Yet, there are more interconnections worth studying. Quisumbing King mentions the lessons we may draw from the historical endeavors of colonized populations across the globe to band together in solidarity against colonial rule. In addition, drawing from

her own work, she also brings up the need to study the elites, the administrators, those who design, produce and carry out imperial rule. I believe, as she does that “naming power” is an essential step towards dismantling it. Yet, it seems here that methodological nationalism continues to haunt us, by conflating Western empire with the United States.

Despite all of the wars that European states have fought from the renaissance to World War II, or perhaps often as a prerequisite to those wars, there was prior agreement about a number of things. Not in the very least, there was an agreement about the fundamental alterity of peoples, lands, culture, climates that Europeans discovered, exploited and exterminated e.g. “Africa”, “the Indian” “the Orient” etc. These categories homogenized objects of rule and in turn suggested a commonality amongst those considering themselves the legitimate rulers self-identifying as European/white/Christian/civilized etc. While these dynamics of racialization and European solidarity across nation-states have been identified by Stoler and Cooper (Stoler and Cooper 1997) as essential to the production of colonial knowledge, this may sometimes remain underappreciated in more concrete political histories that often tend to center a nation-state based conception of empire. This presents us with scholarly accounts of US Empire, British Empire, French Empire etc. While the specificities that they offer are very important and we may in addition get some analytic advantages out of comparing them as separate political entities, this mode of analysis may obscure a fundamental solidarity that produced the west as a political entity exceeding any one single nation-state. To identify this force and analyze how it acts upon the world, a transnational relational analysis is necessary.

To make the necessity of centering the West as a political formation clearer, I will give just one obvious example of how imperialism is irreducible to one particular nation state. A nation-based conception of empire would be insufficient to understand the transnational

circulation of Western grief after 9/11. I grew up in the Netherlands where politicians and media proclaimed that the planes hitting the World Trade Center in New York were a direct attack on “our Western values.” This transnational grief that circulated across Europe, the US and beyond, justified an imperial war against Islam. This war manifested primarily through a twenty year invasion of Afghanistan by a NATO coalition. Yet, it spiraled inward as well through the policing of Muslims’ public visibility by the introduction of bans on Muslim women’s attire in almost all Western European countries, moral panics around the construction of mosques from the New York “Ground Zero Mosque” to the London “Mega Mosque” and the Swiss minaret ban. Finally, the war against Islam meant that Muslims became subject to continuous suspicion for plotting against the West, leading to an immigration ban in the US that coincided with limiting the admittance of Syrian refugees to the European Union. These and the many other ways in which this war has manifested in strikingly similar ways on both sides of the Atlantic and across different nation-states should dissuade analysts from a nation centric approach and invite an interrogation of political coordination and the circulation of discourse. While such scholarship is relatively rare, it is not novel. Recent work has for example interrogated how Western coordination and circulation influenced immigration policy (Bashi 2004; Lake and Reynolds 2008), the policing of anticolonialism (Brückenhaus 2017), racial categories (Kwon 2017; Thompson 2016) and the suppression of Black self-governance (Charles 2020).

This is not to deny the facts that Daniel Immerwahr presents. It is hard to overstate the outsized power of the US by the command of its military, the dollar and its cultural production. It is also important to note, as Immerwahr does, that there is little disagreement amongst US elites regarding its perception of self in the world and as needing to sit “at the head of the table.” However, given its power and possibilities to go at it alone, it is worth pondering the metaphor of the table that US president Joe Biden invoked. A

head of a table implies that there are other seats. We may want to know why those other seats would be there in the first place. Who is allowed to sit in them? What are the criteria for inclusion? While the US sits at the head of the table, the collectivity seated at it may be as crucial to the maintenance of empire as its momentary leader. Who sits at the head has changed several times for the past 600 years, yet the composition of the table has been remarkably stable. Go points out that conceiving of the US as an imperial project has been recent and marks a significant intellectual shift in sociology. Yet, the (re)discovery of the US as an imperial force should not overlook the larger political project it perpetuates, namely Western empire. In my mind one central task for sociologists that want to speed up the dismantling of this empire will be to identify the conditions of possibility for the political formation that we may call the West that we may call whiteness or otherwise. A research agenda that asks what binds the West together? What sustains its internal solidarity? What practices could disrupt this ostensibly natural coalition? I appreciate Immerwahr’s call to take as a starting point conceiving of empire as a set of practices. I hope I made a case for further interrogation of the practices that bind different Western nation-states together in solidarity, so it is possible to formulate objections to them and turn the West into a problem.

Models of Solving Empire

Luna Vincent

Northwestern University

While I agree with the critiques of the problem solving frame provided by the wonderful panelists, I will argue that it is still useful and describe exactly how I think one might approach empire with “problem solving” intentions. The panelists point out two important issues with the idea of using the problem solving frame, asking us to consider “who defines what issues as problems?” and “who actually even considers empire a problem, let alone one they are willing to solve?” More specifically, Dr. Go points out how academia, and particularly sociology as a

discipline has been a site of active imperial support and was constituted in and of imperial pursuits. This forces us to ask ourselves if sociologists could even possibly exist outside of its imperial origins in a way that hinders or ends empire. Dr. Immerwahr then points to the limits of problem solving sociology of empire as one that works with policy makers: noting that policy makers are primary beneficiaries of empire who are often tasked with maintaining it. I agree with both of these points: historically, mainstream social scientific academia and the majority policy makers have acted in service of empire and imperial pursuits. We thus have a problem or two in our problem-solving approach to the study of empire.

