

TRANSFORMING ANTHROPOLOGY

A PUBLICATION OF THE ASSOCIATION OF BLACK ANTHROPOLOGISTS

RACE, RACISM, AND THE HISTORY OF U.S. ANTHROPOLOGY



Volume 5, Numbers 1 & 2

1994

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Issue Editors

Lee D. Baker
and
Thomas C. Patterson

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Race, Racism, and The History of U.S. Anthropology

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RACE, RACISM, AND THE HISTORY OF U.S. ANTHROPOLOGY

Lee D. Baker, Johns Hopkins University
 Thomas C. Patterson, Temple University

The ideology of race has played a significant role in the development and professionalization of anthropology in the United States. When anthropological ideas about race became popular or when popular concepts became anthropological, they legitimated racism, underwrote Jim Crow statutes, and validated the enactment of anti-immigrant legislation (Drake 1987; Drinnon 1987; Fields 1982, 1990; Smedley 1993; Takaki 1990, 1993; Williams 1990). At the same time, other anthropological arguments buttressed demands for desegregation, underpinned U.N. resolutions concerning racial equality, challenged assertions about the racial heritability of IQ scores, and thwarted claims that race was an essential biological category (Benedict and Welfish 1943; Carter, Marshal, and Robinson 1952; Drake 1978, 1980; Klineberg 1935; Myrdal 1944; Redfield 1963:133-165; Washburn 1963).

The interrelated issues of race and racism have been the center of a lively and contentious debate for the last two hundred years. Anthropologists have participated in that discourse for the last century and a half. Within the anthropological contributions to that discourse, certain issues come to the fore as others are relegated to the margins. Those at center stage resonate with and contribute to the national discourse at historically specifically moments. This volume attempts to re-historicize various aspects of the anthropological dis-

course on race, especially in the United States. The authors examine the processes by and contexts in which hegemonic ideas about race were added to the anthropological canon; at the same time, they investigate how counter-hegemonic ideas were obscured and made visible only by savvy maneuvers and coalition building. Examining how U.S. anthropologists dealt historically with the interrelated issues of race and racism not only allows us to bare the strengths and weaknesses of past practices but also to begin laying more solid foundations for combating racism in the present and the future (e.g., Baker 1994; Harrison and Nonini 1992; Littlefield, Lieberman, and Reynolds 1982; Patterson 1995; Rankin-Hill and Blakey 1994:82-85; Vincent 1991:46-49).

The annual output of publications concerned with race and racism has grown exponentially since the late 1960s. However, it is a discourse fragmented by discipline so that parallel arguments rarely merge. Labor historians, for instance, often overlook much in the works of authors concerned primarily with the African American experience who, in turn, often pay scant attention to writers concerned with the discrimination and racism experienced by Asian Americans, Latinos, and others (Allen 1994; Barrera 1979; Dower 1986; Hing 1993; Pike 1992; Roediger 1994; Sacks 1992; Suzuki 1986; Williams 1989). Few refer to works marginalized by virtue of the explicit

political orientations of their authors (e.g., Aptheker 1973). This has had devastating consequences. Potentially useful insights developed in one current remain virtually unknown to writers creating another strand or line of argumentation. Some feminist and womanist writers have worked to transcend these modalities and unravel their epistemological foundations (Morrison 1990; Painter 1992; Williams 1991). But because of their mistrust of the hegemonic influences of unified theory, it is hard for these efforts to develop an overarching framework for articulating and understanding the current output of the race, class, and gender industry (Collins 1992; Leiman 1993; Sacks 1989). The debates over multiculturalism and multicultural curricula remain murky because there is no shared framework of understanding or appreciation of foundations. Consequently, there is no unified discourse to anchor an attack on the efficacy of the social policy decisions that are being enacted on Capitol Hill.

