

## Editorials

# Rethinking Race

**Anthony M. Platt**

*Lift up your faces, you have a piercing need  
For this bright morning dawning for you.  
History, despite its wrenching pain,  
Cannot be unlived, but if faced  
With courage, need not be lived again.*

— Maya Angelou, 1993

**O**PTIMISM OF THE HEART AND PESSIMISM OF THE MIND, AS THE OLD LEFT ADAGE goes, is reversed for me these days. The political defeat and self-destruction of revolutionary social movements and parties, the military hegemony of the United States, and the staying power of the capitalist world economy have quickly sapped the spirit of even the most enthusiastic leftist. The models for achieving human equality that seemed so promising only 20 years ago — whether the state socialism of the former U.S.S.R. and Eastern Europe, the decolonization and national liberation struggles in the Third World, Keynesian-style social democracy in the West, or the creativity of New Lefts unleashed by the spirit of 1968 — are in crisis and disarray.

It is true, as Maya Angelou (1993) proclaimed at the Inauguration, that with Clinton “The horizon leans forward/Offering you space” and that, compared to Reagan and Bush’s legacy of malign neglect, the new administration offers “Very simply/With hope — /Good Morning.” Yet with respect to the issue of race, we see very little evidence of moral urgency or political vision emanating from Washington, D.C. There have been no grand conferences, no populist town-hall meetings, and no gathering of academics and opinion-makers to formulate strategies for attacking racism. The Haitian refugees were turned back, while Cubans continue to be given a hero’s welcome. Millions of dollars were poured into keeping the lid on Los Angeles, while a pittance was allotted to African American, Latino, and Korean neighborhoods. There is also no lack of money for

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police and prisons, while every day some 500,000 black men sit wasting away in their cages.

The public discourse about race has been similarly dispiriting. “On the tainted air broods fear,” wrote Du Bois 90 years ago in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1979: 30), but this observation could just as well characterize the literature about “political correctness,” which, after all is said and done, is a polite exercise in putting the natives back in their ghettos, *barrios*, and reservations. And often it’s not even very polite. “Just at the moment when everyone else has become a ‘person,’ blacks have become blacks,” complained Allan Bloom in the book that made it fashionable to blame African Americans for perpetuating, if not inventing, racism. “There is now a large black presence in major universities, frequently equivalent to their proportion in the general population,” fantasized Bloom. “But they have, by and large, proved indigestible. Most keep to themselves” (Bloom, 1987: 91, 92). When Bloom’s book sold over a million hardback copies, the publishing industry rushed to press with new diatribes against the dangers of multiculturalism (D’Souza, 1991; Kimball, 1990; Sowell, 1993; Steele, 1990). The media responded enthusiastically, transforming minor academics into authoritative pundits who fill endless op-eds, talk shows, and documentaries with dire warnings about the return to “tribalism.” Even Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., the dean of American history, joined the fray with an attack on “ethnic ideologues” — and he is not talking about fundamentalist Jews or Christians — who threaten “to become a counter-revolution against the original theory of America as ‘one people,’ a common culture, a single nation” (Schlesinger, 1991: 17). It is ironic that Schlesinger’s project on *The Disuniting of America* was bankrolled by Whittle Communications, a leading advocate of private schools, and that the book’s call for a defense of a “common American culture” is interspersed with two-page, color advertisements for Federal Express — “When it comes to the international shipping business, we know our way around like the natives. Because we *are* the natives,” reads one.

While this brand of “cultural racism” and “ethnic absolutism,” to use Stuart Hall’s terms (1992: 308), dominates the commercial media, a refreshingly innovative debate about race is under way in activist political and academic circles. In this historical moment of paralysis in practice and strategy, new critiques of taken-for-granted paradigms and new developments in theory are quickly liberating our minds, if not our souls. As Immanuel Wallerstein (1991) has noted, we need to not only *rethink* our strategies and analyses, but also to *unthink* much of the intellectual baggage that we inherited from 19th-century social science (Marxism included). The Left in particular needs to be armed with a much more sophisticated body of theory in order to understand the resiliency of capitalism and the failures of seemingly revolutionary movements and states. It is a healthy sign that many of us are undertaking a reconsideration of our past theoretical journeys. Hence my optimism of the mind.

