



RACIAL SITUATIONS: Nationalist Vindication and Radical Deconstructionism

DEBORAH A. THOMAS
University of Pennsylvania

A dominant idea has been that in the United States, people are socialized into a two-tier view of race relations rooted in institutionalized segregation (the “one-drop rule”). This contrasts with a supposedly more “fluid,” commonsense notion of race in Latin America as well as with the more obvious acceptance of class-color correlations that one associates with the West Indies. However, both poles of this “common sense” are not immutably true. In the United States, there has also been a long-standing sensibility (and tension) regarding the relationships between color and class, and intermediate racial categories (like *mulato*, *quadroon*, *octroon*) were recognized on the census prior to the 1920s (Simmons 2009). And in Latin America and the West Indies, racial identification as “black” has also been a vector of both sociopolitical mobilization and everyday understandings of marginalization and inequality. Despite these similarities of experience, however, many still understand models of racial subjectivity and subjectification throughout the Americas in polar terms.

I want to argue here that this is because race in the Americas has been theorized largely in relation to the development of models of societal integration (or the purported lack thereof), and therefore to nation-building, whether in the Hispanophone, Francophone, Lusophone, Dutch, or Anglophone Caribbean, or in the United States (Slocum and Thomas 2003). This link between nation-building and race has produced both the various models of creolization throughout the region (*mestizaje*, *créolité*, *métissage*, *negritude*, *mestiçagem*, *afro-latinidad*, *hispanidad*, *democracia racial*, and multiculturalism), and liberal projects of racial vindication,

but has marginalized the more radical critique of racialized global geopolitics that emerged from the U.S. and British West Indies during the interwar years, one rooted in a deconstructionist relational historical political economy that was partly a response to the intensification of fascism, eugenics, and scientific racism. And in a seemingly ironic twist, this deconstructionist radicalism was occurring at just the time Brazilian racial theorists were elaborating the idea of racial democracy, itself originally a critique of the position that racially mixed populations were incapable of governing themselves that later became a tool of conservative nonracialist discourse.

To a degree, race has been so intimately linked with nation-building because the modern history of plantation slavery and racial mixing has created a complicated and contradictory field in which to theorize and exercise personhood and value (and therefore notions of citizenship), elaborating race as a “problem” of first disciplinary and then biopolitical management and governance. As a “problem,” race primarily exists in moments of conflict, or in relation to “eruptions” of violence (like race riots), while the foundational violence of New World settlement and exploitation (and thus the origins of Atlantic modernity) is erased.

However, many scholars across disciplines have shown that the idea of race and the hierarchical institutionalization of racial difference emerged dialectically in relation to 16th-century economic transformations that ultimately created what we now know as “the modern West” (Holt 2000; Trouillot 1995; Whitten 2007). While notions of difference operated prior to this period, the expulsion of Muslims from Europe, the emergence of religiously ordained distinctions between Native and African-descended Americans, the initial European voyages of exploration and discovery, and the development of mercantile capitalism generated a novel situation whereby, for the first time, racialized labor became central to the new plantation-based system of economic production. As Norman Whitten (2007) has argued, during the 15th-century European settling of the New World we saw the twin transformative processes of racial fixing (of diverse African peoples into *negros* and diverse indigenous New World populations into *indios*) and racial flexibility (the various configurations of creolization, transculturation, and hybridity). These were processes that became institutionalized through particular extractive labor regimes and constellations of citizenship that excluded non-European groups. At the same time, within European religious, philosophical, scientific, and political discourses, hierarchies of human value were increasingly mapped in terms of gendered, racial, and civilizational difference (Trouillot 1995). In this way, early mercantilism inaugurated material and ideological processes that indelibly linked the “New World” and the “Old” in a common project of defining modern subjectivity

in racial terms. Because these racialized processes also generated the consolidation of both empires and nationalisms within Europe itself, this early moment of globalization engendered a common language not only for an accepted wisdom regarding scales of humanity, but also for related notions of personal freedoms and political revolutions (Carnegie 2002; Palmié 2002).

The initial institutionalization of racialized notions of difference would be subsequently mobilized to serve the late-19th-century British project of indirect imperial rule and the new imperialist project of the United States. These were projects that would ultimately also result in the integration of capital markets on at least five continents and the subsequent intensification of labor migration; the development of technological innovations; the imagination of both political and social life beyond the territorial boundaries of the nation-state through visions of Ethiopianism, internationalism, and pan-Africanism; and the elaboration of science, through which we would see the emergence of various strands of Social Darwinism that would shape the institutionalization of anthropological notions of racialized civilizational difference (Baker 1998). These latter notions would be challenged by late-19th-century antislavery struggles and mid-20th-century anticolonial and Native self-determination struggles, as well as later Civil Rights and Black Power movements and the universal human rights mobilizations of the mid-century and beyond. Thus, the two moments of European expansion to the “New World” and 19th-century indirect imperialism generated both the material and ideological frames for understanding late-20th- and early 21st-century processes in the circum-Atlantic world and beyond.