Questions of race and racism have historically been separated in U.S. anthropology. In fact, U.S. anthropologists have rarely dealt with the issue of racism in disciplinary journals. However, a number of anthropologists have consistently confronted racism in the course of everyday life by blurring the distinction between their professional and political activities. Early in this century, Franz Boas collaborated

with W. E. B. Du Bois and contributed to both the Atlanta University Conferences and the initial meetings of the NAACP; Boas also challenged the United States Immigration Commission, when he refuted its claims that immigrants from Southern Europe were inferior to the implicitly white "American stock." In the 1940s, Ruth Benedict and Gene Weltfish published a series of works showing that there were no scientific justifications for racial segregation. In the 1950s, Robert Redfield collaborated with Thurgood Marshall and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and testified in the school desegregation cases. By the early 1960s, Ashley Montagu, Frank Livingstone, and Sherwood Washburn questioned the existence of any biological basis for race as well as the scientific utility of race concept itself (Boas 1910, 1940, 1945, 1974; Benedict 1940; Benedict and Ellis 1942; Benedict and Weltfish 1943, 1948; Durham, Hastie, and Ming 1948; Livingstone 1962; Montagu 1942, 1965, 1976; Washburn 1963).

The disparity in anthropology between the mountain of materials on race and the dearth of information on racism occurred in the context of technical division of labor. Until the 1960s, most U.S. anthropologists were concerned with primitive communities on the margins of the civilized world, whereas U.S. sociologists dealt with social problems, including race relations, in the industrializing cities of the capitalist world. This technical division of labor was sustained, in part, by the tribal or community-study approach adopted by many U.S. anthropologists, which constructed communities on reservations or in the Third World as autonomous and relatively unaffected by colonial states and civilization. The anthropologists who did address issues of racism in their professional writings—for example, Hortense Powdermaker (1939, 1944), Allison Davis (Davis, Gardner, and Gardner 1941), St. Clair Drake (1955), or Eleanor Leacock (1969)—usually did so as members of sociology or education departments or outside the uni-

versity context.

Discussions of race in the United States have often been closely linked with the issues of forced resettlement and migration. These have often been used to fuel the rhetoric of nativists and racists, who have claimed the existence of racial hierarchies. When anglophone settler-colonists arrived in North America in the early 17th century, they encountered indigenous peoples whom they often interpreted to be part of the natural rather than human world. In the 18th century, they enslaved Africans and brought them to the continent; like many of those who followed, the slaves did not immigrate to North America under conditions of their own making. This was the backdrop for the development of early formulations of the concept of race, racist attitudes, and genocide in the United States. Irish Catholic immigrants, who arrived in the 1830s and 1840s, encountered the nativist sentiments of the Know Nothings in the industrializing cities of the Northeast. The doctrine of Manifest Destiny elevated racism and nativism to a divine right, making the countless Indian Wars and the 1846 War with Mexico seem like a religious crusade to tame the West and seize territory from Texas to California (Drinnon 1980; Horsman 1981).

Racism and ideas about race were recast after the Civil War. Enslaved African Americans were emancipated and Black men were granted citizenship and voting rights as a result of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. This marked an alliance of White (male) Republicans and the new Black freedmen against women of all races, Native American men, and new migrants. However, the alliance and the promises were short-lived. The irony of the alliance was that many of the most effective organizers and workers of the abolition and Negro suffrage movements were women. This was the first time in U.S. history when the Black and women's movements were structurally pitted against one another. Nevertheless, there were men and women—Frederick Douglass and

Sojourner Truth, for instance—who resisted that opposition.

By the 1870s, the hegemonic northern industrialists had already opened the doors of their factories to migrant laborers from Eastern and Southern Europe rather than to Southern Black men, and, during the 1880s, Blacks were used to undercut union organizing efforts in Boston, Baltimore, and other northern cities (Yans-McLaughlin 1990). The Jim Crow legislation of the 1890s deprived most Black men of the rights granted to them by constitutional amendments ratified in the 1860s. Social boundaries became increasingly more rigid. The new migrants from Eastern and Southern Europe were simultaneously feared and viewed as clannish barbarians—undifferentiated masses of people whose religion, language, and traditions did not conform to the perceived norms of U.S. society. African Americans and Native Americans were seen as too savage to shoulder the responsibilities of citizenship in a civilized nation and were disenfranchised. Similar characterizations were made of the Chinese men who had been brought to the West in the 1860s and 1870s to build the railroads. Japanese, Mexican, and Filipino migrants used to break union organizing in the agricultural sector were also stereotyped and marginalized.

