

Race from the 20th to the 21st Century: Multiculturalism or Emancipation?

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WHEN I WAS first invited here for a talk three years ago, I had no idea what Pullman looked like. For me, as well as for many students of American history, Pullman was associated with Pullman, Illinois, where the great railroad strike of 1894 against the Pullman Company began.

In that strike of the American Railway Union, organized by the now legendary Eugene Debs, he and other union leaders were ultimately arrested and the strike in Chicago suppressed by 14,000 soldiers and police. While chattel slavery is gone, “wage slavery” is still with us.

This year 1998 happens to mark the centenary of the conquest of the Philippines by the military force of the United States. The Filipino-American War of 1899-1902 was a brutal war, the “first Vietnam,” for many historians. However, most textbooks devote only a paragraph, if anything at all, to this period—a crucial stage in the construction of the American national identity.

Over one million Filipinos died, more than 8,000 American soldiers perished, for the sake of “manifest destiny.” President McKinley didn’t know where the islands were—officials joked whether the Philippines was a brand name of canned goods or some kind of pineapple.

McKinley justified the forcible annexation of the Philippines to a delegation of Methodist Church leaders in 1899 with these words: Since the natives were “unfit for self government,” he intoned, “. . . there was nothing left for [the United States] to do but to take them all . . . and uplift and civilize and Christianize them.”

Samples of these natives who would be uplifted by the Puritan work ethic and individualist self help were exhibited in the St. Louis Exposition of 1904, one of a series of industrial fairs intended to project the global stature of the United States as the fit successor to the European imperial powers.

Soldiers fresh from the campaigns against the Plains Indians considered the Filipinos savages and “niggers” that needed taming and domestication; reservation-like hamlets had to be set up to cut short a guerilla war that was becoming costly.

Right from the beginning, it was a thoroughly racialized war. One of the scandalous if censored incidents of the U.S. campaign to pacify the islands was the defection of some African-American soldiers to the side of the “enemy,” the revolutionary Philippine Republic.

The rhetoric and discourse of the “civilizing mission” continued up to the time when thousands of Filipinos were recruited for the Hawaiian Sugar Plantations after the entry of the antecedent Asian

migrant labor—Chinese and Japanese—was banned. Objects of the policy called “Benevolent Assimilation,” Filipinos, the new “nationals” who were neither citizens nor aliens but a hybrid, were attacked in the ’30s and ’40s by white vigilantes in Yakima Valley and the entire West Coast.

We should insert here a reminder that the famous *Plessy v. Ferguson* judgment [a Supreme Court ruling that upheld state segregation laws, not overturned till 1954—ed.] took place in 1896, two years before the outbreak of the Spanish-American War. A system of apartheid—not to be altered for half a century—was finally given its legal imprimatur.

Many notable public figures—William Jennings Bryan, Andrew Carnegie, William James, Mark Twain, among others—vehemently protested the carnage. But the most significant is the anti-imperialist resolution of the Black Citizens of Boston published in *The Boston Post* of July 18, 1899. It reads in part:

Resolved, That, while the rights of colored citizens in the south, sacredly guaranteed them by the amendment of the Constitution, are shamefully disregarded; and, while the frequent lynchings of negroes who are denied a civilized trial are a reproach to Republican government, the duty of the president and country is to reform these crying domestic wrongs and not to attempt the civilization of alien peoples by powder and shot.

“Calling attention to the gap between the idealized representation of democracy in foreign adventure and its actual operations in the heartland reveals the authentic character of the expanding nation-state as a racial formation, one constructed on the basis of racial segregation, hierarchy, and violence.”

The claim of “manifest destiny,” the American messianic mission, and the reality of a racialized system may appear incompatible. Yet from a larger historical perspective that discrepancy is itself the very basis for the justification of empire. A review of the political formation of the United States demonstrates a clear racial, not simply ethnic, pattern of constituting the national identity and the commonality it invokes.

As many historians have shown, the U.S. racial order, following the logic of the expansion of the free market, evolved from three or four key conjunctures. These, I submit, should be studied as the core of any general education program.

First is the suppression of the aboriginal inhabitants (Native Americans) for the exploitation of land and natural resources; second, the institutionalization of slavery and the post-Civil War apartheid or legal segregation; third, the conquest of territory from the Mexicans, Spaniards (Puerto Rico, Cuba, the Philippines, Guam) and Hawaiians, and the colonization of Mexicans, Filipinos and Puerto Ricans; and, fourth, the subordination of Asian labor.

In these constitutive strands of the U.S. national formation, the necessary element is racial stratification, the sociopolitical construction of racial hierarchy. I think all questions of citizenship and individual liberties hinge on the theorizing of “race” and its deployment in various political and ideological practices of the state and civil society.

