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Cox's America: caste, race, and the problem of culture

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Cox's assertion that American race relations were rooted in capitalist class antagonisms and their colonial and imperialist pretensions went against many of the dominant theories about race relations in the United States at the time he began publishing, as well as those that became dominant leading into the early 1960s independence moments in the larger British West Indian territories. Originally published in 1948, Cox's *Caste, Class, and Race* is perhaps most appropriately positioned within what we might see as a deconstructionist impetus, best instantiated by C.L.R. James and Eric Williams; an impetus that would like the Americas within a common analytic frame. In positioning Cox alongside his better-known Caribbeanist colleagues, this paper nevertheless parses the American context in which his theoretical apparatus was being developed – the development in sociology of the “race relations” paradigm and the anthropological emphasis on racism and segregation – in order to gain a more profound appreciation for the specificities of context in relation to transnational analyses of racial marginalization.

Cox affirme dès ses premiers écrits que les relations raciales américaines sont ancrées dans les antagonismes entre les classes au sein d'une société capitaliste, et reposent sur des ambitions coloniales et impérialistes. Cette thèse contredit bon nombre des théories sur les relations raciales aux Etats-Unis alors en vigueur, ainsi que les théories qui dominèrent plus tard le champ et ce jusqu'au début des années 1960, marqué par des moments d'indépendance à travers les Antilles britanniques. Publié originellement en 1948, *Caste, Class, and Race* de Cox peut être situé dans une mouvance et une volonté de déconstruction, ainsi que l'illustrent les travaux de C.L.R. James et Eric Williams, une volonté qui placerait les Amériques dans un cadre analytique commun. Dans cet article, je situe Cox en rapport avec ses collègues caribéens mieux connus, mais restitue également le contexte américain dans lequel Cox a développé son dispositif théorique, m'appuyant notamment sur le développement, en sociologie, du paradigme des « relations raciales » et l'insistance, en anthropologie, sur le racisme et la ségrégation. Cela me permet ainsi d'obtenir une meilleure reconnaissance du contexte et de nuancer les analyses transnationales de la marginalisation raciale.

Keywords: Oliver Cox; caste; race; anthropology; culture

Oliver Cox's assertion that racism in the United States (and the Americas more broadly) was rooted in capitalist class antagonisms and their colonial and imperialist pretensions went against many of the dominant theories about race relations in the United States at the time he began publishing, as well as those that became dominant leading into the early 1960s independence moments in the larger British West Indian territories. Originally published in 1948, Cox's *Caste, Class, and Race* is perhaps most appropriately positioned within what we

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might see as a deconstructionist impetus, best instantiated by C.L.R. James and Eric Williams; an impetus that would link the Americas within a common analytic frame, and that would generally privilege a materialist – rather than psychological or cultural – structure of causation. In positioning Cox alongside his better-known Caribbeanist colleagues, this paper nevertheless parses the US American context in which his theoretical apparatus was being developed: the development in sociology of the “race relations” paradigm by Robert Park ([1939] 1950) and Gunnar Myrdal (1944), and the anthropological emphasis on caste within the context of segregation evident in the ethnographic studies conducted during the 1930s by anthropologists John Dollard, Hortense Powdermaker, and Allison Davis and his colleagues. I position Cox in this way in order to gain a more profound appreciation for the specificities of context in relation to transnational analyses of racial marginalization.

I will argue that, despite his prescient historical analysis of a racialized world system and his attempt to critique the liberalism undergirding analyses of race relations in the United States at the time, Cox’s extensive materialist analysis unfortunately cannot account for the myriad cultural complexities that ultimately unravel his political end game, that of a socialist revolution throwing off the yoke of racism. This is because “culture” is not a coherent, static whole but a contradictory and messy set of changing relations best observed and apprehended through practice on the ground. Had Cox analytically attended to the ethnography in the 1930s caste studies of the US south, he might have arrived at a different view of social change; one that built upon already-existing challenges to the segregationist status quo. My aim here is not to recuperate the caste model Cox so heavily critiques, but to suggest that a more robust conceptualization of culture and its relationship to practice – aspects of the “caste ethnographies” he glosses over on his way to his main points – might have led him to think differently about the mechanisms through which racism might be dismantled.

Class, race, and caste in the 1930s US academy

During the 1930s in the United States, the dominant social science paradigm was structural-functionalism as epitomized, in sociology, by Talcott Parsons’ systems theory and, in anthropology, by Bronislaw Malinowski and Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown. In both disciplinary formations in the aftermath of the Great Depression, scholars emphasized the fundamental integration of social systems rooted in commonly held values, thus stymying the development of a structural historical approach to contemporary issues. The Great Migration of African Americans from south to north in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reoriented the study of social divisions within the United States, and the question of race became something more than a southern regional concern as scholars became interested in “the causes and effects of black migration into Northern cities” (Stanfield 2011, 154). Within the emergent field of “race relations”, it was Robert E. Park who defined the parameters of inquiry, grounding it squarely within the University of Chicago, and institutions such as the Rockefeller Foundation (through its newly developed Social Science Research Council) began to support work emphasizing assimilationist paradigms (Adams and Gorton 2004; Wallach 2009). Park’s theory – ultimately a general law of acculturation proceeding through phases of contact, conflict, accommodation, and assimilation – emphasized the obviation of race consciousness as, in his view, it was this consciousness that created a “race problem” (Park [1939] 1950). The dominance of this perspective turned attention away from the arguments that had been put forward by turn-of-the-century observers who, in large part, were geared toward demonstrating the humanity of black people throughout the Americas, quite literally, through a refutation of

explicitly racist observers such as Carlyle, Froude, and de Gobineau¹ as well as an emergent anthropology that, before the Boasian revolution, was often aligned with the various forms of Social Darwinism and scientific racism that emerged in the mid- and late nineteenth century and that used evolution as its framing principle.

