POST-REVISIONIST SCHOLARSHIP ON RACE

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INTRODUCTION

Beginning in the late 1950s and peaking in the 1980s and 1990s, a revisionist wave of scholarship focused on dismantling myths of Latin American “racial democracy.” Scholars emphasized the insidiously disempowering effects of egalitarian myths and documented pervasive inequality and racism.1 By the late twentieth century, most scholars had

1. The author thanks Roger Kittleson for comments on an earlier draft. Deep gratitude is also owed to Karin Rosemblatt, both for comments on this particular essay and for insights provided in an ongoing dialogue on the subject of race in Latin America.

reached a consensus on some basic principles underlying all critical race scholarship: Race is a contingent social and historical construct; racial identities are not simply determined by ancestry or phenotype. We generally agree that other factors, such as economic class, social context, and political mobilization contribute to shaping how people identify racially (though we do not always agree which factors have been the most important).

So much has been written on race in Latin America that one might understandably wonder whether there is anything important left to study and debate. Yet, building on these basic insights, new contributions to the literature continue to bring up original lines of inquiry, thus demonstrating the ongoing vitality and even urgency of the topic. There are indeed many questions waiting to be explored, questions that get at the core of how race is “made” and how race has shaped citizenship in modern nations.

If the books reviewed in this essay can be considered representative of a new trend, then a post-revisionist scholarship is emerging that focuses on the production of racial knowledge. This literature considers the interaction of bureaucratic institutions with social and intellectual movements in modern nation-states, leading us toward a fuller understanding of the institutionalization of racial inequality and its cultural
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underpinnings. These books examine how specific state entities—such as school districts, census bureaus, and Indian bureaus—have produced and disseminated knowledge about race. They are also unified by a common argument that citizenship has been implicitly and explicitly racialized, and that race has served to constrain the full exercise of citizenship. The best post-revisionist scholarship, moreover, moves beyond the revisionists’ emphasis on denunciation and takes a more nuanced view of how elite intellectuals and popular forces have interacted in the making of race.3

PRODUCING RACIAL KNOWLEDGE IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Historian Jerry Dávila’s fine recent book, Diploma of Whiteness: Race and Social Policy in Brazil, 1917–1945 examines how elite intellectuals, politicians, and educational bureaucracies interacted to shape public education in an urban school system. His research focuses on education reform in Rio de Janeiro, 1917–1946, whereby “an emerging white medical, social scientific, and intellectual elite turned their assumptions about race in Brazil into educational politics” (3). He argues that intellectuals projected their views about racial degeneracy “into Brazilian society in ways that typically worked to the disadvantage of poor and nonwhite Brazilians, denying them equitable access to the programs, institutions, and social rewards that educational policies conferred” (3–4).

Dávila deftly shows how Rio’s public schools served not only as institutions for disseminating knowledge to children, but also as laboratories for producing knowledge about them. School reformers collected detailed anthropomorphic data on schoolchildren and used it to produce statistics inscribed within a eugenic framework that associated health and scholastic aptitude with whiteness. Dávila casts a critical eye on school-based hygienic, medical, dental, and nutritional initiatives. On the one hand, Dávila admits, these programs did benefit poor children’s lives directly. But Dávila emphasizes the programs’ more ominous aspects, whereby children “were reduced to objects of science, subjects of experiments whose conclusions were used as scientific proofs

Dávila provides examples of how reformers, in their efforts to uplift “the Brazilian race” by expanding educational access, ultimately reaffirmed racial hierarchy and discrimination. For example, admissions to the highly competitive Teachers’ College depended on assessments of intelligence and health that favored young women who conformed to a eugenic ideal. In primary schools, moreover, educational testing and tracking prevented most poor nonwhite students from advancing academically. Dávila shows that the Estado Novo’s purge of school reformers did not change the racial assumptions of the reform movement. Whitening ideals, he argues, were manifest in the Estado Novo’s huge nationalist rallies featuring schoolchildren’s choral performances of music written by Heitor Villa-Lobos.

Dávila defines race as a “metanarrative.” Yet, his own methodology reveals an unresolved tension between this post-modern approach and a more essentialist, phenotypically-based understanding of race. This tension is most apparent when he compares photographs of teachers over time to argue that “Afrodescendants” were increasingly excluded from the teaching profession. I do not necessarily doubt his conclusions, nor do I mean to single this book out for special criticism given that this tension runs through most of the scholarship on race. But I would have welcomed a discussion on his part of the racial assumptions undergirding his methodology. He assigns to himself the authority to discern who was “Afrodescendant,” yet the subjects of these photos would not necessarily have agreed. His surprisingly uncritical use of the labels “Afrodescendant” and “non-white” throughout the book allows him to largely sidestep thorny questions about racial identity and categorization.