I am not denying progress on the civil rights front. However, the legal scholar Lani Guinier argues that race continues to be an organizing principle of the democratic nation state. She holds that “majority rule is not a reliable instrument of democracy in a racially divided society...In a racially divided society, majority rule may be perceived as majority tyranny.”

Race, Identity and “Diversity”

Ever since I came to this country in 1960, people always ask me: Where are you from? Where do you come from? I believe that Darwin has given that question a generic answer. On second thought, the question may be diagnosed as a symptom of the need to affirm a measure of common value in the modern milieu of alienation. Identity politics has arrived.

While vestiges of scientific racism exist, the political use of race as a biological/anthropological concept is no longer tenable. Today, the problem of cultural ethos or ethnicity has become the major site of racial conflict.

The notion of cultural diversity implies that there is a norm or standard—call it the American Way of Life, the common culture, the Great Books, the canon, whatever—compared to which The Other is different, alien, strange, weird. Some people become problems by the simple fact of their existence.

The President's *Initiative on Race* is to be welcomed in calling attention to the real problem. The Commission's banal if not inadequate findings, however, suggest that it may be a strategy of containment rather than critique. Structural inequality and institutional discrimination, the substantive issues raised in the sixties, have not been fully addressed. Even mainstream media call the Commission report therapy, while ex-professor Newt Gingrich calls it a “liberal failure” because of the Commission's “abstract theoretical questions.”

No doubt, racial thinking still pervades the consensual procedures of our society—from the categories of the census to the neoconservative attack on affirmative action and the gains of the civil rights struggles. It has acquired new life in the sphere of public, especially foreign, policy whenever officials rearticulate the binary opposition between Us and Them (citizens of Western civilization versus the barbaric fundamentalists, rogue states, terrorists of all kinds).

The common life or national identity rises from the rubble of differences vanquished, ostracized and erased. This century now ending thus began with, among other events, the United States seizing territories in Asia, the Pacific and the Caribbean inhabited by peoples with their own cultures, economies and histories. The imperative of modernization covered up for their loss of sovereignty.

The century began with the United States becoming an imperial power that would, after World War II, displace its old European contenders and declare a pax Americana of the free market on the ruins of fascist Germany and Japan. This peace, however, rested also on a neocolonial discourse in which the Western democracies legitimized their mastery of the “Free World” in the crusade against Communist despotism.

But as historians have shown, this hegemony over nation-states (especially among formerly colonized and now neocolonized countries) is always already predicated on the continuation of the European narrative and vision of world domination, on white supremacy.

W.E.B. Du Bois questioned the presumed universality of American nationalism when he wrote in 1945, in an essay entitled “Human Rights for all Minorities,” that Black people in the United States were “a nation without a polity, nationals without citizenship.”

Liberals like Nathan Glazer and Michael Walzer condemn any talk about national autonomy, collective rights or empowerment of communities as inimical to the unity and stability of the country. The “national question” involving people of color in the United States, which I think is the key to unlocking the race question, remains unanswered by all participants in the culture wars, by relativists and law-and-order folks alike.

Meanwhile, the theme of global ideological conflict has now been revitalized. It moves up to center-stage in a recasting of the Cold War as, in Samuel Huntington's words, a war of civilizations. Primarily this means a war between the West and "the Rest."

We need not prophesy the details of this coming "war" within one world-system of transnational corporate business. In fact we all live in one world, where the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund occupy pride of place.

We are confronted in the media with everyday scenes of ethnic cleansing, earlier in Bosnia, now Kosovo, all over what was formerly the Soviet Union, in Afghanistan, in Rwanda and earlier in apartheid South Africa. Racialized antagonisms smolder in various parts of the world—in Quebec, in Los Angeles, Indonesia, Haiti and elsewhere.

Old-New Faces of Domination

With the propagation of the Murray-Herrnstein notion of genetically defined intelligence (*The Bell Curve*), we are once more surrounded with ideas first synthesized by Comte Joseph de Gobineau in his book *Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races* (1953-55) and later elaborated by Social Darwinism, eugenics and pragmatic utilitarianism.

But the latest manifestation of centuries-old strategies of domestication and devaluation of Others is, in my view, the theory of "common culture"—meaning the heritage of Western civilization. This theory inheres in all philosophies and policies that legislate a scheme of general education for everyone based on a narrative of development framed by the "classics of the canon," from Aristotle to the liberal-pragmatist Richard Rorty and the postmodernist Lacan.

I express here a view that may outrage defenders of tradition and accepted disciplinary boundaries—perhaps evidence that despite changes and modifications on the surface, the deep structures of habitual thought and feeling remain entrenched. But what are teachers for, asked James Baldwin, if not to disturb the peace?

The aim of the cultural literacy espoused by E.D. Hirsch, for example, and assorted schemes of "general education" is to reproduce the liberal self, now assuredly more sophisticated and cosmopolitan yet still founded on old power relations. Despite claims of tolerance, liberal latitude, respect for cultural diversity and so on; whether formulated in terms of modernity, progress, Enlightenment, competency or individual self-fulfillment; the old belief in "our civilizing mission" persists.