Also during this period, Sigmund Freud's influence was beginning to be felt outside the European context, and his psychological work influenced American anthropologists like Edward Sapir and others, who began to develop what became known as the "culture and personality" school. At the same time, W. Lloyd Warner was pioneering the anthropological study of US communities, and his decade-long Yankee City study was the first to focus specifically on social and economic inequality in a northern industrial setting. Turning the lens on the American south, however, led Warner to believe that the social class model he had developed in Yankee City was inadequate, on its own, to describe social life within the context of segregation. Thus, he and his research team (led by African American anthropologist Allison Davis) turned to the concept of caste in order to complement a class analysis in their ethnographic study of race relations in the Mississippi Delta. For them, southern society "comprised *both* a class and a caste system" (Wallach 2009, xvi).

Warner's thesis of caste and class in the United States was to capture general social scientific imagination regarding the relationship between black and white Americans, as well as the ideology of black inferiority. The text that resulted from this study, *Deep South: An Anthropological Study of Caste and Class* (Davis, Gardner, and Gardner [1941] 2009) was complemented by two other anthropological enquiries, Hortense Powdermaker's *After Freedom* (1939) and James Dollard's *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* (1937), as well as Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (1944), and the four books together shaped academic and public opinion on American race relations for a generation. Though there were many differences between these studies,² in keeping with the general trend of the period, all four shared a structural-functionalist approach, with Dollard's, Powdermaker's and Myrdal's also revealing a strong psychological orientation.³ The application of Warner's caste framework within *Deep South*, on the other hand, directed attention to institutional and structural discrimination, rather than to psychological and behavioral models, and their role in the perpetuation of racism.⁴

Oliver Cox sought to move beyond the liberalism that informed both the integrative and acculturative models of social stability and many turn-of-the-century black nationalists and pan-Africanists. Annoyed by what he saw as an imprecise definition of class and an understudied application of the caste concept among sociologists and anthropologists studying the US south, he went after them with his characteristically eviscerating critical style. For example, in a review of Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma*, Cox argued that the book was a liberal tract that brought "to finest expression practically all the vacuous theories of race relations which are acceptable among the liberal intelligentsia and which explain race relations away from the social and economic order" because Myrdal located the burden of the American dilemma in the "hearts of the American people" rather than any particular program of structural change. He argued that Myrdal studiously avoided a political class interpretation of race relations, favoring instead a moral and psychological one, and that he uncritically took on the caste theory of race relations (Cox 1945a).

Indeed, the two pillars of Cox's critique of the caste framework revolved around the conceptualization of endogamy, and the understanding of the integrative function of caste. Regarding the first, he addresses Warner's position that membership in caste is heritable and unchanging, arguing instead that racial segregation in the south was not a permanent

situation, but would continue only as long as white people could maintain barriers to black assimilation and inclusion (Cox 1942). As evidence of this, he posed the problem of racial mixing:

The mixed-blood children that are born are, in the long run, the most potent equilibrator of the races; and the lawmakers of the South are by no means unmindful of this fact. The Negro may "rise" biologically if he is able to pass. From too much preoccupation with the unchangeableness of physical inheritance, the conclusion is reached that the social status of Negroes and whites in the South may become identical yet they will continue to constitute two castes. (1942, 220)

For Cox, this erroneous notion led him to the conclusion that endogamy was of "different significance in caste and race relations" (1945b, 367), with intermarrying occurring within the US context opportunistically, and in relation to the perception of relative advantage.

Cox's assessment of the mechanical differences between caste and race as integrative systems was rooted in his sense that caste was a religiously generated and accepted ideology in India, whereas racial segregation in the US context could only be maintained by violence or the threat of it. He argued that, psychologically, within a caste system, one accepts one's position and is not "constantly butting his head against the caste line" ([1942] 1987, 10), as Warner argued for black Americans:

In fact, the absence of such a phenomenon is so vital to the persistence of a caste order that it would hardly be inaccurate to maintain that it is definitely incompatible with a caste system. Caste barriers in the caste system are never challenged; they are sacred to caste and caste alike. (Cox 1942, 222)

He continued:

Hinduism or the caste society of India is a powerful form of social organization which may go on self-satisfiedly, so to speak, forever. It carries within itself no basic antagonisms. But the social aims and purposes of whites and Negroes in the south are irreconcilably opposed. (1942, 223)

In a later article, Cox would expand these points, arguing that harmonious caste organization could only ever occur in a precapitalist society:

As distinguished from a bipartite interracial adjustment, the caste system is ancient, provincial, culturally oriented, hierarchical in structure, status conscious, nonconflictive, non-pathological, occupationally limited, lacking in aspiration and progressiveness, hypergamous, endogamous, and static. (1945b, 360)

Here, Cox asserts that caste rivalry would never bring the caste system into question. Race conflict, on the other hand, was directed at either the upholding or undoing of the racial order, and therefore addressed the legitimacy of the system as a whole:

As a matter of fact, races are not status-bearing entities in the sense that castes are. For instance, Negroes and whites in the United States stand toward each other in the relationship of subordination and superordination – a relationship implying suspended conflict. Conversely, castes stand toward each other in the relationship of superiority and inferiority, a relationship implying *natural*, socially accepted, peaceful status-ordering of the society. In the first case we have a power relationship in which definite aims and ends of each group are

opposed; the second is a situation of mutual emulation or symbiosis among little status-bearing groups. (1945b, 364)

Where for the caste school, then, caste is supposed to maintain social inequality through endogamy, for Cox caste actually has nothing to do with protecting racial “purity” per se, because in his view white elites would only do this “so long as it helps him [sic] to reserve a calculable cultural advantage” ([1942] 1987, 9). This advantage, for Cox, is political-class dominance within the context of capitalism, and this is what ultimately launches his investigation into the origins of racism.

