Race, ethnicity, nation, and class within theories of structure and agency.

by Edward J. McCaughan

An inadequate comprehension of the relationship between social structure and human agency has caused a failure to understand the conflicts among race, ethnicity, nation and class. Marx, Durkheim, Weber and Lacan are among those who theorized on structure and agency. Theorists of the 1980s, including Immanuel Wallerstein and Samir Amin, have helped to expand understanding of the influences of race, ethnicity, class and nationalism.

CULTURAL HOMOGENIZATION AND THE UNIVERSALIZATION OF "WESTERN" VALUES AND behavior were presumed by liberalism and Marxism alike to be among the component results of "progress."(1) Differences, and therefore conflicts, historically rooted in class, racial, ethnic, or national structures, were gradually to fall behind, obsolete and exhausted by the long, inevitable march forward. Modernization theories, hegemonic in North American social sciences and state policy in the 1950s and 1960s, foresaw a linear progression, at home and abroad, toward a broadly "middle class" consumer society in which the market and liberal-democratic institutions would erode class, racial, and national conflict, and, of course, triumph over communism. The great American "melting pot" would eventually relegate racial and ethnic divisions to history books. Foreign investment and aid would set Latin America, Asia, and Africa on the path toward modernization, middle-class prosperity, and therefore stability.

Marxists certainly foresaw a more conflictive, painful, and bloody road ahead, since the material wealth and power of the national bourgeoisies and imperialists would first have to be appropriated by the world's toilers. With that accomplished, however, socialism could be constructed and class differences eliminated, thereby naturally resolving the "secondary" contradictions posed by racial or ethnic differences. There were, of course, as many versions of the Marxist narrative as there were of the modernizationist scenario, some more structuralist and others more voluntarist. Today, relatively few Left intellectuals or activists would defend the disservice we did to Marx with dogmatization that surely sent him spinning in his grave. Liberalism, on the other hand, and only slightly reworked modernization scripts, are enjoying renewed box-office appeal worldwide. Virtually the entire world has lovingly embraced capitalism and electoral democracy, or so liberalism's booking agents and publicists would have us believe. Surely we are about to finally witness the globalization and universalization of Western culture, the end of class, racial, and national conflict -- the "end of history," in the now much over-hyped phrase.

Yet daily events throughout the world indicate everything to the contrary. African-Americans, Latins, and Korean-Americans in Los Angeles were the main protagonists in racially and ethnically charged reactions to last year's verdict in the Rodney King case. Malcolm X's legacy has been embraced by a new generation of American Blacks. The aggressive, even violent, defense of white, middle-class, male privilege has gained new legitimacy in the U.S. and England after the extensive efforts of Reaganism and Thatcherism to reconstruct national political culture. The nations of the former Soviet bloc are splintering into apparently ever more hostile, often ethnically-based territories. The threat of racially and ethnically driven fascism is again a reality in much of Europe. The Germans and French are increasingly polarized over the issue of non-European immigrant populations. Indigenous peoples throughout Latin America have achieved a new level of self-awareness and organization that has significantly altered the political terrain of several nations. Islamic movements and governments are increasingly important in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. There is no end to the list of major world events that underscore the degree to which interests, demands, and conflicts based on the tangled identities of class, race, ethnicity, and nation persist, indeed even flourish, in a world system that liberals and Marxists both presumed would become more homogeneous as systemic structures were globalized.(2) The failure of both social scientists and political activists to fully understand these phenomena is in large part due to our inadequate grasp of the relationship between human agency and social structure.

A good deal of sociological theory has aimed at accurately conceptualizing the relationship between social structure and the agency of the human subject. For the most part, this exploration has taken place within two distinct but interrelated realms. Working within one realm, theorists have sought to explain the material basis of "objective" social structures such as, in Marxist terms, the mode of production and superstructure; and then, within those objective social structures, they have sought to explain the range of agency or freedom available for social actors to challenge, deviate from, or change materially-based structures. Working within a different realm, other theorists have focussed on the material basis of the structures of our "subjectivity" and of our cultural representations of the material world; then, within those structured cultural codes,
Race, ethnicity, nation, and class within theories of structure and agency.

they, too, have explored the range of human agency, such as in the Saussurean distinction between the long-term, structured langue of language and the parole of the speaking subject. While it has been important analytically to separate these two alternate ways of thinking about structure and agency, it is even more important that we find ways of reuniting them so as to better understand how they interact in the real world to produce and reproduce the totality of "objective" and "subjective" social structure and human agency. Achieving that necessary reunion is certainly beyond the scope of this article, but it is a goal toward which I hope to point.

I will first review attempts by several of the dominant figures in classical and contemporary sociology to theorize one or the other of these two realms of structure and agency. I will then focus on more recent efforts to theorize the formation of class, race, nationalism, and ethnicity as dynamic, historically contingent, and reciprocally determinant processes of formation and struggle. Hopefully, we can begin to see how these are processes that, in practice, take place simultaneously within both the "objective" and "subjective" (cultural, representational, discursive) realms of structure and agency. Such an understanding is essential to the construction of progressive political strategies and alliances capable of dismantling ancient and oppressive hierarchies of class and race.

Structure and Agency in Sociological Theory

Marx

Marx focussed largely on the "objective" realm of structure and agency and only secondarily on the realm of culture and representation, which he understood as operating within the "superstructure" that arose from the material base of a society's mode of production. For Marx, if not for most 20th-century Marxism, nature, social structures, and human agency are thoroughly and dialectically intertwined. Any attempt to pull them apart, to assert the predominance of one over the other, is to risk unraveling the whole ball of yarn.

In early writings, such as "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," nature is for Marx the first and ultimate constraint upon human activity, and in this sense, Marx is fundamentally a materialist. Human agency, however, is located by Marx precisely in our capacity to act on and transform nature through social labor -- our capacity to challenge and at times even overcome material constraints through the conscious organization of social relations. Nevertheless, human agency for Marx does not therefore constitute some predetermined essence. As he suggests in "Theses on Feuerbach," "the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each individual. In its reality, it is the ensemble of the social relations" (in Tucker, 1978: 145). Both human nature and social structures are products of human activity upon and within nature.

