

# Unveiling power, or why social science's task is explanation

Julian Go

Department of Sociology, The University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, USA

## Correspondence

Julian Go.

Email: [jgo34@uchicago.edu](mailto:jgo34@uchicago.edu)

## Abstract

This short essay contends that sociology should devote attention to causal explanation in order to expose lies. It argues that lies about causes are common in society and social science is in a unique privileged position to offer social knowledge that can dispel such lies. Offering causal explanations is a vital task of this project.

## KEYWORDS

causation, colonialism, explanation, philosophy of social science, W.E.B. DuBois

As a historical sociologist with deep interests in social theory and postcolonial thought, I cannot help but begin my remarks by reference to the year 1897 when *The Philadelphia Negro* by W.E.B. DuBois was first published. This was DuBois' first major scholarly achievement. It helped establish his career, earning him the admiration of even Max Weber over in Germany. A deep examination of Philadelphia's swelling African American community, it was later lauded as the originator of empirical and urban sociology in the United States. More than a founding influential work of early sociology, however, *The Philadelphia Negro* also did something equally if not more important: it *exposed and dispelled lies*.

These were lies about causes; about why things are the way they are. The lies were being perpetuated all around DuBois, by the white press and public. These were the lies emboldened by scientific racism—a vast area of thought that dominated the US scene in the early 20th century (Southern, 2005). These lies claimed that Black Americans were mired in poverty, illness, and deprivation because of their biological character; that is, because they were racially inferior. The lies spoke of how biology, blood and stock made Black Americans unable to be anything else but lazy, ignorant, incapable of intelligent labor, and often criminal. These were lies, in short, asserting that Black Americans were at the bottom of America's postbellum social hierarchy because of natural hierarchy. Even some sociologists peddled these ideas, framing it as the “Negro problem” that nascent social science in the early 20th century was meant to address (Mills, 2023). This is probably why DuBois heavily critiqued social science at the time. “Much of

-----  
This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) License, which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made.

© 2023 The Authors. The British Journal of Sociology published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd on behalf of London School of Economics and Political Science.

the work done on the Negro question is notoriously uncritical," he wrote, "uncritical from lack of discrimination in the selection and weighting of evidence; uncritical in choosing the proper point of view from which to study these problems... worthless as science" (DuBois, 1898, p. 15).

The work of DuBois in *The Philadelphia Negro*, along with related subsequent work, helped to upend these lies. Through his careful, meticulous empirical investigations, he exposed the barriers of discrimination and class that black Philadelphians faced, and showed how the history of American racism best explains the lowly status of Black America. In other words, DuBois mobilized sociological research and theory to show that the *cause* of Black Americans' inferior position in society was not biological but social and historical. He showed, e.g., that Black Americans performed "common labor and menial service" work not "as a matter of fitness" but rather due to discrimination (DuBois, 1901 #5837, p. 43). As Morris (2015) shows, DuBois thereby offered one of the first empirically backed sociological *causal explanations* of racial hierarchy (Morris, 2015, pp. 68–69) (#5834). DuBois not only dispelled lies. He spoke truth to white power.

This is what I think the discipline of sociology is uniquely positioned to do. I also think it is what sociologists must do at all costs. That is: we must provide causal explanations of social outcomes so that we can dispel lies and speak truth to power. To pair Pierre Bourdieu with DuBois, we must provide causal explanations to "make trouble" and "provoke"; that is, to question received categories and unveil the doxic taken-for-granted assumptions of the social world that typically conceal power relations (Bourdieu, 1993, pp. 9–23; Swartz, 2013, pp. 156–174). Of course, causal explanations are not the only form of explanation. There are others. But as I will discuss first below, causal explanations are a common form of explanation, particularly as they are given by the general public. Because of this, and because of the privileges of social scientists, I suggest that causal explanation is exactly what sociologists must do.

Elaborating this thesis requires taking four steps.

Step One: Recognize that people give causal explanations all the time. This is how people operate in the world. In DuBois' time, most people explained African American poverty by reference to racial inferiority. Even if they did not articulate it exactly that way or in a scientific way, people employed some version of racial thinking to make sense of their society, not least the unequal distribution of resources in society. Today, some people still explain the world in racial terms. Think about the prevalence of genetics. But even if they do not, they still make sense of things with implicit or explicit explanations. They might see a poor person or poverty and think something like "people are poor and there is inequality because some people just don't work hard enough" or because those people have the wrong genes. Or they might look at poor nations and assume that their poverty is due to government corruption, lack of natural resources, or their inability to innovate. Or they look at crime statistics and assume that if we just put more money into police departments, crime will go down (there, the assumed causal process is that more policing causes less crime, and less policing causes more crime). Or they lose their job and claim that it is because there are too many immigrants taking jobs. Or their child does not get into a great college and they say it is because their child is white, assuming that nonwhites get all of the advantages. In short, people make implicit or explicit causal claims *all the time*.