Cox’s argument, as he lays it out in *Caste, Class, and Race*, is that race prejudice originates in capitalist economic exploitation, not in ethnocentrism or intolerance. Racism, for Cox, is modern, and all forms of “belonging” and “exclusion” prior to the advent of modern capitalism – which he locates in thirteenth-century Venice – are culturally- rather than racially-driven. He begins his exegesis with Hellenic Greeks, who, he argues,

had a cultural, not a racial, standard of belonging, so that their basic division of the peoples of the world were Greeks and barbarians – the barbarians having been all those persons who did not possess the Greek culture, especially its language [...] [The Greeks] welcomed those barbarians to the extent that they were able to participate in Greek culture, and intermarried freely with them. The Greeks knew that they had a superior culture to those of the barbarians, but they included Europeans, Africans, and Asiatics in the concept Hellas as these peoples acquired a working knowledge of the Greek culture. (1948, 323)

The Romans, too, remained free from racial antagonism because “the norm of superiority in the Roman system remained a cultural-class attribute” (1948, 324), and citizenship was extended to all those who were not slaves, who nonetheless were also not distinguished by racial difference. In Europe as well, the rise of “the politico-religious system of Christianity” (1948, 325), for Cox, prevented the development of racial animus because the church maintained a “folk and personal – not a territorial or racial – norm of belonging” (1948, 325) since it divided human beings into Christian and non-Christian. Indeed, he argues, “In the Middle Ages, then, we find no racial antagonism in Europe; in fact, Europeans were, at this time, more isolated and ignorant about foreign people and world geography than the Romans and Greeks were” (1948, 326). Even early Portuguese exploration down the West African coast was free from notions of racial superiority and inferiority, and there was no “belief in any cultural incapacity of these colored people”, which led the Portuguese to zealously seek their conversion to Christianity in order to make Africans “the human equal of all other Christians” (1948, 327). Cox writes,

For the full profitable exploitation of a people, the dominant group must devise ways and means of limiting that people’s cultural assimilation. So long as the Portuguese and Spaniards continued to accept the religious definition of human equality, so long also the development of race prejudice was inhibited. (1948, 328)

It was not until human labor was commercialized in the Americas and the East Indies that racial antagonism developed as a result of competition among merchants for the capitalist exploitation of these region’s natural resources, the declining influence of the Catholic Church, and the emergence of nationalism in Europe. For Cox, modern race relations began in the late fifteenth century, and racism reaches full maturation in the second half of the nineteenth century with the second wave of British imperialism and the emergence of scientific racism. In this schema, racial exploitation was only one aspect of the

proletarianization of labor; also key was the development of political-class conflict. Hence, Cox hammered what he considered to be the final nail in the coffin of the application of the caste analytic to the context that emerged with post-colonial agricultural capitalism in the southern United States:

The exploitation of native peoples, imperialism, is not a sin, not essentially a problem of morals or of vice; it is a problem of production and of competition for markets. Here, then, are race relations; they are definitely not caste relations. They are labor-capital-profits relationships; therefore, race relations are proletarian bourgeois relations and hence political-class relations. (1948, 336)

Caste, Class, and Race, clearly, is a magisterial work that originated from an intellectual irritation. Several scholars examining Cox's work retrospectively see him as an originator of the world systems approach typically attributed to Immanuel Wallerstein (Austin 2010; Klarlund 1994; Johnson 2004). Indeed, his mobilization of Weberian and Marxist models – rather than the sociological frameworks that were dominant at the time – would have inspired his comparative historical approach to world civilizations (Hunter 1983).⁵ Cox's innovation here, as Rhoda Reddock has argued, lay in his attempt to incorporate race more centrally into Marxist thought, thereby taking up James' famous dictum that "to think of imperialism in terms of race is disastrous. But to neglect the racial factor as merely incidental is an error only less grave than to make it fundamental" (James 1989, quoted in Reddock 2014, 3).

Indeed, since Christopher McAuley (2004), in his review of Cox's life and work, makes much of the ways Cox's West Indian upbringing might have influenced his analytic perspective, we might read Cox's text alongside two classics of Caribbean history – Eric Williams' *Capitalism and Slavery* (1994) and C.L.R. James's *Black Jacobins* (1989). Though Cox himself doesn't cite them in his text, these two texts were designed as deconstructions of European notions of legitimacy and governance. Williams positioned his transnational historical exegesis of "the role of Negro slavery and the slave trade in providing the capital which financed the Industrial Revolution in England and of mature industrial capitalism in destroying the slave system" (Williams 1994, v) as a corrective to approaches to slavery and its dissolution that foregrounded then contemporary notions of racism (and therefore its correlate, anti-racist activism). His text, therefore, was geared toward arguing that the primary forces responsible for emancipation were economic, thus demonstrating the bankruptcy of European claims to moral superiority and legitimate governance and making a critical argument for independence (Neptune 2007). While Williams' concern did not lie primarily with vindicating the agency, organizational skills, or revolutionary leadership of those deemed incapable of such traits, these were themes taken up by James in *The Black Jacobins*. Famously, in this text, James argued against the prevailing idea that black people were not competent to govern themselves by showcasing Toussaint L'Ouverture's skills as a strategist and leader. Demonstrating that the Haitian revolution was waged by slaves who drew from their own cultural heritage to construct a revolutionary consciousness, and conceptualizing plantations as proto-capitalist forms of socio-economic organization, James was able both to reformulate critical aspects of Marx's theories of revolution and historical materialism and to counter racist ideas about African culture as backward.⁶

Williams and James were part of a more general historiographic trend that was concerned with vindicating New World Africans' cultural heritage and political potential (Scott 2004, 104–5).