During the 19th- and 20th-century nationalist movements throughout the Americas, and especially within Latin America, we saw the emergence of ideologies that wedded citizenship to particular formulations of *mestizaje*, what Ronald Stutzman (1981) famously called the “all inclusive ideology of exclusion,” or a blended subjectivity that nevertheless privileged the contribution of the European part of the triad in the making of the nation (see also de la Cadena 2000; Graham 1990; Wade 1997).¹ During the late 20th and early 21st centuries, however, these nationalist ideologies of multiraciality have been challenged by the emergence of multicultural governance, as many Latin American governments have changed their constitutions to recognize the sovereign rights of indigenous groups and, in some case, Afro-descended populations.

Within the early 20th-century United States, questions about the relationship between race and citizenship were instantiated by the Frazier-Herskovits debate. At that time, Herskovits’s position that black people throughout the Americas shared

cultural “stuff,” and could in fact trace this cultural “stuff” to particular African practices, was marginalized in relation to E. Franklin Frazier’s emphasis on the cultural “stripping” that was the result of the Middle Passage (Herskovits 1930, 1941; Frazier 1939). Both these positions were undergirded by a particular sense of politics. For Herskovits, the acculturation model—critiqued for being excessively classificatory and culturalist in its formulation—nevertheless also directed attention toward a pre-slavery history and culture, something he believed could provide inspiration for black American political action in the aftermath of the failure of Reconstruction in the U.S. South. Herskovits felt that clarifying the African derivation of African-American cultural practices in particular would counter the claims of those who asserted that black Americans had no significant cultural legacy and therefore contributed nothing culturally or politically to the United States. For Frazier, the lack of “African retentions”—at a time when things African were still seen as backward, not conducive to modernist development paradigms—meant that African Americans were fully assimilable into American culture and therefore deserving of the rights and responsibilities associated with full membership in the U.S. polity. Frazier’s supremacy within this debate reflects the political position that was dominant in the 1930s and 1940s straight through the Civil Rights Movement. It wasn’t until the late 1960s and 1970s that the idea of African retentions gained speed again among academics and activists, at which point Herskovits’s work enjoyed renewed attention. However, it is during this period that we also see the consolidation of the “race relations” approach within academic and policy spheres, an approach developed through the commissions that were convened to investigate the causes of race riots as they developed and that was ultimately solidified with the Myrdal study, *An American Dilemma*. Because this approach emerges in relation to conflicts that are understood as being primarily racial in nature, it frames the relationship between race and citizenship as a “problem.”

Within the mid-20th-century Anglophone Caribbean, decolonization movements led to local concerns regarding the viability of these societies given the past of plantation-based slave production. Debates about the nature of West Indian societies gained critical importance because the then-dominant social science view held that social systems needed to be integrated around a common value system in order to thrive without an overarching (external) system of power and control. The idea that West Indian societies exhibited an incompatible sociocultural pluralism was counterposed with notions of creolized stratification. In the former, anthropologists considered sectors of the society as institutionally and culturally distinct, unified only as the result of the overarching power exercised by racial and

ethnic minorities (the plural society thesis, itself developed as the result of M.G. Smith's interest in Furnivall's work in Dutch Indonesia); while in the latter, they deemed that groups shared values and norms but were, nevertheless, divided by class and color differences.

These debates were ultimately concerned with the potential success (or foreseeable failure) of nationalist projects designed to unify diverse sectors of West Indian populations, and they became the basis for the mid-20th-century development of a cultural politics of race, class, and gender. Indeed, a great deal of social-scientific scholarship at the time focused on the institution of the family as a primary site of socialization into class cultures (especially those concerning practices related to sexuality and child-rearing, as was also the case in the United States at the time), and therefore into patterns of economic and political participation. This research profile was connected to the platforms of emerging postcolonial political parties, where race and class figured prominently, and was also designed to vindicate West Indian communities in the face of imperial assessments of family structure, in particular, as deviant, or a primary inhibitor of proper political development.