While critical of the metanarrative of modernizing progress (courtesy of the IMF/World Bank), I should also say here that I do not count myself as one of those postmodernist skeptics who believe that everything is a manifestation of pure power, discourse or textuality, arbitrary social constructions whose truth-claims cannot be adjudicated. After all, reality is what hurts . . .

Imperial Triumphalism

Multiculturalism is celebrated today as the accompaniment to the fall of the Evil Empire and the triumph of liberal capitalist democracy. Ishmael Reed, among others, has trumpeted the virtues of "America: The Multinational Society."

"Reed's term "multinational" continues the thought of Du Bois, the proponents of La Raza Unida [a

radical Chicano party active in the 1970s—ed.] , and the theories of internal colonialism. Ironically, however, Reed declares somewhat naïvely that “the United States is unique in the world: The world is here” in New York City, Los Angeles, etc.”

Reed, I suspect, doesn't mean that the problems of the underdeveloped peoples have come in to plague American cities. With this figure of subsumption or synecdochic linkage, America reasserts a privileged role in the world—all the margins, the absent Others, are redeemed in an inclusive, homogenized space where cultural differences dissolve or are sorted out into their proper niches in the ranking of national values and priorities. We thus have plural cultures or ethnicities coexisting peacefully, in a free play of monads in the best of all possible worlds—no longer the melting pot of earlier theory but now a salad bowl, a smorgasbord of cultures, the mass consumption of variegated and heterogeneous lifestyles.

There is in this picture, of course, a core or consensual culture to which we add any number of diverse particulars, thus proving that our principles of liberty and tolerance can accommodate those formerly excluded or ignored. In short, your particular is not as valuable or significant as mine.

On closer scrutiny, this liberal mechanism of inclusion—what Herbert Marcuse once called “repressive desublimation”—is a mode of appropriation: It fetishizes and commodifies Others.

The universal swallows the particulars. And the immigrant, or border-crosser like Guillermo Gomez Pena or Coco Fusco, our most provocative performance-artists, is always reminded that to gain full citizenship, unambiguous rules must be obeyed: Proficiency in English is mandatory, assimilation of certain procedures and rituals are assumed, and so on and so forth.

Cultural pluralism, first broached in the twenties by Horace Kallen, has been refurbished for the needs of the “New World Order.” What the multiculturalist orthodoxy (of left or right varieties) of today elides, however, is the history of the struggles of people of color—both those within the metropolis and the peripheries.

While the military armies of racial supremacy were defeated in World War II, the practices of the liberal nation-state continue to reproduce the domination and subordination of racialized populations in overt and subtle ways. The highly touted concept of civic nationalism, a framework for harmonizing ethnic differences, is bound to reproduce the racialization of identity and the processes of stigmatization and marginalization witnessed in the history of the sociopolitical formation.

Others who are different, inferior or subordinate to us, are constructed to define the rights-bearing subject of the liberal nation-state. These Others are excluded or exteriorized—undocumented aliens, etc.—in order to establish the boundaries of the nation-state. In the process, a fictive ethnicity of the nation emerges to validate its legitimacy and naturalness.

As against those who insist on conformity to a uniform monolithic culture, I am for the recognition of the integrity and importance of peoples' cultures and ways of life, and for their right to exist and flourish.

But how can this recognition of multiplicity be universalized? Not, I believe, within the existing global logic of corporate accumulation. I believe that multiculturalism, so long as it is conceived within the existing framework of the hegemonic nation-state or bloc of states founded on inequality and hierarchy, cannot offer the means to realize justice, fairness and recognition of people's singular identities and worth around the world.

The multiculturalist respect for the Other's specificity, within the existing framework, is the very form of asserting one's own superiority. According to Slavoj Žižek, this paradox underlies

multiculturalism as, in fact, the authentic “cultural logic of multinational” or globalized capitalism.

So I am afraid the race question will be with us in the next millennium as long as the conditions that produce and reproduce it are the foundation of the prevailing social structures and institutional practices of our everyday lives.

I originally wanted to end these brief remarks with Chief Joseph’s eloquent response to the genocidal and ethnocidal practices of the U.S. government in the wake of the Nez Perce War of 1879, his plea that all peoples should be treated equally, or the well-known testimonio of Chief Seattle on the need to value our natural surroundings and reaffirm our connection with the earth.

However, it seems appropriate in this gathering to recall what the novelist John Berger once said: In our century of homelessness, migration, exile and diaspora—when all of us have been uprooted from our home, whether it’s the village or some other country and continent, an ancestral habitat long gone, or home now distant in time—the only defense against solitude and individual helplessness is the solidarity of all, of which this event today is an inspiring example.

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P.S.

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