This brings us to Step Two: acknowledge that people not only make implicit or explicit causal claims, they also act in the world based upon those claims. Based upon their ideas of what causes things in society to happen, they make decisions that together impact policies and the distribution of resources in society. If I believe that the poverty of racialized minorities is due to their own inferior biology, I will be less likely to support government programs that try to educate racialized minorities and help them do better. If low social status is biologically determined, no amount of social help will do any good. If I believe that a country is poor because of government corruption, I will be less likely to support financial aid to that country and more likely to support free market solutions. If I believe that crime can be reduced by more policing, I will be more likely to support our tax money going into policing, rather than, say, social programs for wayward teens. If I believe that people are losing jobs to immigrants, I may be more likely to oppose immigration. And so on and so on. In short, causal claims are not just ideas floating around in peoples' heads. They have real consequences.

Step Three follows: recognize that people's assumptions about causality can be wrong.

It is not necessarily the case that the reason why some people are poor is because they don't work hard enough. Maybe it is because they do not have enough opportunities. It is not necessarily the case that more police reduces crime. Crime might fall for a variety of reasons if it falls at all. It is not necessarily the case that the reason why poor countries are poor is because of corruption. It may have to do with other things. Moreover, sometimes people are not only wrong in their causal assessments; it is also that their causal assessments are boldfaced *lies*. Powerful institutions typically lie to get people to support their policies, vote for them, or buy things they are selling, and unfortunately, many people internalize those lies.

And so my fourth and final step gets to the point of this debate: Social science, and particularly sociology, can help expose these lies by doing research that better explains social outcomes and events. And I say "better" not because I think sociologists are smarter than everyone else and other people are dumb, but "better" only because sociologists have the resources to observe and analyze the world. They have the training, time, finances and infrastructural support to systematically, carefully, and thoughtfully collect data, analyze it, and test hypotheses; that is, to examine the data so as to adjudicate among competing causal claims. Sociologists, therefore, are more likely to produce valid or least informed causal explanations—just as, for instance, DuBois does in *The Philadelphia Negro*.

To be clear, I am not claiming saying that social scientists *always* provide good explanations. Sometimes they fall short. Much large-scale quantitative work that seeks associations between variables to find covering laws, rather than tracing causes and causal processes, would not qualify as good explanations in my view because they fail to specify causes and related mechanisms. This form of positivist explanation—that is, an explanation that is satisfied with only tracking constant conjunctions between variables—is not the same as causal explanation. It is not what I take to be the sort of explanations we should strive for to expose lies. Nor am I denying that "causal explanation" can mean a lot of different things to different people in our field. I, for one, insist that causal explanation also includes historical forms of sociology that take seriously temporality, sequence and conjunctural explanation (as rooted in Louis Althusser and Stuart Hall) and related forms of post-positivist explanation (see for instance Decoteau, 2018). In fact, I would argue that such post-positivist explanations are to be preferred. In any case, my point is that sociologists can and should explain things, even if there are probably better forms of explanation than others.

Lest one assumes that I am only skeptical of positivist quantitative studies, let me give you another example from an area of study that typically uses qualitative data: postcolonial sociology. One of the implicit if not stated claims of postcolonial sociology is that imperialism had and continues to have an important impact upon colonized societies and metropolitan societies alike. Colonialism is a kind of cause that can be enlisted to explain things. For instance, one common claim is that colonialism has detrimentally impacted the economic, political and social conditions of ex-colonies while conversely enabling the economic growth and wealth of metropolitan societies. Another related claim is that colonialism generated socioeconomic inequalities between metropolitan and ex-colonial countries that persist into the present. Given such causal claims, some scholars suggest that the goal of postcolonial sociology is to trace these colonial connections; that is, to produce what is sometimes called "connected histories" or "connected sociologies" to illuminate how colonialism has created modernity and many of its injustices (Bhambra, 2007; Go, 2013).

The problem is that postcolonial scholars too often *assume* rather than explain. They assume, for instance, that just because there is a colonial connection then that connection is automatically a causal factor for explaining an outcome. Such assumptions leave the postcolonial project open to critique. For example, some historical economists insist that Europe's economic growth in the eighteenth century was not dependent upon overseas imperialism. O'Brien (2005, p. 77) points out that all of the principal powers in Europe were underdeveloped and relatively poor from around 1415 to 1815 except Britain and arguably Holland. He then uses this fact to suggest that colonialism cannot explain the wealth of European countries: if it did, all European countries and not just Britain and Holland should have been wealthy. Portugal and Spain had massive overseas empires yet neither overtook England and instead suffered from economic stagnation even though they were colonial empires larger than Britain (O'Brien and Escosura, 1999). Some historical economists also mobilize quantitative data to unsettle post-colonial theory's claim that colonialism explains the wealth of imperial nations. Even in the late 1700s, European exports from and imports to the periphery amounted to only 1% and 2%–4% of total economic output respec-

tively (as late as the 1840s, total exports and imports never amounted to more than 15%) (O'Brien, 2005, p. 77). Presumably, this shows that Europe's growth could not have been dependent upon overseas colonialism. The entire postcolonial project that rests upon the assumption that colonialism explains outcomes is legitimately questioned.