Another way to understand how Marx conceptualized the relationship between structure and agency is to look at his writings on consciousness and ideology. From concepts like "dominant ideology" and "false consciousness" in earlier works such as "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844" and "The Communist Manifesto," through the development of his notion of "commodity fetishism" in Capital, Marx provides the elements of a theory of ideology as it pertains to how human beings think as well as to how we live. This can also be seen in the subjective meanings of "alienation" in Marx. Marx again asserts material conditions (including nature) and social relations as the context in which thought and ideology develop, but he stops well short of the economic reductionism exhibited by so many of his students.

Interesting passages from Engels' "Letters on Historical Materialism" indicate the degree to which he and Marx also understood the ways in which ideology also works on the material context of human activity. For example, Engels wrote "[I]deological conception...reacts in its turn upon the economic basis and may, within certain limits, modify it" (in Tucker, 1978: 763). Similarly, Engels suggested that, "once a historic element has been brought into the world by other, ultimately economic causes, it reacts, can react on its environment and even on the causes that have given rise to it" (Ibid.: 767). In other words, while Marx and Engels were firmly materialist, they were not simple reductionists; rather, they understood that ideas both emerged from and, in turn, could reshape particular material and social conditions.

Much 20th-century Marxism has been marked by economic determinism in the theoretical realm and idealism or voluntarism in the political realm, missing the fundamental dialectics of historical materialism present in the body of Marx' work. Moreover, neither Marx nor his followers directed much of the power of historical materialism to understanding social relations other than class, e.g., relations defined in terms of gender or race. For Marx, social history was the history of class struggle, and he largely ignored the importance of conflict and struggle within the social systems that produce gender and racial hierarchies. Perhaps this is partly because Marx' master work, Capital, was primarily focussed on understanding the workings of capitalism and the capital-labor relations particular to this mode of production in the 19th century. He never trained his overall theoretical approach on simultaneously existing modes of social and cultural production, such as patriarchy and the family,

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Race, ethnicity, nation, and class within theories of structure and agency.

racism and ethnicity. Nonetheless, Marx provided many, though not all, of the essential elements necessary to understand the relationship between social structure and human agency.

Durkheim

The relationship between agency and social structure, which Durkheim discusses in terms of individual autonomy versus social solidarity, is central to his first great work, The Division of Labor in Society: "It has seemed to us that what resolved this apparent antinomy was the transformation of social solidarity which arises from the ever-increasing division of society" (Durkheim, 1984: xxx).

Durkheim's explanation is far less dynamic than that provided by Marx. For him, social structures and social solidarity emerge in a progressive, linear fashion with the evolution of an ever more complex division of labor, requiring bonds of mutual dependence and "organic" solidarity to replace the simple "mechanical" solidarity that held together primitive societies. Durkheim's evolving division of labor is presented as a natural law. Moreover, as elaborated in The Division of Labor in Society, his model leaves little room for human agency -- and themes of the state, power, domination, and social class are all relatively secondary. "[B]ecause individuals form a society, new phenomena occur whose cause is association, and which, reacting upon the consciousness of individuals, for the most part shapes them. This is why, although society is nothing without individuals, each of them is more a product of society than he is the author" (Ibid.: 288).

In later work, however, such as his The Elementary Forms of Religious Life (1965), Durkheim begins to discuss human knowledge and human consciousness as historically and socially constructed -- i.e., not simply as the "natural" result of society's evolution toward a more complex division of labor. In this regard, Durkheim's theory of collective consciousness is an essential contribution to understanding the agency of the human subject. His presentation of collective consciousness in his later work allows for more dynamic human intervention. In Durkheim's view, different societies in different times and spaces collectively experience and represent different realities: "[S]ociety...has its own personal physiognomy and its idiosyncrasies; it is a particular subject and consequently particularizes whatever it thinks of. Therefore collective representations also contain subjective elements..." (Durkheim, 1965: 493). To understand human consciousness as neither predetermined nor as simply reducible to a reflection of "objective" material conditions, it is helpful to view knowledge as a social and historical construction that changes over time. In Durkheim's presentation, the concepts that make up the basis of logical thought change when we discover "some imperfection" in them, when they have to be "rectified" (Ibid.: 481), because human beings verify collective representations "by their own experience" (Ibid.: 486).

Missing from Durkheim's model, however, is any convincing theory of power, domination, and authority, or a theory of social classes (not to mention gender or race and ethnicity) that would help explain how consciousness and representations are constructed in practice. An example is his analysis of the social conflicts that emerge from industrial society (and that seem to contradict his model of increasing "organic solidarity") as pathological deviations from the norm. "Contrary to what has been said, the division of labor does not produce these consequences through some imperative of its own nature, but only in exceptional and abnormal circumstances" (Durkheim, 1984: 307). Class struggle for Durkheim is not a site for the exercise of human agency in the contention over society's structures and representations, but a pathological deviation from normal collective consciousness and solidarity.

Part of the problem is that in Durkheim's model, there are few significant actors between "society" and the "individual." As a result, within the limits of his framework, there is no adequate way to explain why certain representations predominate over others at any given time. In The Division of Labor in Society, for example, Durkheim defines collective consciousness without any reference to class or other social distinctions: "The totality of beliefs and sentiments common to the average members of society forms a determinate system with a life of its own. It can be termed the collective or common consciousness" (Durkheim, 1984: 38--39). Yet in The Elementary Forms of Religious Life, Durkheim seems to acknowledge that there may be individuals within a given society whose consciousness might not coincide with the predominant collective consciousness. Thus, he writes:

If [society] is to live, there is not merely need of a satisfactory moral conformity, but also there is a minimum of logical conformity beyond which it cannot safely go. For this reason it uses all its authority upon its members to forestall such dissidences (Durkheim, 1965: 30).