Williams, especially, dismantles European claims to superiority and the sole inheritors of modernity, and argues persuasively and passionately that the West Indies, and the Americas more broadly, are nothing if not quintessentially modern. James, as well, in adding Haiti to the modern revolutionary canon, argues that black West Indians “from the very start lived a life that was in its essence a modern life” (James 1989, 392). For both, the New World geopolitical and structural historical frame of analysis allows them not only to vindicate the humanity of slaves and former slaves but also to advocate for a reparative solution: for them, the achievement of West Indian “national identity” (1989, 402). This also reveals an underlying concern with the question of what holds societies together, a question that was also being asked by scholars and nationalists who were, after World War II, attempting to come to terms with the assertions within the Moyne Commission and developing models of societal integration (or lack thereof) that linked economic, familial, and spiritual practices to a sense of political community. This question was also being posed within US anthropological circles after World War II as it became clear that Britain would gradually release its hold on the islands within what would become seen as “America’s backyard”.

Cox, however, was less concerned with either West Indian or African nationalisms and more, like Park, with African American assimilation. Indeed, Cox was not only opposed to black nationalism, but to any form of nationalism, believing as he did that it was a social psychological instrument meant to exploit everyone under ruling classes in capitalist society (McAuley 2004). For Cox, the purpose of placing racial discrimination within the world historical framework of the development of capitalism, rather than in relation to the psycho-social dynamics of the endogamous maintenance of hierarchical heritable groupings, provided a way to understand why and how working-class and elite white people did not profit equally from racist practices, and therefore a means by which to forge solidarities that might bring into being a new form of social organization that would create the conditions for the dissolution of racial discrimination. In Cox’s view, the caste model, on the other hand, “discouraged political protest against racial injustice” (McAuley 2004, 105).

Moreover, Cox’s context is explicitly a post-World War II one, as is suggested by his preface to *Caste, Class, and Race*. For him, World War II began a period of political-class wars, a struggle among the masses for democracy and a challenge to elite capitalist dominance, not only throughout Europe and its overseas theaters but also domestically (1948, xxix). Democracy, for him, was a threat to “the modern system of power relationship” (1948, xxx), and therefore the struggle against racism was also a struggle for democracy. That he believed this struggle would immanently lead to another great world transformation is made evident in the last paragraph of his preface. He states:

Probably in no other country of the world are the philosophies and practices of racial mastery so openly and tenaciously held to as in the South. In this case the South is not a backwood country of the United States; it is, in fact, to a very considerable extent, at the very head of the diplomatic and political destiny of the nation. It seems, therefore, that as the nations prepare again for war, the nature of the social systems that are actually in question should be as clearly understood as possible. Perhaps it is time that the people, who finally pay the cost of war in lives and wealth, should be ready to examine the crucial subject at issue. (1948, xxxiii)

Caste, obviously, was not a framework that would provide sufficient inroads into this project.

At any rate, the life of “caste” as a conceptual frame was ultimately a short one. Despite Myrdal’s liberal use of it in *American Dilemma* to apply to social life beyond the

US south, as the anthropological and sociological interest in African American communities shifted to the urban north, the analytic utility of caste waned after the 1940s (Fuller 2011, 616). Additionally, the civil rights movement created the conditions for African Americans to reject their exploitation and degradation, at which point, as McAuley argues, “the caste interpretation of southern race relations was summarily out-casted” (2004, 101).

Critiques of Cox’s critique

Of course, there was push back to Cox’s critique, initially mostly among the sociological devotees not only of Warner, but also of E. Franklin Frazier and Charles Johnson. Later, critiques emerged from a range of scholars, some of whom were specialists of the Indian context. Gerald Berreman, for example, was an Indianist anthropologist who advocated the application of caste to the US south. In his view, this was important for cross-culturally comparative work, and would shed light on the ways ideal systems are actualized in diverse locations.⁷ Berreman critiques Cox on two grounds. First, he argues that the contexts of a rapidly changing urban or industrial US south and a slowly transforming agrarian India do not make for equivalent analytic comparative insights. Second, he takes issue with Cox’s contention that caste in India is passively accepted as the result of universally shared religious affiliation, arguing that Cox bases his differentiation of the US context on a notion that race relations in the United States are violently maintained rather than pervasively condoned. He sees this contrast as invalid, and as having resulted “from an idealized and unrealistic view of Indian caste, contrasted with a more realistic, pragmatic view of American race relations” (1960, 121). Berreman continues:

Indian caste is viewed as it is supposed to work rather than as it does work; American race relations are seen as they do work rather than as they are supposed, by the privileged, to work. (1960, 121)

For Berreman, both ideal and actual inter-caste attitudes and practices are similar in India and the United States because the “rules” undergirding them in both cases maintain systems characterized by institutionalized and heritable inequality. Finally, he suggests that reform movements aimed at lower castes within India (including those spawned by anti-caste religions like Buddhism and Christianity) have been “unable, in practice, to remain casteless” (1960, 125), and he contrasts this with the US context, where, he believes, objection is directed to the caste system as a whole.

Sociologist Andrew Austin also critiques Cox’s refutation of the relevance of caste to the US context in the context of a review of McAuley’s (2004) *The Mind of Oliver Cox*. For Austin, Cox completely misunderstands racial caste because, in his view, the “caste school” was not merely borrowing caste from the Indian context. He asserts that caste was used by Spanish and Portuguese imperialists to describe racial gradations in the New World, and was also effectively mobilized as an analytic concept by Max Weber in *Economy and Society*, in which he defined it as follows: “Caste structure transforms the horizontal and unconnected coexistences of ethnically segregated groups into a vertical social system of super- and subordination” (1978, quoted in Austin 2010, 243). The implication here is that “caste” has multiple meanings and originary frameworks, some of which correspond to the Western capitalist cycles Cox examines, and that therefore one must pay attention to the implications of emphasizing one or another context as it is worked out on the ground in a particular geopolitical moment.