MAKING AND CONTESTING RACIAL CATEGORIES IN CENSUSES

Political scientist Melissa Nobles focuses precisely on these thorny questions in her engrossing book on Brazil and the United States, *Shades of Citizenship: Race and the Census in Modern Politics*. She argues that “census-taking is one of the institutional mechanisms by which racial boundaries are set” and that “racial enumeration itself creates and advances concepts of race, bringing into being the racial reality that census officials presume is already there, waiting to be counted. Ideas of race, in turn, shape public policies” (xi).

Nobles shares with Dávila an interest in how intellectuals sought to use state institutions as tools for producing racial knowledge. I was most intrigued by Nobles’s historical accounts of how nineteenth- and twentieth-century social scientists influenced the creation of census
categories in both the United States and Brazil, especially the category mulatto, in order to obtain statistics that would support particular scientific theories and political projects. In the United States, nineteenth-century theorists of polygenesis successfully lobbied to include mulatto in the census. These intellectuals sought to generate mortality statistics in order to prove that the interbreeding of ostensibly separate species inevitably results in a frail mixed race. They believed that both blacks and mulattos were destined to die out. In Brazil, the census was also used as a forum for theorists of whitening. Francisco José Oliveira Vianna and Fernando de Azevedo wrote influential texts that accompanied the 1920 and 1940 censuses respectively. But Brazilians, in contrast to most North American theorists, came to advocate racial fusion as the best way to whiten the nation. Thus, in both countries the census was used as a scientific tool for ideologies of whitening, but from distinct perspectives. The science, in both cases, was influenced by politics: In the United States, segregation hardened the North American population into distinct races separated by the one-drop rule, and “mulatto” disappeared from the U.S. census after 1920, while in Brazil intellectuals and populist politicians increasingly characterized Brazil as a unified “racial democracy.” They preferred the terminology of “color” for classifying Brazilians, as it implied that all Brazilians, whatever their complexion, belonged to one national race.

The importance of the census for politicians and activists is also discussed in a fascinating chapter on two very different social movements that emerged in the 1990s to pressure for changes in census categories. In the United States, the multiracial movement sought official recognition for those of mixed African and European heritage, causing consternation to civil rights advocates who feared a decrease in numbers of blacks. The implementation of civil rights legislation has depended on clear-cut, mutually exclusive, unquestioned categories such as “black” and “white.” Nobles argues that both sides of the debate, the multiracial advocates and the established black civil rights activists, reinforce racial essentialism. Even the category “multiracial,” she points out ironically, “presupposes monoracial identities” (133).

In Brazil, meanwhile, black activists in the 1990s advocated a bipartite racial model more like that of the United States. Among other demands, they campaigned to revise the census’s intermediate \textit{pardo} category, which they consider to be a factor in a systematic overcount of white Brazilians and undercount of black Brazilians. Brazil, they have argued, is predominantly black and in the process of becoming more so. In order to prove their argument, they need numbers that only a census can provide. Both the black activists in Brazil and the multiracial activists in the United States have realized that the knowledge produced by the census depends on the categories that the census employs.
The two movements pursue seemingly opposite goals, yet both have viewed the census as a key site of contestation in their struggles for recognition.

*Shades of Citizenship* follows a long tradition of U.S.-Brazil comparative scholarship. This tradition has been enormously productive in revealing the historically and geographically contingent nature of North Americans’ common-sense assumptions about race. Yet this otherwise strong book also exemplifies one limitation of this comparative literature, which too often isolates Brazil from Spanish America, where comparable processes have also played out. Nobles makes few references to research on Spanish America or the Caribbean. Moreover, in order to bolster a questionable and unnecessary assertion that the United States and Brazil are unique when it comes to census categories, she makes the misleading comment that “neither Colombian, Cuban, nor Dominican Republic censuses count by race or color” (180). In fact, Cuban censuses consistently have done just that, while those of other Latin American republics have done so intermittently. Counting by race currently seems to be on the rise in Latin America. Presumably, social scientists and social movements have influenced the creation of census categories in those countries too.

Nobles makes only brief references to Indians, who in Brazil were subsumed under the category of pardo in 1980. In leaving Indians largely out of her story, Nobles follows in the footsteps of the earlier revisionists. The revisionist race scholarship, with certain exceptions, focused mainly on people of African descent and their oppression by white-dominated societies, with the unintended implication that race is really only a topic of concern to black people. Indians and heavily indigenous societies were usually studied in terms of ethnicity or class rather than race. Likewise, Asian and European immigrants have generally been discussed in terms of ethnicity. Some of the new post-revisionist


7. On ethnicity and race, see Peter Wade, *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America* (London: Pluto Press, 1997). The ethnicity research on indigenous peoples and immigrants has
research, however, broadens the scope of critical race scholarship by considering all racial groups and definitions within its purview.