Similarly, he points out that "there can be no society which does not feel the need of upholding and reaffirming at regular intervals the collective sentiments and the collective ideas which make its unity and its personality" (Ibid.: 475). Thus the importance of moral education and legal sanctions. However, without a theory of knowledge that includes a theory of social power and authority, we are unable to explain adequately how "society" determines the norms around which it imposes such unity on its
"members." Durkheim’s circular answer is ultimately purely structuralist and functionalist: society’s evolving division of labor gives rise to the bonds and norms that are required for it to function. Pathological deviations are corrected with moral education and sanctions. Despite Durkheim’s liberal concern with individual autonomy, then, his theoretical framework leaves largely undefined the potential source of or limits to human agency.

Weber

Concepts of structure and agency are central to Weber’s work. The structures of power and obedience are at the heart of Weber’s Economy and Society (1978), and it is within such structures that he seeks to explain human action. At the same time, agency permeates Weber’s analysis. He draws a sharp distinction between “behavior,” which he sees as reflexive and animal-like, and “action,” which is his real interest. For Weber, social action involves willful, meaningful, interpretative relationships among social actors. Weber seeks to uncover the motives, the subjective understanding underlying social action. In contrast to Marx, Weber is deeply concerned with the irrational in history, as well as with the rational calculation that drives the human subject. Thus, in his typology of legitimate authority, he includes not only traditional and rational-legal, but also charismatic.

Weber attempts to correct the economic determinism of some Marxism in works such as The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1958), in which he seeks a balance of cultural and materialist explanations of social behavior and action. Like Marx, Weber sees competition and struggle as key to social change; but for him, the competition and struggle among status groups, within the state bureaucracy and among nations, are as important as class conflict. Status groups, classes, religion and ethics form the bases of the structures of social power and obedience in Weber’s scheme.

An analysis of status groups allows Weber to add complex issues, such as lifestyle and honor, to an explanation of the apparently nonrational aspects of human action and social movements that are largely ignored by Marx. This component of Weber has become particularly important to contemporary analyses of social action centered on racial and ethnic, as well as gender and sexual identities.

Weber’s work tends to be more fragmented than that of either Marx or Durkheim. It is more formalistic and less dialectical than that of Marx, but certainly far less evolutionary than that of Durkheim. Still, Weber believed that an historical tendency toward the rationalization of all aspects of life would lead to a “means-to-an-end” rationality as the universal form of domination. In his later work, Weber presents a more complex, causal model of the development of Western civilization and capitalism. In that model, the bureaucratic state, responding to demands from the citizenry for calculable law, is key. Weber sees the bureaucratic state as having broken down feudalism by freeing labor and land, passifying territories, eliminating barriers to markets, standardizing taxation and currency, and regularizing contracts and banking. In this picture, human capacity for rational action, which Weber respected as a source of agency, creates the ultimate structure—the bureaucratic state—that greatly restricts human agency. Individuals increasingly lose the space and capacity for creative change in the context of a growing, bureaucratic, rational “iron cage.”

Lacan

With Jacques Lacan, we move firmly into the “subjective” realm of the structure and agency dichotomy. In an important addition to the socio-historical approach of our three great classical theorists, Lacan (1977) rewrites Freud in light of structuralist linguistics. In so doing, Lacan attempts to transcend the dualism of structure and agency inherent in the classical structuralist paradigm. Lacan begins by “de-biologizing” Freud: the unconscious is reinterpreted as a language-like structure, which is socially and historically constructed rather than biologically determined. To the extent that Lacan sees the unconscious as precoded, the subject is a slave to social structure, as in much of classical structuralism. In fact, for Lacan the subject itself is structured within language’s chain of signifiers; the self is largely imaginary. If we remain strictly within Lacan’s realm, his model is not very useful for our purposes; however, we can draw some very helpful political insights if we adapt his theoretical model to a social subject grounded in material reality. This is because Lacan also endows his subject with creative and conceptual abilities, the capacity to alter language in the process of speech and communication. If we grant our subject such capacity, then we understand human beings as able to alter the very social moorings that anchor us to a particular socially determined role.

How does Lacan’s model theoretically account for such agency? He makes two key, interrelated moves -- one from the tradition of psychoanalysis and one from the tradition of Saussurean structuralism. Lacan argues that in the preoedipal stage, before the subject has been gendered and entered the world of the social language of consensus, each infant develops a completely unique protolanguage. This is materially based, since it emerges from the infant’s need to signify bodily desires, urges, and excitations, which are primarily centered on the mouth and anus. This protolanguage remains embedded in the unconscious, together with the precoded elements of the
social structure, and accounts for the unique creative capacities of each individual subject. Lacan's analysis has been important to some feminists who view this as the stage of human development in which the subject is gendered.

Lacan's second move is to reject the rigid, horizontal chain of relations between signifier and signified, as initially theorized by Saussure. Instead, he establishes a verticality that allows for a slipping and sliding of the relationship between the signified and the signifier, which is, after all, an arbitrary relationship. Thus, when the subject free associates meanings, drawing upon deeply rooted memories stored in the protolanguage component of the unconscious, s/he is able to combine and recombine the linguistic system of signs in a near infinite variety. In other words, there is no simple, one-to-one correspondence between signifier and signified; rather, meaning is accumulated as more signifiers are added to the chain. This semiotic discovery has been an important contribution to understanding the politics of representation.

In this way, Lacan has attempted to provide a theoretical explanation of the ability of the subject, the speaker, to refuse Saussure's dichotomous langue and parole. Ultimately, for Lacan, the process of signification is the process of the subject: life entails the ongoing construction of the self, within the boundaries of language and structure. In this model, then, body and desire drive the subject throughout life to action beyond any preexisting linguistic or social structures of meaning. By adapting Lacan's analysis of the structure/agency relationship in the subjective, representational realm, we can add critical dimensions of the process of social construction and action not present in Marx, Durkheim, or Weber.