The concern with nation-building, historical consciousness, and racial vindication throughout the West Indies led to a more general intellectual and political revisionism of the place of black West Indians in the modern world. Scholars like E. Kamau Brathwaite and Sylvia Wynter—building on Jean Price Mars' reevaluation and affirmation of African-derived folklore in Haiti as the necessary foundation for nationalist development and cultural self-esteem within the context of U.S. occupation—argued against the notion that a process of acculturation is what characterized Caribbean societies (Brathwaite 1971; Wynter 1970; Price Mars 1983). Their view instead was that the dominant European sector, often absent, did not provide a cultural and social scaffolding to which dominated Africans had to acclimatize, but that Afro-West Indians, in maintaining, reconstructing, and transforming their own cultural practices (especially those having to do with land use and religious expression) underwent a cultural process of indigenization that rooted them in the New World. In other words, it was the African heritage embedded within the folk culture of West Indian slaves that should be seen as the basis for Caribbean cultural creativity, and thus developed as a modern *national* culture.

These scholars were concerned with generating evidence that could both counter the old, racist epistemologies and serve as the foundation for new, more liberatory claims, which have had the effect—across the disciplines—of dismantling enduring tropes: black people are unfit to lead; black people create dysfunctional

families (because they are hypersexual); black people don't have a valuable cultural legacy. While these tropes were common across the Americas, their project ultimately had to do with making a claim for the strength and validity of Caribbean societies as autonomous and legitimately sovereign, seeing the achievement of national independence as a form of reparative justice. These mid-20th-century vindicationist projects had precursors, of course, in the work of mid- and late-19th-century scholars and activists like John Jacob Thomas and Antenor Firmin (among others, including those fighting for Cuban independence). However, though these earlier figures would defend black diasporic perspectives and practices in the face of post-emancipation backlash, they generally remained committed to the colonial institutions of governance they felt were capacious enough to expand to include them (Smith 2002).

There is a tension, however, between both of these vindicationist moments—ultimately nationalist in scope—and the projects that were generated during the interwar years by scholars such as Eric Williams, W.E.B. Du Bois, and C.L.R. James, projects we might better conceptualize as deconstructionist. Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction*, Williams's *Capitalism and Slavery* and C.L.R. James's *Black Jacobins* were designed as antidotes to European notions of legitimacy and governance (James 1989; Williams 1994; DuBois 1999). Williams, especially, is concerned with dismantling European claims to superiority and to being the sole inheritors of modernity, and argues persuasively and passionately that the West Indies, and the Americas more broadly, are nothing if not quintessentially modern. James, as well, in adding Haiti to the modern revolutionary canon, argues that black West Indians “from the very start lived a life that was in its essence a modern life” (James 1989: 393). And Du Bois demonstrated how slaves took a role in their own emancipation through work stoppage, and ultimately through fighting with the North—despite the fact that the North was not initially antislavery. For all three of them, the New World geopolitical and structural historical frame of analysis allows them not only to vindicate the humanity of slaves and former slaves but also to conceptualize race as one of the vectors through which global geopolitical processes—both material and affective—unfolded, rather than seeing race as an intermittent problem to be managed through the elaboration of nationalist frameworks like *mestizaje* and multiculturalism.

Of course, one of the tensions between the perspectives of James, Du Bois, and Williams and vindicationist nationalisms is ultimately rooted in a vision of what constitutes the appropriate space for political action. For scholars like James, and later Fanon and E. Franklin Frazier, in usurping the struggle for self-determination

from the working classes who rose up to challenge colonialism, the nationalist bourgeoisie reasserted colonial paradigms and hierarchies while dressing up nationalism in the clothing of “culture.”² It was, nevertheless, this project that dominated the immediate post-independence period, and with a few extraordinary exceptions, both scholars and activists turned their attention to the space of the nation-state, whether to advance arguments for self-rule or to support Civil Rights and Black Power struggles. This meant that New World scholarship began to primarily serve the purpose of validating the particularities of national histories and cultural practices rooted in specific places. Privileging a national analytic frame continued through the post-independence, post-Civil Rights contexts of developmentalism, and as such, *race* became reconceptualized as “culture” or “cultural difference” and the global historical critique of modernity and humanism was not sustained, creating the limitations we confront today in terms of discourse, policy, and activism across the Americas and beyond.

[race, nationalism, modernity, vindication, deconstructionism]

NOTES

1. These models have been challenged by the recent constitutional changes throughout Latin America that are recognizing indigenous (and occasionally, Afro-descendant) rights to land.
2. I have placed the word “culture” in scare-quotes here in order to indicate that I am not here invoking the holistic anthropological sense of culture but instead the more popular view that sees “culture” as something that is epiphenomenal.

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