Nationalism’s Bloody Terrain
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Nationalism’s Bloody Terrain
Racism, Class Inequality, and the Politics of Recognition

Edited by
George Baca
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INTRODUCTION
Politics of Recognition and Myths of Race

George Baca

At the time of this writing, the world is watching incredulously as terror and deprivation ravage the poorest citizens of New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The region’s middle class and elite fled the disaster, while federal authorities’ inaction resulted in starvation for those too poor to leave. Such callousness embodied in US civil society and state institutions has been made transparent to the world, illuminating the increasing class inequality that has evolved since the passage of the Civil Rights Act. In light of this conflation of racism and class inequality, this forum focuses on the ways that multi-cultural politics mystify such power relations with romantic recollections of popular resistance to racism in the post–World War II era: decolonization, the US civil rights movement, and the fall of apartheid in South Africa.

Such mythologies of ‘racial progress’ pervade contemporary scholarship on racism, often providing triumphal narratives of how, after years of anti-colonial and civil rights struggles, the disenfranchised have finally
made their voices heard. To be sure, these wide-ranging social movements contributed to the demise of legally sanctioned racism throughout the world. However, while international capital and national governments responded to these direct challenges to the legitimacy of the liberal-democratic state by gradually dismantling officially sanctioned racism, those same institutional reforms reconstituted racial domination in other, pernicious ways. More than merely co-opting popular movements, reform policies defused struggles for liberation as they recuperated the energy of these struggles into the maintenance of liberal forms of power. The ‘cunning of recognition’, as Elizabeth Povinelli describes this maneuver of power, does not refuse to recognize past atrocities committed by the liberal state, but acknowledges the horror of these actions—e.g., slavery, genocide, segregation, and apartheid—in order to secure and reinvigorate the future of the liberal nation-state and its core values (Povinelli 2002: 29). In short, liberal forms of multiculturalism use national rituals of apology for the past mistreatment of subordinated and oppressed members of society not to transfer power or to change society but to re-create the national form.

Racial reforms—from attempts at reconciliation in Australia, to civil rights in the US, to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa—function as narratives of national redemption, maintaining (and sometimes inventing) racial cleavages along the way (see Dominguez 1994). What surprise, then, that ‘racial reform’ has overlapped—if not conspired—with neo-conservative assaults on the welfare state that have gutted the very institutions that were supposed to remedy these inequalities (Baca 2004; see Prashad in this issue). Such co-existence of racial reform with the deepening of racial and class inequality is not as anomalous as some commentators suggest (e.g., Holt
Instead, the manner in which racial reforms complement racializing discourse illustrates the politics of nationalism, which requires that we theorize the relationship between the racist content of neo-liberal reforms and the rise of multi-culturalism (Baca 2003). As many commentators have argued, racism and its passions are created by and subordinated to the nation (Kapferer 1998; Williams 1989). This forum develops these insights by examining the way that nationalists have used liberal-democratic forms of racism to rework narratives and visions of the nation to meet new political and economic challenges. Contemporary reforms modify racism in terms of contemporary problems associated with globalization as well as the new political context following decolonization. Nevertheless, such reforms draw upon the passions of nationalist discourse to shape—and obscure—class relations. It is the connection between racism and the nation that is the substance of nationalism. As such, the power of nationalism lies in its capacity to provide interactive frames in which the relationships between state institutions and diverse social relations are negotiated (Lomnitz-Adler 2001: 14). Thus, race has attained its modern significance as a mechanism of state control and civil society and as an embodiment of national culture (Williams 1989).

This forum places the practices of racism at the center of analysis of so-called post-racist or multi-cultural nation-states. In this way, each contributor analytically treats racism and its related concepts of race, identity, culture, and naturalizing symbols of blood to highlight the manner in which governing institutions use nationalist precepts to create ‘races’. In the end, it is racism—the actual political practices of domination—that makes ‘race’ salient (Cooper and Brubaker 2000), especially in its multi-cultural and liberal-democratic form.
Myths of Paradox and the Cunning of Recognition