Foucault

Elements of Marx, Durkheim, Weber, and Lacan can be seen in Michel Foucault's attempts to transcend the dualism of structure and agency. In his genealogical investigations, such as Discipline and Punish (1979) and The History of Sexuality (1980), Foucault explores structure and subject within concrete history, and in so doing, establishes a space, ambiguous as it is, for conscious agency. Drawing on Marx, Foucault sees the rise of European capitalism as the backdrop for his studies. Like Durkheim, he views all knowledge and consciousness as historically and socially constructed. Like Lacan, Foucault sees human agency as deeply rooted in bodily desires. Perhaps most of all, however, Foucault's work is reminiscent of Weber, as he traces the specific construction of contemporary society (structure and subject) through institutions such as the factory, the prison, and confession. The age of enlightenment and industrialization sees the institutions of total domination flourish. "The Enlightenment," which discovered the liberties, also invented the disciplines" (Foucault, 1979: 222).

Foucault locates structure and subject within specific relations of power and domination, including the demand created by capitalism for a subject that is constructed as a disciplined, capable, but docile individual. For Foucault, all contemporary knowledge is based fundamentally on the need to exert power and control over the individual; science has reduced the individual to an observable, knowable, and therefore controllable subject. Relations of knowledge and power -- combined in the hegemonic discourses of society -- have shaped the essential elements of identity and consciousness (e.g., sexuality). The result is a subject coded by omnipresent, omniscient, Panopticon-like institutions of discipline and domination, which define normalcy and act against deviance. "Like surveillance and with it, normalization becomes one of the great instruments of power of the classical age" (Ibid.: 184). "The whole indefinite domain of the non-conforming is punishable" (Ibid.: 178--179).

However, implicit in Foucault's theory is a free-willed subject, driven by desires located in the body, who must be disciplined and made docile. Capitalist, bourgeois democracy is only possible if the individual has internalized his/her subjugation and thus ceases to challenge the relations of power as they have been constructed. Unlike the somewhat static model of classic structuralism, Foucault's nightmare vision of society contains contradiction: discipline creates an individual who is both enormously capable and subjugated; lines that clearly delineate normal from deviant also urge one to seek the pleasure of deviation.

Something that smacks of revolt, of promised freedom, of the coming age of a different law, slips easily into this discourse of sexual oppression.... Tomorrow sex will be good again. Because this repression is affirmed, one can discreetly bring into coexistence concepts which the fear of ridicule or the bitterness of history prevents most of us from putting side by side: revolution and happiness; or revolution and a different body, one that is newer and more beautiful; or indeed revolution and pleasure. What sustains our eagerness to speak of sex in terms of repression is doubtless this opportunity to speak out against the powers that be, to utter truths and promise bliss, to link together enlightenment, liberation, and manifold pleasures; to pronounce a discourse that combines the fervor of knowledge, the determination to change the laws, and the longing for the garden of earthly delights (Foucault, 1980: 7).
Race, ethnicity, nation, and class within theories of structure and agency.

The agency of Foucault’s subject, then, is rooted largely in desire, in the real, lived body (in this sense, more along the lines of Lacan than Weber).

In sum, the very necessity to construct practices of discipline, subordination, and conformity presupposes the potential of resistance and rebellion. Moreover, the fact that the social structure of knowledge and power as we know it is understood by Foucault as particular to the modern age implies that alternate knowledges and relations can also be constructed. However, Foucault paints an image of a highly successful system of control and domination, where power is located not simply in Weber’s iron cage of rational bureaucracy, but everywhere at once, including (and importantly for the discussion of race, nationalism, and ethnicity that follows) in the dominant discourses of any given society and era.

Foucault’s vision of modern society clearly alerts us to the need to struggle against oppressive power relations on many fronts simultaneously, not simply within the realm of class relations. Unfortunately, however, in Foucault’s work, the actual potential for resistance by the no longer so free-willed subject remains quite ambiguous. He allows us to understand what fires the spirits of resistance, but not what would allow for an organized capacity to challenge the totality of power. As a result, Foucault’s contribution is less useful politically than we might wish.

Bourdieu

Of the theorists reviewed thus far, Pierre Bourdieu comes the closest to bringing together the “objective” and “subjective” realms into a single framework for understanding social structure and human agency. Like Lacan and Foucault, Bourdieu (1977) also attempts to bridge the structure/agency dichotomy. He does so through his theory of practice, which seeks to establish a “third-order knowledge” that bridges the gap between immediate, phenomenological experience and the distanced, objectivist knowledge of the observer (the dichotomy between insider/outsider and observer/observed). A multidimensional concept of time is critical to Bourdieu’s efforts; he asserts that meaningful action can only be understood through the complex layering of the immediate moment of the act, the conjunctural context in which the action takes place, and the distanced view of the observer.

Bourdieu theorizes an intermediate institution/space/zone in which such dichotomies supposedly dissolve: the habitus. Habitus is the site of production of customs, strategies, interpretive skills, practical knowledge, and structured dispositions (not rules), behind which lurk the “objective” social structures of the economy, politics, and kinship. Habitus is the site in which subjects are produced and structures are reproduced. It is, therefore, a concept of great potential importance for understanding the construction of gender, ethnicity, and class.

Relationships in Bourdieu’s model are dialectical and fluid: the subject is formed within habitus, and at the same time is able to improve and manipulate the codes of habitus, even while habitus itself is shaped to a great extent by the larger social structures. Bourdieu’s theory of practice is a theory of conditional freedom: the freedom to acquire practical knowledge or skills, to strategize, to interpret, to manipulate one’s habitus, to improvise, all within the parameters of fluid but nonetheless structural boundaries. The differences that exist among human beings in terms of their material and “symbolic” capital (the latter acquired through habitus) provide the motivation to struggle against such inequality by using one’s capacity to strategize and improvise.