C.J. Fuller, like Austin, argues that the term “caste” had appeared in literature about race in the American south before it had become a sociological concept, having been mobilized by W.E.B. DuBois in *The Souls of Black Folk* ([1903] 2009), as well as historians of southern slavery and segregation. Where Cox got it “wrong”, in Fuller’s opinion, was in his assertion that caste in India was accepted and justified. Nevertheless, for him, the application of caste to the US context could have provided an important touchstone were Indianists more inclined toward cross-cultural analysis. “If this ethnography of African Americans had been more widely read by students of caste in India”, he writes, “the difficult problem of low-caste consensus or resistance could have been examined earlier and more perceptively” (2011, 219).

Finally, Fijian academic and politician Ganeshwar Chand has argued that Cox’s argument “rests solely on a physical differentiation of people [...] For, according to Cox, race has to do with physical distinction” (1994, 76). This means that not only did Cox “ignore racial exploitation and prejudice in the pre-capitalist era” (1994, 76), but also in assuming that eliminating political discrimination through, on one hand, cultural assimilation, and, on the other, revolutionary socialism would eliminate racism, he missed the extent to which competition among working-class people could exacerbate, rather than lessen, racial animus (1994, 80). With this, Chand brings attention to what he sees as Cox’s impoverished culture concept, and this is the critique I would like to elaborate here.

Chand argues that Cox’s distinction between pre-capitalist models of differentiation, which he frames as cultural, and post-capitalist models, which he frames as racial, raises the question of “whether a racial and a cultural sense of belonging are mutually exclusive” (1994, 76). He continues:

Culture is a much wider phenomenon than mere language, religion or nationality. Culture embodies the entire mechanism of societal organization. Social (or class) hierarchies, political organizations, role allocations, belief systems, production and distribution relations, access to means of production, etc. [...], in other words, the entire set of social relations of production – is incorporated in the term “culture”. (Chand 1994, 77)

It is true that most contemporary scholars would not draw as fine a line as Cox between racial and cultural distinction, and would instead position ideologies of racial difference in relation to other forms of differentiation, understanding “race” as socio-culturally produced rather than as a phenotypical “otherness” rooted in biology. Indeed, several scholars have been interested to show the ways early modern (and, to an extent, medieval) anxieties about faith purity were rooted in those about blood purity, as well as how to be human meant to be European.⁸ To his credit, Cox also took a social constructionist view of race, but in his move from race to racism, he also moved from the field of the social and the realm of cultural practice to the field of the biological and the realm of ideology.

Lest this all sound like too much presentism, a case of pouring new wine into old glasses, so to speak, let me say something about the culture concept as it was developing in American anthropology in the 1930s. Up to the early twentieth century, US anthropology was dominated by racialized evolutionary models that delineated purportedly universal stages of human development from a state of savagery, through barbarism, and ultimately to civilization as represented by Euro-Americans at the time. The Boasian Revolution that began in the 1910s sought to challenge these racial categorizations by bringing anthropology out of museums and by placing material cultures in cultural and historical contexts. For Boas and his students, cultures were assemblages of traits, each of

which possessed complex pasts and therefore could not be universally situated on a continuum of evolutionary stages tending toward Western civilizational models. It was the task of the anthropologist, therefore, to conduct comprehensive and detailed field-work-based and inductive scientific investigations into the specificities of cultural practices, beliefs, and histories as they emerged and changed in specific contexts in order to provide more detailed insights into human complexity, past and present. Boas himself argued vehemently for the independent variation of race, culture, and language, and therefore he and his students became associated with a wide-ranging anti-racist and anti-xenophobic war that was waged not only in the halls of academia but also in public journals and other fora (Baker 1998; Liss 1998).

Culture, for Boasians, was learned (rather than determined) and therefore changed over time as a result of both environmental and historical processes, and this would form the basis of an acculturation model. Indeed, Herskovits, Boas' student, used the Caribbean as a living laboratory in order to explain particular instances of cultural difference, especially those related to religion and family structure, in terms of the survival, retention, syncretism, or reinterpretation of African cultural elements. In this way, he further developed the acculturation framework (Herskovits [1941] 1990), through which attention to African cultural retentions occurred alongside, and was influenced by, the resurgence of interest in Africa and the diaspora among African American artists and intellectuals. Herskovits' ultimate emphasis on African cultural continuities did not enjoy extensive currency during the 1930s and 1940s. At that point, as I already mentioned, the British structural-functionalist approach had become ascendant in anthropology, and Parsonian sociology and French structuralism were also becoming dominant paradigms. The Boasian anti-racist struggle that had been formulated through the language of cultural integrity and historicism would change to one rooted in the framework of assimilation grounded in the assertion that African Americans were essentially *American*, and therefore deserved equal rights as citizens, and scholars would become drawn to the sociological view of African American culture advanced by Robert Park and elaborated by sociologist E. Franklin Frazier (1939) in his exegesis of culture contact under conditions of slavery.⁹

We see a similar debate playing out in the West Indies during this time, as the labor riots of the late 1930s inaugurated a period of scholarly investigation into societal integration (or lack thereof). Again, because of the dominance of the view that social systems needed to be integrated around a common value system in order to thrive without an overarching (external) system of power and control, debates about the nature of West Indian societies gained critical importance. The idea that they exhibited an incompatible socio-cultural pluralism (in which sectors of the society remained institutionally and culturally distinct, unified only as the result of the overarching power exercised by racial and ethnic minorities) was counterposed with ideas about a creolized stratification (in which groups were deemed to share values and norms but were nevertheless cut across by class and race differences). Such analyses were used to assess the potential success, or predict the foreseeable failure, of nationalist projects designed to unify diverse sectors of their populations.¹⁰ As in other regions throughout the globe, these debates became platforms for the development of a cultural politics of race, class, and gender during the mid-twentieth century.