CREATING AND CONTESTING INDIAN IDENTITY

*Racial Revolutions: Antiracism and Indian Resurgence in Brazil* by anthropologist Jonathan Warren does consider the implications of adding an indigenous category to the Brazilian census. *Racial Revolutions* asks why the Brazilian Indian population has dramatically increased in areas of the country where they had been widely presumed to be extinct. The author focuses on “post-traditional” Eastern Indians in Minas Gerais and Espírito Santo, whose Indian-ness is often questioned because they do not resemble “the romanticized savages of colonial nostalgia” (31). He attributes the resurgence of the Indian population in large part to “racial identity shifts” prompted by a combination of factors. Along with the addition of *indígena* to the Brazilian census, other factors include the decline of repressive policies previously aimed at “exorcising” Indian-ness from Brazil; the state’s backing of land claims for some indigenous communities; and the emergence of an indigenous rights movement organized and backed by the Catholic Church, academics, and international NGOs.

Warren notes that the political and cultural climate for Brazilian Indians has improved as state institutions—including schools and the census, among others—have increasingly conceptualized the Brazilian national population as mutiracial rather than racially fused (a change that is also taking place in Spanish-American countries). Some previous “disincentives” to Indian-ness have been removed. But Warren insists that significant obstacles to asserting Indian identity still persist in Brazil. He seeks to disprove the “racial huckster” thesis, according to which false Indians “are gravitating toward Indian identities due to state-provided material incentives” (31). His argument resonates with recent research by historians and anthropologists in Spanish America, who have encountered various historical examples of hegemonic discourse that denied the authenticity of any Indian who was urban or semi-educated.8

Warren discusses the role of the church and NGOs in the building of an indigenous rights movement, in light of current social movement theory. He traces the roles played by professional anthropologists in formulating various nefarious state policies towards Indians. Warren places his findings in the context of ethnographic research across the Americas, rather than assuming Brazil’s uniqueness.

The other researchers considered in this review all rely mainly on bureaucratic archives and publications for their evidence, thus limiting their ability to gauge the effect of official policies on everyday life. According to historian Thomas Holt’s influential formulation, however, “it is precisely within the ordinary and everyday that racialization has been most effective, where it makes race.” Ethnographers such as Warren interact with their living subjects, gaining a privileged view into how individuals constitute and racialize their own identities. Warren uses this access to delve into the experiences, practices, and discourses of Indians and some non-Indians. Through systematic interviews and direct observation in three rural indigenous communities and one urban neighborhood, he examines the process whereby some Indians constituted new communities after being forcibly dislocated from ancestral lands. He interviews people about racial categories, daily life, and racism. He recounts how some individuals went from identifying themselves as caboclo or pardo to “Indian.”

Ultimately, however, his ethnographic description is not as rich as I would have hoped. I was captivated by the communities themselves, and would have welcomed a much thicker description. For example, I would have liked to know more about a dispute over racial authenticity that divided one of the communities into opposing camps; this dispute could have been used to explore complicated issues about identity and communal power dynamics. Instead, Warren devotes much of the book to denouncing racism and racist policies. Comparing the discourse of white, black, and Indian informants, he concludes that most white and black Brazilians share a discourse of racial democracy, while only Indians explicitly question the racial order; thus the Indians provide Brazil’s only critical subaltern voice. This argument seems suspiciously neat; I suspect that a thicker ethnography might have indicated greater complexity.

**BEYOND BRAZIL**

From these three books, we know that in Brazil elite intellectuals, social movements “from below,” and external actors such as NGOs and

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foreign academics have all contributed to shaping the state institutions that have played key roles in race-making. Meanwhile, what about the rest of Latin America? Race scholarship has not been limited to Brazil; important work on race is being done for almost every country of Latin America. Here I will limit myself to discussing only one example, a monograph book on Mexico. Historian Alexander Dawson’s book, *Indian and Nation in Revolutionary Mexico*, focuses on an intertwined set of state institutions, intellectuals, and social movements that sought to remake “the Indian.” He locates his discussion of race within the scholarly literature on “everyday forms of state formation” in Mexico and the rest of Latin America. His analysis is more nuanced, and less one-sided, than any of the books considered above.