The idea of a conditional freedom is consistent with Marx’ notion of people making history within conditions not of their choice. Bourdieu, however, through the construct of habitus, allows us to understand human agency as it is carried out in other than class terms and in social spaces other than the mode of production. He comes very close, theoretically, to fusing the objective and subjective realms of structure and agency.

From these six theorists, then, we can extract the following important contributions to understanding the relationship between structure and agency:

1. Marx’ dialectical materialism, in which human agency is located in our capacity to challenge and at times overcome material constraints through social labor, the conscious organization of social relations, and class struggle;
2. Durkheim’s concept of knowledge and human consciousness as historically and socially constructed and thus changing over time and space;
3. Weber’s notion of social action as driven by both rational and irrational motivations, by competition and struggle, within structures of power, authority, and obedience;
4. Lacan’s portrait of a subject motivated by bodily desires to alter the codes of preexisting linguistic and social meaning;
5. Foucault’s understanding of power as located not only within class relations, nor simply within the state, but everywhere at once, within desire, within all social relations of class, gender, and sexuality, and within all discourses;
Race, ethnicity, nation, and class within theories of structure and agency.

6. Bourdieu’s understanding of conditional freedom, structured within a multiplicity of habitus as sites for the production of customs, strategies, interpretive and improvisational skills, practical knowledge, and structured dispositions.

Structure and Agency in Race, Ethnicity, and Nationalism

With the advantage of accumulated theoretical work and lived experience, contemporary writings on racism and nationalism help move our theoretical understanding of these phenomena beyond the economic determinism of much earlier Marxism(4) and beyond simplistic structure/agency dichotomies. Increasingly, we are able to see a relationship of reciprocal determination among class, race, ethnicity, and nationalism, each understood as dynamic, historically contingent processes of formation and struggle. They are processes that operate both within the “objective” social structures of the economy, politics, kinship, etc., and within societies’ “subjective” representational or discursive structures. I will begin with those approaches that remain firmly rooted in structures of political economy and then begin to introduce more complex issues of representation and discourse.

Race, Ethnicity, and Nationalism in the Capitalist World System

Immanuel Wallerstein (1987) helps provide a structural understanding of race, nation, and ethnic group as equally important to class as conceptual categories for understanding social experience in the modern world system. Wallerstein presents an elegant, though somewhat functionalist, case for viewing racism, nationalism and ethnicity as each hinging “around one of the basic structural features of the capitalist world-economy” (Ibid.: 381). Combining Marx and Weber, Wallerstein understands race and racism as helping to maintain the axial division of labor represented by the core-periphery antimony. He views nations and nationalism as reflecting the political superstructure (the interstate system) of the capitalist world system, in which nations compete for advantage and power. Both racial and national categories “are claims to the right to possess advantage in the capitalist world-economy” (Ibid.: 385). Ethnic groups and ethnicity, finally, are associated in Wallerstein’s schema with the “creation of household structures that permit the maintenance of large components of non-wage labor in the accumulation of capital” (Ibid.: 381–382). As sketched here by Wallerstein, the relationship between ethnicity and household structures is not made completely clear. However, if we add Bourdieu’s habitus to Wallerstein’s household, we arrive at a fuller picture of the ways in which cultural structures and practices associated with particular ethnic groups have facilitated many economic structural traits of capitalism, such as articulated modes of production, dual labor markets, informal sectors of the economy, and the periodic incorporation and displacement from the waged labor force of women and immigrants.

Wallerstein does us a valuable service by using a world-systems framework to illustrate the degree to which racism, nationalism, and ethnicity, historically have operated together with class in facilitating the emergence, growth, and maintenance of the capitalist world economy. As we shall see below, other work on the historical centrality of race (Amin, 1989) and nationalism (Nairn, 1981) add considerable weight to Wallerstein’s basic arguments.

In describing racism, nationalism, and ethnicity as corresponding to the historical structure of the capitalist world system, Wallerstein attempts to avoid simple economic determinism by stressing the extent to which these categories are social constructs with “constantly changing boundaries” (1987: 379). He suggests that there is nothing inevitable about the role race, nationhood, and ethnic groups may play in the future; and he advises that “we need to analyze more closely the possible directions in which [peoplehood] will push us...toward various possible alternative outcomes” in the transition toward future historical systems (Ibid.: 387–388).

Nevertheless, Wallerstein’s presentation occasionally edges dangerously close to economic determinism and functionalism, such as in his discussion of ethnicity as related to the different socialization processes that serve to maintain the heterogeneous labor force required by capitalist labor processes (Ibid.: 386). Left at this level of macro analysis, we are hard pressed to imagine the fissures within these systemic structures wherein human agency and struggle actually shape the definitions and functions of racism, nationalism, and ethnicity. For a more complex and subtle analysis of these historically contingent and reciprocal processes of formation and struggle, we are better served by recent work done by authors such as Stuart Hall (1988), Paul Gilroy (1987), and Philippe Bourgois (1989), discussed below. First, however, let us look more closely at race and racism.

The Centrality of Race and Racism

Unlike most Marxist analyses, which view racism as useful to capitalism as a means of disciplining and superexploiting the working class but as neither essential to nor constitutive of capitalism, Amin (1989: 77) places “inerradicable racism”--the “damned soul” of Eurocentrism--at the heart of world capitalism’s reproductive system. He analyzes this at two levels in...
Race, ethnicity, nation, and class within theories of structure and agency.

Amin seems to grant more importance to ideology and culture than do most Marxist analysts. He defines three key interrelated functions of world capitalism's dominant ideology (Ibid.: 76--77), all of which include a racist or culturalist worldview:

1. This worldview obscures the essential nature of the capitalist mode of production, replacing economic alienation with a "discourse of transhistorical, instrumental rationality." Whereas Marx generally focussed primarily on the wage contract and the commodification of labor power as the primary mechanisms by which economic alienation was obscured, Amin places great importance on the Eurocentric reinterpretation of world history, which has become the commonsense world history of the citizens of the core (and a good deal of the periphery, I assume). Among other things, that reinterpretation, essentially a mythical reconstruction of "Western civilization," places rationality at the center of what makes the modern Western world "great," fabricating a European family tree (through racist "scientific" theories of social evolution), which traces the origins of rationality to a European Hellenistic Greece.