We might dispute the economists' reasoning here about development. Consider the claim that imperialism does not matter because all of the European powers had overseas colonies and yet there was wide variation in their economies that do not correlate with their holdings. Once we take causal explanation seriously, we can see that this argument falters. Perhaps imperialism itself does not explain variation between imperial powers but it could still be a necessary cause of development (especially if we compare Portugal and Spain with, say, Peru). Here, thinking harder about explanation helps us realize that there is a difference between necessary and sufficient causes—there are "INUS" (insufficient but necessary) causes (Mahoney, Kimball and Koivu, 2009). Or consider the argument that neither imperialism nor colonialism mattered for European development because European exports from and imports to the periphery amounted to small percentages of total economic output. This argument relies upon purely quantitative renderings of causation rooted in linear models of probability. Such approaches to causation, as Abbott's work (1988) would remind us, overlook qualitative differences in trade and the causal impact of events. Profits from trade may have been small but if they had been used to fund a critical sector of economic development, then their importance upon growth would have been greater than 1% (if 1% of trade was from cotton, then the importation of raw cotton upon, say, Britain's economy would have been much greater than just 1%: consider how raw cotton fueled the textile industry and hence manufacturing in Manchester, the port economy in Liverpool, and so on).

All of this is to say: if we assume that all connections are a cause and only describe them, rather than thoroughly and systematically investigating causes and causal processes, our analyses will be weak at best. We will not be able to validate our assumptions, leaving our implied causal claims open to refutation. We *need to do more than just recognize and describe connected histories*—which is unfortunately where some postcolonial sociologies end their task—we have to *explain*. It is one thing to say we need to go beyond methodological nationalism and recognize that England has colonized India or Jamaica or some other place. It is quite another to say that these connections and colonial relations *explain* England's economic growth. To meet the task of explanation, we would have to do careful work of collecting empirical data and enlisting methods of causal inference such as ruling out alternative hypotheses, process tracing, or comparative pattern matching—among other methods—to create causal narratives that specify deeper causes and mechanisms and thus best explain why and how colonial connections matter (Ermakoff, 2019; Mahoney, 2003). We can therefore effectively dispel the lie that is often told if not simply assumed by so many people: that colonialism does not matter for the present.

I maintain, therefore, that the task of explanation is one of the most important tasks of sociology. It may even be the task of sociology. Without causal explanations, it is difficult if not impossible to expose the hidden mechanisms of power and domination that are not easily revealed or seen by description only. While description is vital and necessary for our epistemic enterprise, we must recognize the difference: while description remains at the visible, the surface, the readily detectable, causal explanation seeks to index the unseen and the hidden. Put simply, without causal explanations, it becomes more difficult to unmask and debunk, to dispel lies, and speak truth to power.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to Monika Krause for inviting me to participate in the LSE forum on explanation and to the other participants for their contributions and exchanges.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There are no known conflicts of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## REFERENCES

- Abbott, A. (1988). Transcending general linear reality. *Sociological Theory*, 6(2), 169–186. <https://doi.org/10.2307/202114>
- Bhambra, G. (2007). *Rethinking modernity: Postcolonialism and the sociological imagination*. Palgrave-MacMillan.
- Bourdieu, P. (1993). *Sociology in question*. Sage.
- Decoteau, C. (2018). Conjunctures and assemblages: Approaches to multicausal explanation in the human sciences. *Political Power and Social Theory*, 34, 89–118.
- DuBois, W. E. B. (1898). The study of Negro problems. *Annals of the Academy of Political and Social Science*, 11, 1–38.
- DuBois, W. E. B. (1901). *The black north in 1901: A social study*. Arno Press.
- Ermakoff, I. (2019). Causality and history: Modes of causal investigation in the historical social sciences. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 45(1), 581–606. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-073117-041140>
- Go, J. (2013). For a postcolonial sociology. *Theory and Society*, 42(1), 25–55. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-012-9184-6>
- Mahoney, J. (2003). Strategies of causal assessment in comparative historical analysis. In J. Mahoney & D. Rueschemeyer (Eds.), *Comparative historical analysis in the social sciences*. Cambridge University Press.
- Mahoney, J., Kimball, E., & Koivu, K. (2009). The logic of historical explanation in the social sciences. *Comparative Political Studies*, 42(1), 114–146. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414008325433>
- Mills, C. W. (2023). The 'white' problem: American sociology and epistemic injustice. In J. Lackey (Ed.), *Applied epistemology*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198833659.003.0009>
- Morris, A. (2015). *The scholar denied: W.E.B. DuBois and the birth of modern sociology*. University of California Press.
- O'Brien, P. (2005). Intercontinental trade and the development of the third world since the industrial revolution. *Journal of World History*, 8(1), 75–133. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jwh.2005.0087>
- O'Brien, P., & de la Escosura, L. P. (1999). Balance sheets for the acquisition, retention, and loss of European empires overseas. *Itinerarios*, 23(3/4), 25–52. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0165115300024542>
- Southern, D. (2005). *The progressive era and race: Reaction and reform, 1900–1917*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Swartz, D. (2013). *Symbolic power, politics, and intellectuals: The political sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*. University of Chicago Press.

**How to cite this article:** Go, J. (2023). Unveiling power, or why social science's task is explanation. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.13056>