However, even if mainstream academia and majority of policy makers actually act in service of imperial maintenance (and even expansion), I believe a social scientist earnest in their efforts can use social science towards a goal of ending, therefore “solving” empire. The first task would be to find the people who do similarly define empire as a “problem” whose “solution” is its end. As Drs Go, Immerwahr, and Quisumbing King alluded, looking for these people in traditional academics policy-makers’ spaces would likely fail. However, these people exist. Many of the people who conceive of empire at large as a problem can be found in anti-imperial political collectives. As resistance to the modern empire-state has existed as long as the modern empire state has existed, there are groups of peoples with rich histories of anti-imperial political action, knowledge, and strategy. If we consider these groups of people the people a social science to end empire must be accountable to, then the question can be reframed from “how can the social sciences solve empire?” to “how can we use the tools of social science to serve the ongoing struggles to eradicate the imperial global order?”

If we accept this reframe, which I think is in line with Dr. Quisumbing King’s conclusions, then we have several real world models of scholars doing this kind of work that we can learn from.

Dr. Go mentioned Jane Addams and W.E.B. DuBois, Dr. Quisumbing-King mentioned Robin D.G. Kelley and there are many more. Just here in Chicago there are people working alongside movements and holding their work accountable to movement like Barbara Ransby, Beth Ritchie, and Cathy Cohen. Scholars like Angela Davis and Ruth Wilson Gilmore and so many more work alongside activists and resisters who define empire as problem and consistently act with the ultimate goal of its end.

I bring these scholars up as models for a problem solving sociology of empire. What is worth modeling here, and what I think is essential to “problem-solving” scholarship is not just the way these scholars share their work with movement actors, but how their research agendas are shaped by their movement involvement! They ask, sometimes directly, what questions will yield useful answers in the struggle to “solve” their commonly defined problem. They build systems of adjudication for themselves which ask movement actors to earnestly adjudicate the generated knowledge’s potential utility for, in our case, eradicating the imperial global order.

To Dr. Immerwahr's point that Marx sought to change the world but is remembered for how he interpreted it, perhaps Marx was *able* to interpret it because he tried to change it. He was consistently engaged in organized social resistance and thus had his finger on the pulse of the movement.

I was once told by Dr. Beth Ritchie that a way to make sure you are attempting to answer questions that would be useful for movement was to have two dissertation committees: one regular academic one, and one with people you trust who do political, grass-roots work. I found this advice particularly useful and applicable far beyond the dissertation phase; if we keep asking movement actors how our work can be of service to anti-imperial political movement then our work will more likely be of service to anti-imperial political movement. In this way, I think

a problem solving sociology of empire is possible.

Dissolving Empire

Perdana P. Roswally

Northwestern University

How should one solve empire? This question has haunted many scholars of plantations and (post)colonialism across disciplines; some answer with pessimism and uncertainty. Truthfully, I, on my own, do not have an answer to such a question, because just like Julian Go argues correctly: we cannot talk about empire without reproducing it. However, my informants in Indonesian plantations and customary forests may do. I have been an ethnographer of Indonesia's agrarian politics and economies for the last seven years. One thing that strikes me is the gap between how scholars frame problems and "solving" and the very people who must face empire in a dead-or-alive situation. For many indigenous people and precarious farmers whose livelihoods are threatened by the expansion of plantations and imperial definitions of wealth, empire *must* be solved. As a matter of fact, the empire *must* be destroyed because it is at the core of so many problems they face and how it devalues their very existence.

While the solution for empire is clear (its destruction), the solving process requires a massive amount of work, with trials, errors, and potentially many backfires. Daniel Immerwahr deduced correctly, empire is a nebulous concept; it can mean anything from gender, sexuality, wealth, race, and ability. The meanings also entangle to one another; solving one may perpetuate others, complicating any attempts to cease the problems of empire. Describing the problem, then, is still crucial because the description of problems sets the course for solving them. However, descriptions alone are not enough and may even provoke frustrations for the victims and survivors of the empire. Dianne Rocheleau, a political ecology feminist, researched about the gendered power relation in a Kenyan forestry village. When she introduced

her problem descriptions to the Kenyan audience (mostly women, both academics and activists), they were upset. The descriptions, for many Kenyan women, are not new, and they did not understand why their bodily experience of anti-indigeneity and colonialism only became a theoretical playground for Rocheleau. Describing this is insufficient, even more upsetting for the Kenyans that they had to cite a white woman from the first world country to explain about their pain. Description, argues Katherine McKittrick, is not liberation; but may I add, not by itself.