Recent work on race has opened up some encouraging theoretical and strategic possibilities. In the past, most progressive analysts focused on exposing and documenting the dynamics of racial oppression, as well as humanizing people who had been reduced to less-than-human stereotypes or pathological victims. Racial cultures were typically framed in essentialist terms, reflecting the unifying experiences of oppression and the need to construct positive identities of difference. This was a necessary building-block and a corrective to racism in the social sciences, but it was also a limitation. The search for cultural unity and integrity meant that significant internal differences and divisions (of class, gender, sexuality, politics) were often ignored or minimized. Most work was not only race-specific in the tradition of “separate spheres,” but also tended to emphasize only one ethnicity, usually African Americans, typically framed in gender-neutral terms.

In recent years there has been a qualitative break with this kind of linear interpretation. As Stuart Hall (1988a) has observed, we are at the end of a certain innocence in cultural politics. Many intellectuals seem to be following Cornel West’s admonition that a “race-transcending prophet is someone who never forgets about the significance of race but refuses to be confined by race” (hooks and West, 1991: 49). Ronald Takaki’s ground-breaking work on race and culture in the 19th century, published over a decade ago, gave us some important insights that we have been slow to develop. “Where scholars have examined separately the oppression of blacks, Indians, Mexicans, and Asians,” wrote Takaki (1979: *xiii*, 136), “I have tried to analyze the ways the experiences of these different groups related to each other.... While studies...have advanced our understanding of the subordination of blacks and women respectively, they have tended to analyze the two groups separately.”

A dynamic, relational, and dialectical approach to race and gender, in which cultural attitudes and representations are located in their material contexts, set the stage for further studies that are gradually challenging the theoretical ghettoization of race. “Whiteness” is no longer seen as an unproblematized given but, like “blackness” and other racial categories, a matter of political, cultural, and social construction (Roediger, 1991; Saxton, 1990; Gilroy, 1987). Similarly, it is not enough to add gender and sexuality to class and race but, as in the films of Marlon Riggs (*Ethnic Notions*, *Tongues Untied*, and *Color Adjustment*), to uncover and explain their interdependence. The kind of imaginative work that is under way demonstrates the importance of moving back and forth between academic disciplines and different levels of theory. Mike Davis (1990: 265–322), for example, draws upon urban sociology, architecture, race relations, postmodernism, and criminology to make sense of the “war on drugs” in Los Angeles’ ghettos and *barrios*.

Our understanding of race has a new richness and complexity when it is informed by an analysis in which class, race, and genders are constitutive of the

material relations of production and reproduction, when racism and sexism are understood as reciprocally determining processes, not simply a social by-product of exploitation. The work of Ronald Takaki (1979), bell hooks (1992), Michele Wallace and Gina Dent (1992), and Patricia Hill Collins (1990) in this country, and of Stuart Hall (1992), Homi Bhabha (1990), Paul Gilroy (1987), and others in England exemplifies this fruitful reworking of cultural analysis. Similarly, studies of race and racism are being stretched by reevaluating the concept of ethnicity (Sollors, 1986).