Of course, the emphasis on cultural histories would reemerge later with the development of the Black Power movement and cultural nationalism in the United States, and with the success of anti-colonial movements in the West Indies. Within the latter context, scholars like E. Kamau Brathwaite (1971) and Sylvia Wynter (1970), building on Jean

Price Mars' (1935) re-evaluation and affirmation of African-derived folklore in Haiti as the necessary foundation for nationalist development and cultural self-esteem within the context of US occupation, argued against the notion that a process of acculturation is what characterized Caribbean societies. Their view, instead, was that the dominant European sector, often absent, did not provide a cultural and social scaffolding to which dominated Africans had to acclimatize, but that Afro-West Indians, in maintaining, reconstructing, and transforming their own cultural practices (especially those having to do with land use and religious expression) underwent a cultural process of indigenization that rooted them in the New World. For these scholars, it was the African heritage embedded within the folk culture of West Indian slaves that should be seen as the basis for Caribbean cultural creativity, and thus developed as a modern *national* culture.

For Cox, nationalism was not a “problem” of culture but of political-class relations of power, and so despite his invocations of cultural difference in his exploration of pre-capitalist forms of conquest and accumulation, he generally eschewed culture as an organizing principle. While he was not completely disinterested in the ways beliefs and practices influenced social systems – though he disagreed with the caste school authors’ theoretical framework, he commended them for their ethnographic insights – he nevertheless tended toward an ideological view of culture. That is, if racism was generated through capitalist political-class relations of dominance, then its eradication must come with socialist revolution. Culture, in this view, was a meta-effect rather than a deep set of historically grounded practices that nonetheless dynamically shaped, and were shaped by, human interaction in all spheres of life. But what if Cox *had* taken more seriously the ethnographic explorations of class and caste generated by the Mississippi ethnographies in the 1930s? What if he had used the insights generated by the day-to-day workings of culture in context and action as the basis for his broader critique of racial capitalism? Taking a closer look at the dynamics of class and caste as they were reported in *Deep South*, the ethnography that most explicitly took on the task of applying Warner’s model to the US south, helps us to see important shades of gray where Cox saw black and white. Most particularly, it provides a window into the importance of broader structuring principles and contextual specificities in destabilizing the seamless workings of caste ideology.

Deep South

With *Deep South*, Warner and his researchers were arguing against the position, iterated most clearly within *An American Dilemma*, that prejudice was what perpetuated racial discrimination in American society. For them, the prejudice doctrine reflected a liberal attitude, but not a comprehensive social analysis, and so they advocated a different approach. In Warner’s introduction to the ethnography, he writes:

It is necessary to re-examine the problem [of racism] to determine whether our understanding of the problem – and the language used to refer to our understanding and to the facts – are correct. This need becomes increasingly strong when we find that the prejudices have a core of sentiments which are emotionally held by all individuals who are members of the white group and that another body of sentiments in opposition to the first is carried by the Negroes. (Warner [1941] 2009, 5–6)

It is this statement that frames their investigations into the caste/class theoretical grid, and in how this theory is lived in everyday practice.

The structure of the ethnography both mirrors and deconstructs its argumentation. That is, the first half of the book is dedicated to an exegesis of how caste relations are grounded in master–slave relations during the heyday of plantation slavery, are “organized around the control of sex” ([1941] 2009, 6), and are reproduced through daily patterns of social segregation and demonstrations of (“Negro”) deference, especially in rural areas. They define caste as “a commonly shared body of beliefs about the status and capabilities of Negroes”, and argue that “[t]his body of beliefs constitutes an ideological system which is used to justify the social relationships between the superordinate whites and the subordinate Negroes” ([1941] 2009, 20). The second half of the book, however, perhaps unwittingly given the ethnographers’ ultimate conclusion (a point to which I will return later), deconstructs this ideology by documenting significant transformations and changes in practice that reflect the ideology’s rootedness in mercantile and agricultural, rather than industrial, capitalism. This, of course, has implications for Cox’s ultimate argument regarding the dismantling of racist ideology and practice.

Indeed, what is most striking about the ethnographic material in *Deep South* is its documentation not of rigid separation but of occasionally flexible movement across caste lines. This movement is neither free nor characteristic of other southern locations, but the distinction between ideology and practice in this case is gendered and classed, and is dependent on a changing local political economy. In other words, it is in the specifics of context and in the practice of the everyday that we see what matters in the maintenance and transformation of a particular set of social relations. Let me briefly flesh out two examples, one having to do with family formation across the caste line and the other addressing the changing base of the economy within Natchez, Mississippi, during the research period.

With respect to the first instance, we see a fair amount of attention to sexual “intermixture” (Davis, Gardner, and Gardner [1941] 2009, 41) across the caste line and the ways this is apprehended differently within the two castes. The ethnographers discuss white men as not only having sexual liaisons with black women but also sharing relatively permanent relationships with them and recognizing their children. Within the space of the home, they argue, these families “ignore the caste restrictions” ([1941] 2009, 33), and while white men, if they acknowledged these relationships, would have been isolated from their caste group, black women were not. Instead, these women acquired security and protection that would “guard [them] in [their] relations with the white group” ([1941] 2009, 36) without losing their ability to participate in the social lives and institutions of the black group. While the white man involved in such a relationship wouldn’t enter the black woman’s social life, and while the woman wouldn’t entertain her friends while the man was in the home, the relationship itself, the ethnographers argue, “imposes few restrictions” ([1941] 2009, 36). Similarly for the black men engaging in relationships with white women, “there is nothing to indicate that they were isolated from their own group or considered queer” ([1941] 2009, 30). White women, however, were seen as already being isolated “from their own group” and as refusing “to participate or [being] prevented from participating in the normal ways” ([1941] 2009, 30). In other words, black men and women who had sexual and familial relations across the caste line were not seen to experience the same kind of social exclusion as the white men or women with whom they had these relations.