Dawson follows Alan Knight and other revisionists on *indigenismo* in noting the paternalism and shortcomings of the *indigenistas*. Mexican indigenistas viewed Indians as “proto-citizens, incapable of rising to the level of citizen without state tutelage” (xx). According to revisionist critics, indigenistas exhibited a fundamentally racist disdain for the living breathing Indians whom they sought to transform. But for Dawson, this racism is only part of the story. Dawson parts company with the revisionists when he argues that some indigenistas undermined and challenged an essentialist view of the Indian. He probes the internal tensions within *indigenismo* and reveals tensions between these intellectuals and the state that they served. At the same time, he emphasizes that indigenista social scientists helped expand and strengthen the state.

Dawson recounts the history of educational establishments created by indigenista social scientists working within state bureaucracies, beginning with the short-lived and ill-fated Casa del Estudiante Indígena in the late 1920s. Dawson shares with Dávila and Nobles an emphasis on how social scientists used state institutions to produce racial knowledge. Indigenistas sought not only to train indigenous youth to become communal leaders and agents of indigenous modernization, but they also tried to use the school to prove a scientific point: Indians are not biologically inferior; Indians are capable of modernization. With the replacement of the Casa in the early 1930s with local boarding schools located in and near their students’ communities, indigenista education faced local pressures on the part of both indigenous communities and non-Indian politicians. Dawson recounts the various local and national political pressures that shaped *indigenismo* as Lázaro Cárdenas came to power. By this time, some indigenistas working within the bureaucracy had adopted a Soviet-influenced analysis of Indians as “oppressed nationalities,” which did not mesh well with Cárdenas’s populist efforts to build a tightly unified nation-state. Cárdenas saw the Indians’ problems more in class terms. He publicly and repeatedly manifested
his respect for Indians’ dignity and equality, but many of his functionaries were more concerned with expanding their power than with promoting Indians’ welfare.

Ultimately, many of Cárdenas’s populist impulses were undermined by local forces and subsequent presidential administrations. Moreover, according to Dawson, the indigenistas were never successful in remaking the common-sense Mexican definition of the Indian as racially immutable and inferior (his main evidence for this assertion is that the word *indio* remained a common slur). Indian representatives to indigenous congresses and students trained in indigenista boarding schools, however, “used the forums created by revolutionary Indigenismo to talk back to the state” (xxi). These new indigenous political actors, known as *indígenas capacitados*, both challenged and consented to their own domination. In mediating between the state and their communities, they exercised their citizenship through the state’s corporatist framework and negotiated the terms of their own domination. In doing so, they ultimately contributed to the state’s stability. According to Dawson, they embodied hegemony.

CONCLUSIONS

The post-revisionist research considered above has effectively documented the interaction of state entities, social movements, and intellectuals in the production of both esoteric and common-sense racial knowledge, and thus in the very “making” of the racial categories that have shaped modern life throughout the Americas. Their insights illuminate some of the ways that citizenship and nation-state formation have been racialized.

Much still remains to be studied. For example, several of the authors considered here mention that racial categories vary regionally within countries, but these scholars do not probe the spatial dimensions of race. As other research has indicated, racial labels have often been geographic ascriptions denoting place of origin within the nation; in any given Latin American country, citizens’ racial identities are shaped in part by whether they are from “the backwoods,” the sierra, or the tropical coast.10 Particular places within the nation are commonly ascribed their own racial characteristics. Scholars are only just beginning to examine this racialization of geography; more studies are needed of topics such as cartographic institutes, map-making expeditions, and


14. See for example Peter Wade, Music, Race, and Nation: Música Tropical in Colombia (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), among others.
propose a multicultural model of national diversity. This trend, driven
by both local and global pressures, is controversial and complex. It has
been manifest in constitutional and institutional reforms as well as in
myriad social programs. But these initiatives aimed at eliminating rac-

ism and empowering indigenous and black communities have been
implemented unevenly. Reforms face resistance from entrenched sec-
tors who benefited under the previous policies. Continual research is
necessary in order to carefully document any effects that these changes
are having (or not) on institutionalized racial hierarchy, subjective ra-
cial identities, economic inequality, and everyday practices of racial
discrimination.

Academics who work in and on Latin America are not simply de-
tached observers. Scholars participate in the current controversies and
reforms. The innovative new books discussed here remind us that ear-
lier generations of scholars also participated in school reform, census
categorization, and state policies towards blacks and Indians. Scientific
theories have influenced, and have been influenced by, the common-
sense racial prejudices of each era. As we continue to document the
errors of our predecessors, our own complicity in both institutional and
oppositional race-making must necessarily be the subject of continual
reflection and debate.