By the turn of the century, these circumstances provided a fertile medium for the rise of scientific racism, eugenics, and ideas about inherited criminality (Allen 1983, 1986, 1987; Barkan 1992; Chase 1980; Kevles 1985; Kühl 1994; Pick 1989). By 1890, the U.S. government was already keeping track of whether the members of European immigrant communities were foreign or native born as well as the nativity of their parents. At the same time, the Immigration Protection League launched arguments and lobbied Congress to curtail the number of immigrants arriving from areas outside of northwestern Europe. Anti-immigration legislation was finally enacted in 1921.

THE DISCIPLINE OF ANTHROPOLOGY

Anthropology was professionalized after the Civil War at the same time positivist understandings of science associated with Charles Darwin gained ascendancy. During the Gilded Age, science and technology were viewed increasingly as progressive, modernizing activities that would improve the conditions of everyday life for those who could partake of their benefits (DiMaggio 1982; Rydell 1978, 1984). The beneficiaries were the professionals, shopkeepers, merchants, managers, salesmen, and white-collar workers in an increasingly capitalist society with a rapidly developing technical division of labor. This was the sector of U.S. society that attended college before World War I.

The hegemonic paradigm of scientific racism has been challenged at various times by anthropologists, first around the turn of the century by Franz Boas and again in the 1930s. The latter involved simultaneous efforts by the U.S. government to demonize Japanese and distinguish them from other peoples of the Far East, to incarcerate Japanese-Americans in concentration camps, and to convince everyone, especially ethnics, that their primary identity was a nationalist one and that that national identity was White. This was seen as essential for building an military force with an average age of 28, seventy percent of whom were drafted. The G.I. Bill of 1944 provided the financial resources to send 2.1 million men and 65,000 women, mostly White given the segregated schools that existed in the United States following the war, to college. Education became an avenue of social mobility for the offspring of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, whose ethnicity, place of birth, and the natality of their parents were no longer recorded in the 1950 Census. In other words, the not-quite-white ethnics of the censuses in 1930 and 1940 became White (Sacks 1992).

Assimilation and integration were dominant themes in both political and social science discourse during the 1940s and 1950s. The second UNESCO statement on race (authored by Ashley Montagu, Theodosius Dobzhansky, and others) and Sherwood Washburn's (1963) presidential address to the American Anthropological Association in 1962 denied the validity of race as a *biological* category and focused instead on the concept of a population (Haraway 1989:197-206; UNESCO 1952). Furthermore, Montagu argued that race was a socially constructed category that continued to provide an essential underpinning for racism. Sociologists and social historians—Nathan Glazer and D. Patrick Moynihan (1963; Moynihan 1965), and Oscar Handlin (1957)—also downplayed the importance of race as a biological category, arguing instead for the importance of culture and ethnicity in the constitution of everyday life. They mainstreamed "culture of poverty" theses, which argued that the cultures of some ethnic groups were pathological, because their family structures did not appear to be the same as those of the beneficiaries of the American Dream (Leacock 1971). For the sociologists, the racial hierarchies of the 1890s and early 1900s were overlain by a hierarchy of ethnic groups. The political discourse of this moment culminated with the civil rights legislation of the mid 1960s, which guaranteed voting rights, fair housing, redistricting, and prohibited discrimination on the basis of race.