What is important about the sometimes significant kin ties that developed across caste lines is not the fact of their existence; despite racially-rooted taboos, we know that these relationships have always occurred within social contexts developed as the result of plantation-based production during slavery. Instead, what is key here is that *middle-class* people within both “caste” groups were the ones who most disdained these

relationships, indicating the emergence of a common class ideology. This should not be surprising, since in similar contexts – for example, the British West Indies – it has long been documented that middle-class community members, both black and white, have tended to be the most vigilant police of moral-social affairs.¹¹ In part, this is because members of this class have the most forward-looking and future-directed orientation. Where the white upper class in *Deep South* is characterized by a deep reverence for the past and for the families' original ancestors, seeing children as belonging to and reproducing an entire lineage rather than representing the future, the middle-class people in both caste groups regarded the raising of children as the primary function of marriage and achieved their identity through the development of "social personality" ([1941] 2009, 102) in clubs and churches within the context of group controls.¹² This reflects a developmentalist stance, undergirded by a belief in the possibility of social mobility and meritocratic advance.

It is potentially this stance that also generated the belief among black community members, reported by the ethnographers, "that the extensive miscegenation has definitely affected the general relations between the two groups. They insist that the caste rules are not so rigidly applied and that the Negroes are not so strongly subordinated as they are elsewhere in the state" ([1941] 2009, 39). However, since the basis for the endogamy principle was legally enforced – in other words, members of the two castes could not legally marry, thus providing the cornerstone of household economic and political participation according to this same developmentalist ideology – it is perhaps more accurate to view this perception not as an absolute loosening of social stigma but as a reflection of the ways the caste sanction was apprehended differently within different institutional spheres, given the history of slavery during which these spheres developed. That this is also true of economic relations is made clear by my second example.

In the introduction to the volume, Warner suggested that one of the functions of maintaining the caste line was to prevent the proliferation of class segmentation within the lower class. He speculated that if greater economic differentiation within the "Negro" caste were to continue, then social sanctions applying to cross-caste engagement might weaken, and caste differentials would diminish in power and prestige (Warner [1941] 2009, 11–12); this should call our attention to the economic sphere within the society. While the ethnographers positioned the caste/class framework they encountered in Natchez as having evolved from the old master–slave dynamics of cotton plantation socio-economic life, they also noted significant economic transformations. These included the decimation of the cotton industry as a result of the boll weevil infestation during the early 1900s and the population decline that followed, the closure of textile mills, the great migration of black laborers to the industrial north, the 1929 depression, and the industrialization spurred by the development of the lumber industry. By the time of their fieldwork, then, and despite a continued sensibility among upper-class and some middle-class community members that cotton had to be revived, the area was experiencing some degree of economic diversification. And what they saw through their ethnographic fieldwork was a weakening of caste within an emergent occupational structure.

In part, this weakening had to do with the entry of white people into common labor jobs usually given to black people as a result of the federal relief programs initiated after the Depression. Yet, it also reflected several patterns specific to the new availability of factory work in the planing mill, which, owned by a non-local corporation and opened in 1919 during a period of labor shortage, gave experienced black workers an opportunity to rise in the occupational hierarchy due to the scarcity of white skilled workers and the lack of a white union organization. This new industry, in conjunction with the preference of

some landowners for black tenants over white ones, the preference of employers for black workers over white, ones the need for white shopkeepers to court the money of black consumers, and the legal protections afforded to black land ownership, led the ethnographers to argue that “economic relationships are less completely governed by caste than are intergroup relationships of any other type” (Davis, Gardner, and Gardner [1941] 2009, 454). For them, this “indicates a fundamental conflict between the economic system and the caste dogma” ([1941] 2009, 479) that is rooted in “the principle of the sacredness of private property and [...] the principle of free competition” ([1941] 2009, 478).¹³ Ultimately, however, their view was that these economic transformations did not result in the abrogation of caste relations as a whole, which they positioned as enduring.

Conclusion

Despite the ultimate conclusion of *Deep South*, what we see clearly throughout the ethnographic exegesis is that, within particular spheres, shared structuring principles rooted in a common class-cultural and ideological framework trumped the legal-political operations of caste sanction, neither as the result of a commitment to socialist egalitarianism nor of a sexual revolution of miscegenation (as Cox would have had it, albeit cynically with respect to the latter), but through an adherence to capitalist principles of competition and private property. As a result, what is revealed by ethnographic attention to the everyday operations of social life is that the caste system of race remained strongest in rurally based plantation mono-crop economies where there was a concentration of land ownership in lateral kin groups and a strictly racialized division of labor, generating extreme dispossession and legalized segregation. The ethnography shows us that these patterns weakened with capitalist diversification within the broader context of global industrialization, and that, therefore, the patterns of racial caste organization were not generalizable to capitalist production within all industries (and, if one reasonably extrapolated, should also not be assumed to be *limited* to capitalist production). Indeed, as the ethnographers themselves stated, caste “seems to be essentially a structure of pastoral and agricultural societies” and was difficult to adjust and apply to “manufacturing and commercial economies” (Davis, Gardner, and Gardner [1941] 2009, 479). Cox’s insistence that racial discrimination could only be undone by socialist revolution – in other words, by an industrial proletariat finding common cause and throwing off the mantle of bourgeois ownership and political class domination – therefore misses the importance of culturally-rooted beliefs rooted in industrial capitalism, beliefs that in daily practice mitigated against a more generalized ideological system of segregation.

Where Cox was right in his assessment of the social world of caste and class relations was in his critique of nationalism, as we see that the maintenance of strict disenfranchisement in *Deep South* occurred neither in the realm of kinship nor in the economy, but in the realm of politics and law, and therefore in the sphere of the state. As the ethnographers averred, “The ultimate seat of power in Old City is in the upper-middle class, for it is members of this stratum who normally dominate the ring [a political and economic clique], manipulate the symbols of the society, dispense patronage, and, for all practical purposes, control elections” (Davis, Gardner, and Gardner [1941] 2009, 497–8). Indeed, we might see this power, in addition to the forms of overt violence characterizing racial conflict in many locations during this period (and beyond), as having intensified as a result of the seeming loosening of caste ideology in other spheres. With revolutionary, nominally democratic, and postcolonial hindsight, we all know that it is much easier to transform institutional patterns of inclusion and exclusion than it is to change deep-seated

attitudes and patterns of association, whether in US or Caribbean societies. Had Cox been able to maintain a practice-oriented and relational understanding of the dynamic of culture, political-economy, and history, he might have been more committed to parsing the complex dynamics of inequality in a variety of settings over time rather than proffering a programmatic platform for change.