The new literature on agency has tried to break through binary approaches that swing between the extremes of heroic resilience or an overdetermined structuralism. Left theories have always been concerned about the ideological means through which relations of domination are enforced, contested, and received: the cultural space between the formal institutions of power and people's daily lived reality. Postmodernism and deconstruction, gender and cultural studies have enlarged this field of inquiry, especially given the political defeat of Leninism. Gramscian notions of hegemony have taken on a new complexity that befits a world of globalized culture (Eagleton, 1991). No longer can we characterize ideology as only a reactive instrument of power, or culture as simply another important site of investigation to be added to economic analysis. The challenge, as Janet Wolff (1991: 171) has observed, is "the integral place of culture *in* social processes and in social change: the cultural formation and identity of social groups, as well as of ideologies, discourses, and practices." Recent work on nationalism, racism, and patriotism perhaps best exemplifies Wolff's call for a cultural materialism that integrates the analysis of texts and representations into economic and political processes (Anderson, 1991; Bhabha, 1990; Parker, Russo, Sommer, and Yaeger, 1992; Samuel, 1989; Hall et al., 1978). Some contributions within cultural studies in particular have enabled us to explore the Gramscian approach to ideology from the bottom up and thus to appreciate how hegemony is constructed, shaped, and contested in the shifting, unstable terrain of everyday "common sense" (Clarke, 1991). This emphasis on the *resonance* of social control within working-class communities and popular culture is a common theme in the new social history and cultural studies. Stuart Hall's (1988b) analysis of Thatcherism's appeal to an "authoritarian populism" is perhaps the best-known example of this genre.

Occasionally we can find studies in which the worlds of human agency so engage each other in all their dynamic complexity that we are able to understand the actual processes through which racialization is contested and imposed. In Ramon Gutiérrez' recent book — a social history of New Mexico through three centuries of Spanish, Mexican, and Indian relations between 1500 and 1846 — we learn about both the "visions of the victors" and the "voice of the mute and silent," not as separate, disconnected monologues, but as:

a dialogue between cultures, each of which had many voices that often spoke in unison, but just as often were diverse and divisive.... [T]he historical process that unfolds here is a story of contestation, of mediation and negotiation between cultures and between social groups. This is not the history of Spanish men or of Indian men, or of their battles, triumphs, and defeats. It is a history of the complex web of interactions between men and women, young and old, rich and poor, slave and free, Spaniard and Indian, all of whom fundamentally depended on the other for their own self-definition (Gutiérrez, 1991: xvii–xviii).

A similar multidimensional perspective informs Sarah Deutsch's (1987) analysis of the cultural and economic contests between Anglos and Hispanics in the Southwest from 1880 to 1940.

The new developments in theory and strategy should be welcomed. In revitalizing and reconstructing the field of "race," they help us to break out of dogmas and compartments that gave us a false sense of security and put blinders on our imagination. Of course, there is a danger that the search for complexity will degenerate into an amoral relativism and what Hall (1988a: 28) calls an "endlessly sliding discursive liberal-pluralism." We need to take that risk. The structures of domination are more resourceful than we thought, the struggles for equality more difficult. We need the kind of interdisciplinary and comparative theory that not only gives us a better grasp of the dynamics of racism and ethnicity, but also enables us to construct a political vision of equality that resonates in the public imagination. There is much to both rethink and unthink.

The contributors to this special issue of *Social Justice* are part of this process of reflection and renewal. We begin with various aspects of the political crisis in race relations: the contradictions between and within communities of color as viewed from the perspective of Korean American and Latina activists (Kim, Martínez); a proposal to address the increasing isolation and defensiveness of the African American movement (Childs); a personal call to recognize the hybridity of American race (Dunbar Ortiz) and another to make feminism a copartner in the struggle against racism (Daly); and a view from campus of the battle over multiculturalism (Platt). The second section reflects the new thinking about race: a reconsideration of the relationship between structure and agency (McCaughan); the strengths and limits of essentialist approaches to black culture (Hall); a postmodern analysis of the role of Asian Americans in the politics of affirmative action (Takagi); and a reconsideration of an out-of-favor theorist (Platt). Finally, we include a variety of reports and observations about struggles for justice in the legal system (Johnson, Aguirre and Baker), Latino communities (Rodriguez, Boyle), and the American Indian movement (Fordham, Peltier and Croy); and a discussion of the lessons to be learned from the Black Panther Party (Dunbar Ortiz).

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