Understanding these connections between racism, nationalism, and class inequality requires historical sensitivity; we must explore the political and economic factors that motivate the mythic post-liberal state. As Brackette Williams reminds us, “[A] useful prologue to the interpenetration of race, class, and culture in nation-states must be the mythmaking and the material factors that motivate and rationalize its elements” (1989: 429). The material factors related to the emergence of the contemporary concept of racism derives from seventeenth-century class formation, when European merchants and colonists transformed the Caribbean and the southern US into a frontier zone. European colonists invented the modern concept of ‘race’ to make slavery congruent with the Enlightenment ideals of liberty and civic equality. Race resolved the contradiction between slavery—the economic underpinning of both the American and French Revolutions—and liberty by ascribing moral and intellectual features to phenotype, which normalized the disqualification of Afro-Americans from civic participation (Fields 1990: 114). Accordingly, racism is neither paradoxical nor contradictory to democracy, liberalism, or nationalism. In fact, the idea that racism is paradoxical to democracy is intrinsic to the mythical construct of the nation dating back to the eighteenth century, when anti-slavery intellectuals and politicians conceived of racism as being a fundamental contradiction to the basic national precepts of civic equality and universal natural rights (see Trouillot 1995). As such, the historical moment of abolition posed the ideology of nationalism as a paradox to racism.

Since the racialization of the New World plantation system, the social principle of race has emerged as an
international framework of ranked categories that segments the world’s population, which differentially recognizes humanity (Trouillot 1990). The multi-cultural state—and its liberal racial reforms—maintains this same hierarchy of races that was at the center of the North Atlantic planetary system. Conventionally, scholars view the US civil rights movement or the fall of apartheid as if it threatened global racial order, a view which is complicit with the multi-cultural state’s national narrative of redemption. Such a view fails to analyze how political reforms, following in the wake of decolonization and the rise of new social movements, have strengthened the global system of race by reworking this international hierarchy. Howard Winant (2001), exemplifies this tendency as he misrecognizes these developments as a “rupture.” Moreover, he glorifies and reifies these movements as “the global resistance to white supremacy.” However, he mitigates his optimism by sounding “a political alarm: all around the world the momentum of struggle against racism is stalemated” (ibid.: xiv). Accordingly, he tells us, in Myrdalian fashion, of the “paradox” of a “new racism”:

Paradoxically, in this reformed version racial inequality can live on, still battening on all sorts of stereotypes and fears, still resorting to exclusionism and scapegoating when politically necessary, still invoking the supposed superiority of ‘mainstream’ (aka white) values, and cheerfully maintaining that equality has been achieved. It is rather ironic that this new, ‘color-blind’ racial system may prove more effective in containing the challenges posed over the past few decades by movements for racial justice than any intransigent, overly racist ‘backlash’ could possible have been. (Winant 2001: 289)

By seeing the relationship between racial reforms and racism as paradoxical, Winant misses the crucial point: the essence of race is power and the contests over power, not
merely the contest between ‘blacks’ and ‘whites’ (Fields 2003). Race is also about struggles over power among whites themselves. White supremacy was never the single theme of world history. Even in the US, white supremacy has never led to consensus on a single program (ibid.). Instead, elite forces have consistently harnessed racial ideologies to economic and state projects in order to dominate both blacks and whites with what “may be characterized by a patronizing tolerance” (Fields 1982: 159).

Recently, Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant (1999), in “On the Cunning of Imperial Reason,” dropped a bomb on many such anti-racist US scholars—especially those influenced by the book Racial Formations (1994), which Winant co-authored with Michael Omi. Most notably, Bourdieu and Wacquant argued that North American scholars of race represented US imperialism in its most “cunning” form as they had imposed North America’s peculiar and rigid form of race, based upon the principle of hypodescent, foisting US national values and beliefs upon Brazil as well as the rest of the world. Specifically, Bourdieu and Wacquant charged political scientist Michael Hanchard with applying North American racial categories to Brazil, in the process making the history of US civil rights into the universal standard for the struggle of all racially oppressed groups (1999: 44). This intervention resolved little, unraveling into an inter-necine dispute whereby supporters of US scholarship in Brazil accused Wacquant and Bourdieu of anti-Americanism while being seduced by the Brazilian myth of racial democracy (French 2000, 2003; Hanchard 2003).

Nevertheless, Bourdieu and Wacquant made an important point in that they showed how academic knowledge, even in its critical forms, often reproduces the underlying logic of US nationalism—the racial principle of hypodescent—and imposes it on foreign countries, failing to appreciate the indigenous logic of class and race. Interest-