Notes

1. Here, of course, I am thinking of W.E.B. DuBois, Antenor Firmin, and J.J. Thomas, among others; see Smith (2002) for an analysis of J.J. Thomas' life and work, and Magloire-Danton (2005) for Firmin.
2. Powdermaker never actually uses the caste concept in her Mississippi ethnography; Dollard's is more explicitly psychological in approach; and *Deep South* is the only one to use black ethnographers. Additionally, Davis and his colleagues pay more attention to the economic sphere (Davis 1945; Drake 1978, 1980), which challenged some of the findings of Dollard and Powdermaker.
3. See Powdermaker (1966) for a retrospective assessment of her own work in Indianola during that period, and its grounding in both functionalist and psychological paradigms; and see Fraser (1991) for a reevaluation of *After Freedom* some 50 years later, within the context of a more general elaboration of the place of African Americans in anthropological research at that time.
4. Fuller (2011) laments the fact that these ethnographies are largely ignored within the structural-functionalist canon, arguing that *Deep South* in particular represents an innovation within this theoretical paradigm as it addresses a modern urban community rather than on the more common "traditional" tribal societies in Africa, Oceania, and elsewhere (2011, 605). "More plainly than most monographs of its period", he continues, "even though Leach, Turner, and other critics of functionalism never mentioned it – *Deep South* had already demonstrated in 1941 how a functionalist ethnography can be written about a fractured, changing, modern society" (2011, 606). In a different vein, Adams and Gorton's (2004) re-evaluation of the "caste" ethnographies theorize the various omissions of Powdermaker and Dollard (they do not include *Deep South* in their discussion). They argue that in not catching significant class and ethnic distinctions among white people (due to an anemic definition of class), in taking the proclamations of aristocratic white people as fact rather than ideology, and in perceiving what they saw in Indianola as universally applicable to the south as a whole, these two scholars missed important factors that made the Mississippi Delta unique, both at that time and shortly after, as a rapidly industrializing area that attracted migrants from other counties in Mississippi as well as other states (and countries). For Adams and Gorton, these shortcomings, coupled with foundations' emphases on personality and culture, acculturation, and the "problem" of race relations, led them to elide the significant ways cross-racial class alliances intermittently issued serious threats to the maintenance of white supremacy, thereby instead creating a "mythic history" (2004, 335) of an essential, timeless, segregated south. Their argument is, ultimately, that Powdermaker and Dollard solidified a view that southern white people were uniformly resistant to African American equality, and that had activists seen southern white communities as complexly differentiated, "they might have developed significantly different strategies" (2004, 341).
5. One might also position Cox's analysis here in relation to the 1928 shift in position among the Comintern that now saw "Negroes" in the United States as members of an oppressed nation, which, as a special group, should be mobilized toward a national revolutionary movement against American imperialism. (But see Zumoff 2012; Makalani 2011 for analyses of early Communist Party approaches to the "Negro Question". Both argue that the struggle to put race on the Marxist table was long-fought.)
6. This is a point toward which W.E.B. DuBois (1998) also gestures, and is one that has been taken up by several succeeding generations of Marxist scholars within the Caribbean.
7. This is a point also made by Fuller (2011).
8. See, for example, Loomba and Burton (2007); Silverblatt (2004); Trouillot (1995); and Wynter (2003).

9. Despite the dominance of this approach, during the 1920s and 1930s folklorists continued to collect songs, stories, dances, and texts designed to answer questions about the relationships among black people in the Old and New Worlds. See, for example, Walter Jekyll ([1907] 1966) and see also Beckwith ([1929] 1969).
10. I am alluding here to the “plural society debate”, the main protagonists of which were Smith (1962) and Smith (1956; see also Braithwaite 1953). For important reformulations and critiques, see Austin (1983), Hall (1977) and Robotham (1980).
11. See Catherine Hall (2002) and Austin-Broos (1992) for historical exegeses of this phenomenon in the British West Indies. The family studies that developed within British West Indian anthropology, in fact, drew upon the analyses of kinship relations in the US south by these and other ethnographers at the encouragement of Thomas Simey, first Director of the Colonial Office of Social Development and Welfare and author of the classic study *Welfare and Planning in the West Indies* (published in 1946). This study included a foundational analysis of class-based kinship arrangements that was later critiqued and elaborated by other scholars of West Indian family structure. It should be noted that what the *Deep South* ethnographers write about lower-class family structure (white and black) and what the sociologists and anthropologists attending to West Indian family formation discover is remarkably similar.
12. This kind of orientation is also well documented in additional US contexts. See, for example, Higginbotham (1994) and Jones (2007).
13. These were points Davis elaborated in a later essay, in which he was also notably developing a theory of violence based on these economic (caste) inconsistencies. Davis saw the intensification of anti-black violence as a result of “the breakdown of caste in the economic sphere” (1945, 7), and argued that “the physical terrorization of colored people is most common in those areas where their general economic status is highest. In the ‘newer’ agricultural, oil-producing and manufacturing sections of Mississippi and of the South in general, where relatively large groups of colored people are economically superordinate to relatively large groups of white people, open racial conflict and terrorization seem to be at their height” (1945, 14). This insight directed him to an assertion that can be read as a pre-emptive critique of Cox: that economic equality does not automatically constitute generalized equality.

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