2. This worldview deforms the vision of the historical genesis of capitalism, amplifying the uniqueness of so-called European history and the unique "otherness" of the "Orient."

3. This worldview refuses to acknowledge that capitalism's worldwide process of reproduction presupposes the creation of powerful, rich centers at the expense of peripheries and the continuing polarization of core and periphery. The construction of "Orientalism" -- as nonrational and metaphysical -- has been essential to the justification of unequal development on a world scale.

Thus, in Amin's view, from the origins of modern bourgeois ideology in Renaissance Europe's reconstruction of world history, racism has been at the heart of the worldview that helps maintain the power relations that allow capitalism to reproduce itself.

In Amin's analysis of capitalism as a world system, the class contradictions as well as the contradictions between forces and relations of production analyzed by Marx become racialized by the fact of an increasing and, within the logic of capitalism, inevitable North-South (core-periphery, white-nonwhite) polarization, "the major and most explosive contradiction of our time" (Ibid.: 75).

Amin traces this aspect of the modern world system to its historical origins: "It is no coincidence that 1492 marks both the discovery of the New World and the beginnings of the Renaissance" (Ibid.: 72). This aspect of his analysis is consistent with the general account of the capitalist world system provided by wallerstein. Beyond the obvious economic implications of an analysis of world capitalism that views the underdevelopment of the Third World as essential to the process of accumulation, this perspective contains broad political implications about the nature of the system's reproductive logic, political alliances, and future strategies of resistance. In the centers of the world system, the North-South polarization:

brings about, as a result of the auto-centered character of the economy,

an increase in the revenues from labor parallel to that of productivity,

thereby assuring the continued functioning of the political consensus

around electoral democracy. At the peripheries, this polarization sepa-

rates the evolution of revenues from labor from the process of productiv-

ity, thereby making democracy impossible (Ibid.: 122--123).

Among other things, such a perspective insists on placing both race and class at the center of our analysis, and on emphasizing imperialism, not simply capital accumulation. "Imperialism is precisely an amalgamation of the requirements and laws for the reproduction of capital; the social, national, and international alliances that underlie them; and the political strategies employed by these alliances" (Ibid.: 141).

Race and Ethnic Formation and the Reciprocal Determination of Race, Ethnicity, and Class

A weakness of Amin's analysis, like that of Wallerstein, is that, despite his well-placed emphasis on the role of ideology and culture, oppositional or anti-systemic human agency tends to drop from view in the sweeping historical account. In this regard, recent studies of African Americans in the contemporary U.S. and Blacks in Britain are helpful. Omi and Winant (1989), for example, provide a provocative formulation of "racial formation" as "a process by which social, economic, and political forces determine the content and importance of racial categories, and by which they are in turn shaped by racial meanings" (Ibid.:
Race, ethnicity, nation, and class within theories of structure and agency.

61). Unfortunately, this important theoretical conceptualization of race and racism is not matched by the sound political economy that informs Wallerstein and Amin. As a consequence, Omi and Winant's correct insistence on centering racial movements and the racial state in any analysis of the United States is undermined by their incomplete historical account, particularly by their scant attention to changing capital-labor relations. For example, they cite World War II as the demarcation between a previously unstable racial equilibrium in the U.S. and new challenges by social movements (Ibid.: 83). Yet their analysis gives only scant attention to the Keynesian-Fordist policies that share center stage during this period. Likewise, in describing how the reformed racial state becomes the target of challenges from the Right in the 1970s (Ibid.: 83--85), they give only secondary attention to the economic crisis of that period. It is one thing to argue that political economy is shaped by racial movements and the racial state -- a fact that has certainly been overlooked by much Marxist analysis -- but their narrative has nearly rendered invisible the political-economic context that also shapes racial movements and the racial state.

Paul Gilroy (1987), in his analysis of race and racism in contemporary England, goes far in keeping political economy at the center of his text while simultaneously foregrounding the cultural and ideological processes of race formation and racism. In large part, this is because Gilroy insists on the "reciprocal determination between 'race' and class politics" (Ibid.: 31). For Gilroy, both class and race are dynamic, historically contingent processes involving social struggle. Because his analysis of class so thoroughly informs his analysis of race, it is worth noting his formulation of class as the effect of "struggles which bring classes into being as well as struggles between organized class forces which are relatively rare" (Ibid.: 30). Objective conditions structure the process of class formation, "but precise outcomes emerge directly from struggle" (Ibid.).

Echoing Amin's cultural history of capitalism, but embedding his analysis in a richly researched study of race, nation, and class in contemporary England, Gilroy emphasizes the social, political, and ideological construction of racialized identities that have accompanied capitalist expansion.

If [race formation] is conceived as a continuous and contingent process

in the same sense as class formation, race formation can also relate the

release of political forces which define themselves and organize around

notions of "race" to the meaning and extent of class relationships. The

concept supports the idea that racial meanings can change, can be

struggled over. Rather than talking about racism in the singular, analysts

should therefore be talking about racisms in the plural. These are not just
different over time but may vary within the same social or historical

conjuncture (Ibid.: 38).

For Gilroy, the racialization of class politics has become so thorough that he agrees with Stuart Hall suggesting, "for contemporary Britain, 'race is the modality in which class is lived,' the medium in which it is appropriated and 'fought through'" (Ibid.: 30).

Race, Ethnicity, and Representation

Philippe Bourgois (1989), in analyzing the relationship between ethnicity and class among Central American plantation workers, likewise sees the processes of class and ethnic formation as inseparable, as part of the same process of struggle and "ongoing historical confrontation" (Ibid.: 226). Bourgois adds an insistence on breaking down old material-ideological, base-superstructure dualisms. He identifies two hierarchies of power, but he does not want to concede that either is ultimately primary. One hierarchy is more clearly class-related and is based on production/occupation. The other is based on ethnicity, which he defines in terms of an ideological process by which a set of symbolic markers are established to structure power relations (Ibid.: x--xi).