I reflect on my work to solve the problems of plantations, another node of empire economies, that have plagued Indonesian economies for over a hundred years. Like the rural Kenyan women, I grow frustrated with how many well-meaning scholars describe the problems of plantations in Southeast Asia and later offer solutions (or not) to the plantation issues. I know that solving plantations must involve uprooting rural feudal property ownership, slowing down the flows of goods and capital between rural and urban areas, and heavy investments and incentives for farmers instead of the agro-corporations. In that sense, solving empire then requires a limit: which part of empire that we want to solve? There is only so much that a sociologist can do anyway. However, designing steps to end plantations also reveals the bitter truth of how much plantations have ingrained in the Indonesian vision for growth and development as a nation. Hence, my possible and nascent solutions also force me to think about whether ending plantations means reshaping Indonesia – which is beyond the scope of my research.

My case then shows another layer of empire that we have to grasp: its adaptability. What once were the means for Dutch colonialism to fund its metropole's welfare, plantations have transformed into a postcolonial, and sometimes ironically anticolonial, institution. Solving empire then will take a long time because there will be no guarantee that it will stop even with radical movements and policies. Accounting for

empire's adaptability requires what the philosopher Rocío Zambrana calls "historical reckoning" or the long process of detangling and (re)describing and (re)framing problems to produce initial steps for actions even for a short period. Here is for me where the role of sociologists can also be powerful beyond describing and solving problems: that our skeptical mode of knowing can see the potential problem with the solving part or even the solutions. Such a process is a good reminder that solving is not a linear process; there will be mishaps, successes, and complete failures that should not prevent one from imagining and designing another possible world.

If our method is not convincing enough for problem-solving, our informants will force us to do so anyway. Katrina Quisumbing King correctly reminded us about humility: who are we to "tell people what to do"? However, as an ethnographer, I have lost count of how many times my informants asked me what to do. When I study gender restructuring in a post-conflict community, women I interviewed and who grieved about their new precarity always reminded me that I had something to help them. "How can we make our labor count in our village? The plantation company took everything and now I am so exhausted from surviving, I can't think. You learn something to help us in school, right?" asked Paulina. She is right: I have the resources to think about solutions, even for the short-term period. Paulina's plea is also a cruel reminder that social problems afflict many and exist beyond academia's armchairs and seminar rooms. Problem-solving is also a device to respect my informants' intentions in helping me, so I will not be the only one who extracts the knowledge from them.

Solving empire is an almost impossible task but a mandatory one for many; only by examining and participating in the struggle against empire beyond the ivory tower and our academic peer reviews, I finally understand what Walter Benjamin calls "organizing pessimism." My

informants are mostly pessimistic about the future. Still, it does not discourage them from exercising their rights through whatever channels they have, starting from legal battles or land occupation in the plantations. Every defeat means re-strategizing to prevent the worst, precisely because they now know what could have happened. They know and embody how progress often does not have a clear path and will involve wounds afflicted upon them or others. Fanon has predicted that decolonization will be violent because our convenience is ingrained in imperial pain and dispossession of others. Solving empire then requires another pressing question: can we imagine and build growth that is not adjacent to capitalism, whiteness, and imperialism?

Learning from others before me, my informants, and echoing Katrina Quisumbing King, the dissolution for empire will involve connecting the dots and weaving our shared struggle. It will also involve voices typically absent from our academic institutions: our own interlocutors, activists, non-Euroamerican scholars, and artists. Sometimes, the solving process has been running, the solutions may have always been there. They are just beyond the methodologies of social science and the scrutiny of unnecessarily time-consuming academic peer reviews.

Conclusions (and Beginnings)

Monica Prasad

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I was struck by Perdana Roswally's observation that when we embed ourselves in communities that are experiencing oppression, the first thing they ask is: "Can you help me?" That is, when we do what several panelists suggest, and turn to "anticolonial and postcolonial thinkers" and the "subordinated, excluded, and dominated people of the world," often they turn back to us and say: what can you bring to this effort?

What Roswally's respondent Paulina is asking is straightforward. She knows that the situation she is experiencing is not right. But she does not

have the time, the resources, and the luxury to figure out why the world is producing this situation, what the alternatives to it are, and how those alternatives can be brought into being. She is asking us to contribute those insights. In fact, she is asking us to do sociology: sociology that identifies the causes of problems, the potential solutions to problems, and the mechanisms that can move the world closer to the solutions (Prasad 2021). Comparative historical methods are central to all of these tasks, because comparison is the secret weapon for examining how issues as seemingly intractable as empire can be overcome.

If “anticolonial and postcolonial thinkers” have solutions, of course we should consider those solutions. But in many cases indigenous intellectuals are giving the same excuses we give for not trying to solve the problem.

The path forward is to figure out what we do not yet know. If we know the solution to empire, but the problem is “Voters appear to be increasingly apathetic about empire” then *that is the problem to be solved*: why are voters apathetic about empire? What can make them change? Indeed, as Luna Vincent notes, even if our goal is only to produce good descriptions, like Marx, the best way to get there is by genuinely trying to change the situation, like Marx.

In the end, it is again Roswally who has identified the issue in the clearest of terms: empire must be solved. For anyone interested in the effort, and in thinking through what sociologists can do beyond describing problems, join us at

<https://www.problemsolvingsociology.com>.

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