This moment rapidly came to a close, and the language of Social Darwinism which had been muted, but never silent, for twenty-five years, once again came to the fore. The advances of the Black civil rights movement were halted as the government once again played the Black and women's movements against one another. The academy witnessed renewed interest in IQ studies, the debut of sociobiology, and the ordination of ethnic studies. While women's studies also emerged in the 1970s, most programs were minimally funded centers rather than regular budgetary units. Outside the academy, the

disproportionate numbers of young men of color, mostly in their late teens, were conscripted and served in Vietnam; after the war, they did not receive the same levels of support as the beneficiaries of the G.I. Bill a generation earlier. Finally, the 1960s marked the beginning of the "brain drain." The last thirty-five years have witnessed the arrival of the second largest group of migrants in U.S. history; however, unlike the turn of the century when 95 percent of the migrants came from Europe, nearly 75 percent of the ten million of the new arrivals since 1969 came from Asia and Latin America. They constitute internally diverse populations: well-educated Koreans and Chinese professionals; impoverished Hmong and second-wave Cambodians peasants; and working-class men and women from Mexico, the Caribbean, and Central America. Almost 70 percent of the new migrants are concentrated in a few metropolitan areas: New York, Los Angeles, Miami, or the San Francisco Bay area. Their arrival coincided with the related reorganization of the U.S. class structure and with the appearance of new groups composed of previously disconnected individuals who were beginning to sense that they had something in common. Taken together, these processes marked the development of identity politics. They also created the conditions for the formation of new buffer races, a new racial hierarchy, and the resurgence of racist violence after the mid 1970s. The latter was exacerbated by the neo-liberalism of Reagan's "color-blind society" and Bush's "kinder, gentler America."

The papers in volume, which were presented at the 1994 annual meeting of the American Ethnological Society in Santa Monica, CA seek to construct a map showing the intersection race concepts, racism, the history of anthropology, and political power/hegemony in the United States.

Peter Gran argues that racialist thought, which is embedded in scholarship and official discourse, is an integral part of the hegemony of many modern states. In his view, race and racism

occupy different terrains or spaces in states with different forms of hegemony—what he calls Russian, Italian, tribal-ethnic, and bourgeois-democratic roads. From this comparative perspective, he explores how race and racism are deployed in the bourgeois democracies with particular reference to the United States. He argues that this comparative approach gives subjects such as racism a clarity and specificity they lack when they are studied in isolation from political economy.

Terrence W. Epperson indicates that the concept of race is grounded in John Locke's empiricist philosophy. Locke was a colonial administrator and organic intellectual of emergent capitalism, who articulated and implemented a philosophy that legitimated wage labor and also made it possible to select a single trait, such as skin color, as the criterion by which humanity would be judged. Locke's work also blurred the distinction between human and non-human beings, and classified enslaved people as property. Epperson proceeds to argue that, today, most attempts to comprehend and eradicate racism are still bounded by Locke's empiricist epistemology, particular the fact/value dichotomy. As a result, even when the "value" of racism is opposed, the purportedly neutral "fact" of race is seldom challenged.

Thomas C. Patterson and Frank Spencer examine how the meaning of the concept of race shifted and narrowed during the 19th century. They also examine how U.S. scientists and intellectuals articulated race with the hierarchical notions imbedded in the Great Chain of Being and with other analytical categories—such as savagery and civilization—to create a hierarchy of races. During the 1840s, various cranial measurements were used to support the validity claimed for these racial classifications. In the 1890s, U.S. scientists confronted with unprecedented migration from Eastern and Southern Europe began to define differences in the races of Europe. These were hierarchically related; they were inserted in the racial hierarchies proposed earlier

and served as buffers separating northern Europeans from "colored" races.

Lee D. Baker argues that the history of the construction of race as a social category in the United States is the history of an unstable complex of social meanings constantly transformed by political struggle. Similarly, the history of anthropological discourse on race is equally unstable and politically charged. He employs this framework to interrogate how early ethnography was articulated within vehicles of mass culture at the turn of the century. He argues that the processes which constructed race helped to professionalize anthropology, in turn, anthropology helped to shape various racial constructs.

Christine Ward Gailey shows that 18th and 19th-century European representations of the skin tone of southern Pacific Islanders were highly variable and mutable. She points out that colonial agents from different countries depicted skin color differently, and that the representations of travelers—for example, the French—changed through time. She argues that how people were portrayed by Europeans was linked partly to colonial agendas, such as the creation of a penal colony in Australia, settlement, commerce, or enslavement. These representations also reflected class differences between their authors as well as ongoing intellectual debates in Europe and the United States.

NOTES

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