Along the same lines, Stuart Hall (1988) theorizes ideology as playing as much of a constitutive role as material structures in the process of race and ethnic formation. Hall focuses on what he calls the regimes, modes, and relations of representation -- the discursive realm of race and ethnicity -- which brings Saussurean linguistics into play with Weberean notions of culture.

[E]vents, relations, structures do have conditions of existence and real effects, outside the sphere of the discursive; but...only within the discursive, and subject to its specific conditions, limits, and modalities, do they have or can they be constructed within meaning. Thus, while not
Race, ethnicity, nation, and class within theories of structure and agency.

wanting to expand the territorial claims of the discursive infinitely, how things are represented and the 'machineries' and regimes of representation in a culture do play a constitutive, and not merely a reflexive, after-the-event role. This gives questions of culture and ideology, and the scenarios of representation -- subjectivity, identity, politics -- a formative, not merely an expressive, place in the constitution of social and political life (Hall, 1988: 27).

Because social identities such as "black" in England, where the term has served as a focus of identities for both Afro-Caribbean and Asian communities (Hall, 1992: 308), or African American in the U.S. are more about socially constructed representations than about some essentially racial identity, Hall (1988: 29) prefers the term ethnicity to race:

If the black subject and black experience are not stabilized by Nature or

by some other essential guarantee, then it must be the case that they are

constructed historically, culturally, politically -- and the concept which

refers to this is "ethnicity." The term ethnicity acknowledges the place of

history, language, and culture in the construction of subjectivity and

identity, as well as the fact that all discourse is placed, positioned,

situated, and all knowledge is contextual.

Gilroy (1987: 225) argues that discourse and ideology are increasingly important not only to racial and ethnic politics, but to capitalism itself:

[T]he accumulation of capital is no longer fed by the mere exploitation

of the labour force. It depends increasingly on manipulation of complex

organizational and information systems, "on control over the processes

and institutions of symbol formation, and by intervention in interper-

sonal relations."

Perhaps this has always been true of capitalism, considering Amin's discussion of the historical role of Eurocentrism. However, what I suspect is new about Gilroy's assertion is that such ideological and cultural manipulation is of increasing importance to capitalism today, particularly in the post-Fordist period of neoliberal free markets, individualism, austerity, and the destruction of the welfare state. Gilroy's "new racism," which has so thoroughly blurred what in other times might have seemed the clear-cut class politics of economic crisis and austerity, has successfully linked "discourses of patriotism, nationalism, xenophobia, Englishness, Britishness, militarism, and gender difference into a complex system which gives 'race' its contemporary meaning" (Ibid.: 43).

The Ambivalence of Nationalism

After reading Hall, Bourgois, and Gilroy, one is no longer satisfied with Wallerstein's schema that so neatly distinguishes between racism, nationalism, and ethnicity. Nor are we content with Amin's exclusive focus on race when nationalism is so clearly central to the North-South conflict he describes. However much it is interwoven with identities of race and ethnicity, there are distinctive aspects of nationalism worth trying to identify more precisely. For Wallerstein, nationalism primarily serves in the interstate contention for domination and occasionally hegemony within the capitalist world system. Tom Nairn (1981), adapting Wallerstein's basic world-system framework, asserts that nationalism is a product of the uneven development that has historically characterized the capitalist world system. Nairn also views nationalism as functional to that system, because a multiplicity of unequal and contending political units allows for unequal exchange, the basis of the core's wealth (Ibid.: 310--311).

In many ways, Nairn is more interested in the politics of nationalism, particularly its double-edged role in the Third World, describing it as "by far the most important and influential mass cultural by-product of 19th-century Europe" (Ibid.: 310). Nairn describes the powerful "common sense" connection between nationalism and Enlightenment notions of development and progress (Ibid.: 334), which have helped make nationalism such a persistent ideology in the periphery. Yet the true secret of nationalism's power, asserts Nairn, is that it offered the masses something that abstract, intellectualized "class consciousness" could not:

a culture which however deplorable was larger, more accessible, and more relevant to mass realities than the rationalism of our Enlightenment inheritance. If this is so, then it cannot be true that nationalism is just false consciousness. It must have had a functionality in modern development, perhaps one more important than that of
Race, ethnicity, nation, and class within theories of structure and agency.

class consciousness and formation within the individual nation-states of this period (Ibid.: 354).

Nairn’s perspective is useful and flushes out Wallerstein’s account. However, in his eagerness to convince us that the real Achilles heel of Marxism is its Eurocentric understanding of nationalism, Nairn fails to capture the ways in which nationalism has engaged in a reciprocally determinant drama with class, race, and ethnicity. Thus, for instance, he misses Wallerstein’s point that the historically constructed “peoples” correlate heavily with objective classes, and that “a very high proportion of class-based political activity in the modern world has taken the form of people-based political activity” (Wallerstein, 1987: 387).

On the other hand, by failing to recognize the fundamental racism that has colored nationalism from the very early period of capitalism’s consolidation in Europe, Nairn is unable to help explain, as Gilroy attempts to do, “how the limits of ‘race’ have come to coincide so precisely with national frontiers” in the “new racism” of contemporary Britain (Gilroy, 1987: 46) and, I expect, elsewhere.

The politics of “race” in this country is fired by conceptions of national belonging and homogeneity which not only blur the distinction between “race” and nation, but rely on that very ambiguity for their effect. Phrases like “the Island Race” and “the Bulldog Breed” vividly convey the manner in which this nation is represented in terms which are simultaneously biological and cultural (Ibid.: 45).

Nationalism is thus a highly ambivalent ideology, subject to manipulation by class, racial, and ethnic forces representing quite different political projects. If “progressive” nationalism seemed a dominant force internationally during the decades of anticolonial struggles, today nationalism seems as often harnessed by socially conservative religious fundamentalists (in the U.S. and Europe, as well as in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East), by new entrepreneurial forces in Eastern Europe, and by the defenders of empire in Britain and the United States.

Homi Bhabha (1990) is concerned with the cultural representation of the ambivalent nature of the nation. Relying on Saussurean-influenced cultural analysis, Bhabha explores the nation as a system of cultural signification, along the lines Stuart Hall has pursued in his work on ethnicity. Bhabha (Ibid.: 2) lists some of the contradictions embedded in the discourses that signify “nationness”:

the heimlich pleasures of the hearth, the unheimlich terror of the space or race of the Other; the comfort of social belonging, the hidden injuries of class; the customs of taste, the powers of political affiliation; the sense of social order, the sensibility of sexuality; the blindness of bureaucracy, the strait insight of institutions; the quality of justice, the common sense of injustice; the langue of the law and the parole of the people.

Out of the “incomplete signification” of the nation, Bhabha turns our attention to “the in-between spaces” of the nation, “through which the meanings of cultural and political authority are negotiated” (Ibid.: 4). Out of such spaces, Bhabha calls for us to move “from the problematic unity of the nation to the articulation of cultural difference in the construction of an international perspective” (Ibid.: 5).

Conclusions

By the late--1970s and early--1980s, what Stuart Hall (1992) has called a “crisis of identity in late modernity” appeared particularly severe in the incumbent and predecessor hegemons of the world system, the United States and England. Many "objective" and "subjective" structural factors contributed to that crisis, including prolonged economic recession, sharp competition from Japan and Western Europe, massive immigration from the Third World, social changes forged by the women’s and civil rights movements, and theoretical challenges from feminism and post-structuralist social science, to name but a few. Many once seemingly firm identities were threatened by such changes, including that of the hegemonic subject within the world’s core powers: rich, white, heterosexual, and imperialist men. One response to this crisis was an effort to "reconstruct purified identities" (Ibid.: 311).

Under Thatcherism and Reaganism, we saw powerfully successful efforts to merge the discourses of class, race, ethnicity, nation, gender, and sexuality in a political and economic project to dismantle old Fordist social pacts; roll back the gains of labor, women, and people of color; redistribute wealth toward the wealthy; revitalize profit-making for the bourgeoisie; and reassert the power of core nation-states globally. To conceptualize race, nationalism, ethnicity, and class as reciprocally determinant processes of formation and struggle--as defined by both structure and agency -- allows us to
Race, ethnicity, nation, and class within theories of structure and agency.

understand better how this has been accomplished. It also helps clarify the political stakes of current attacks on multiculturalism in the U.S., attacks aimed at reasserting the hegemony of a particular subject (or ethnicity, as Hall might suggest): powerful white men.

A different response to the crisis of identity is illustrated by the assertion in England of a "black" identity that encompassed the Afro-Caribbean and Asian immigrant communities. Hall uses the term "translation" to describe "those identity formations which cut across and intersect natural frontiers, and which are composed of people who have been dispersed forever from their homelands" (Ibid.: 310). Such "cultures of hybridity" offer potentially powerful, creative, and progressive alternatives to the often dangerous attempts to reassert traditional, "purified" identities (whether this takes the form of right-wing Republican "family values" in the U.S., "ethnic cleansing" in Eastern Europe, or Asian "nerd" bashing by African American and Latino students on U.S. college campuses).

In formulating progressive political strategies, it is not only important to understand how class, race, ethnicity, and nation merge; it is equally important for us to understand how to pull them apart again. Writing of contemporary England, but with important implications for the U.S. as well, Hall (1988: 9) advises that we must "decouple ethnicity, as it functions in the dominant discourse, from its equivalence with nationalism, imperialism, racism, and the state."

Along similar lines, Paul Gilroy (1987: 39) writes regarding race, "it is struggle that determines which definitions of 'race' will prevail and the conditions under which they will endure or wither away." Such a statement underscores the human agency involved in the construction of basic social identities, and it carries a powerful appeal for those who oppose the current hegemonic subject and seek to build new political alliances across divisions of race, ethnicity, and nation. On the other hand, lest we fall yet again into the trap of naive voluntarism, we should remember that Bourdieu qualifies our freedom as conditional and that Marx understood that we are not so privileged with agency as to make history under circumstances of our choosing. It is clearly no simple task, theoretically or practically, to formulate viable, progressive political strategies aimed at creating harmonious "cultures of hybridity" out of the confusion, difference, and often hostile division that now characterize our societies.

NOTES

(1.)For an excellent discussion of the erroneous assumptions about universalization in liberal and Marxist thought, see Stuart Hall (1992: 314).

(2.)Again, see Stuart Hall (1992) for a very useful discussion of the contradictions between globalization and localization of identities.

(3.)Thanks to Wally Goldfrank for these insights into Weber's later contributions.

(4.)Even as fine a Third World Marxist as Mariategui, who wrote extensively on issues of race and nationalism, essentially reduced the problem to one of class and economics. He argued that while the concept of an inferior race had been useful to the white man's conquest and expansion, racism was not really the issue; the key to resolving the plight of Latin America's Indians was to reform the landtenure system. By changing the Indians' class position, through land redistribution, all other problems would be solved (Mariategui 1971: 22--23).

(5.)It is not altogether clear whether Amin wishes to use "Eurocentrism" as the label for this dominant ideology. There are passages where he discusses Eurocentrism as a theory of the world, as a global project (1989: 74--75); yet elsewhere he calls it a "prejudice" that distorts social theories. At one point he writes, "Eurocentrism is only one dimension of the prevailing ideology, though one that has developed like an invasive cancer suppressing the essential force -- that is to say, economism -- in the hidden recesses of the corpulent body it has produced" (Ibid.: 104). Thus, here I am using the term dominant ideology or worldview.

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