RESEÑAS DE LIBROS / BOOK REVIEWS


This is a welcome addition to the Spanish-language literature on the history of the intersections of race and nation in Latin America. Its scope is broader than that of “Hispanic America,” as referred to in the title, since Brazil receives treatment in a chapter by Jeffrey Lesser and is included as part of the “South,” as discussed by Patricia Funes who compares Brazil, Argentina, and Bolivia. The treatment is historical—the authors are historians, with the exception of Rodolfo Stavenhagen (que en paz descanse) and Marta Elena Casasús Arzú—and the coverage is broad, with discussions of Cuba, Puerto Rico, Mexico (three times), Brazil (twice), Argentina (twice), Bolivia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Colombia. Spain also figures, as does, somewhat unexpectedly, Morocco, which appears in Joshua Goode’s chapter on the concept of hispanidad in early twentieth-century Cuba and Spain, and in Spain’s colonial relations with North Africa. The authors are specialists in their field, but the book does not assume an expert reader: the chapters are highly readable and most would be accessible for advanced undergraduates.

The book highlights the conundrum facing Latin American elites after independence, as they strove to build distinctive nations that would be fit to grace the global stage, using as their main human resources indigenous, African-descent, and mixed-race populations categorized as inferior by the dominant powers and their scientists. To solve the problem, national elites adopted approaches that combined, in varying degrees, diverse elements: a) an attempt to “whiten” their countries with mass immigration from Europe; b) an attempt to improve the biopolitical quality of the population by implementing social hygiene measures; c) the marginalization of black and indigenous populations; d) the rejection of European scientists’ biological racism; e) a positive revalorization of the race mixture that these scientists had disqualified as degenerative; and f) a glorification, through indigenismo, of selected aspects of (past) indigenous cultures. The reader who knows the literature on race and nation in Latin America will find this familiar. Speaking as such a reader, I nevertheless enjoyed the book. Knowing a bit about Mexico and having read FitzGerald and Cook-Martin’s Culling the Masses: The Democratic Origins of Racist Immigration Policy in the Americas
(Harvard University Press, 2014), I was still engrossed by Pablo Yankelevich’s
discussion of immigration policy in Mexico and his perspicacious and incisive
analysis of the contradictions that beset the state’s denial of racism and racial
hierarchies, alongside of its adherence to an idea of the Mexican people as a
mestizo raza, one which should not be contaminated by the immigration of blacks,
Asians, Jews, and other peoples who were deemed as incapable of “assimilating”
and, therefore, as potentially damaging to Mexico’s “embryonic nationality.”
In 1935, Manuel Gamio even said that Jews were not desirable because their
cultural level was too high (343)! Meanwhile, businesses with labour needs
lobbied government to admit black Belizeans to work in the tropical forests of
Quintana Roo, and, as Pérez Vejo notes in his chapter, the government itself
proposed the establishment of colonies of black immigrants on the coasts near
Tepic, Tabasco, and Tampico.

Despite knowing about Colombia, I also admired Marta Saade’s account of
the country’s racialized “moral order” in the early twentieth century. She provided
a persuasive account of “race” as a flexible, mercurial concept, which can carry
multiple meanings –what George Mosse refers to as its “scavenger” character.
She demonstrates this strikingly with an analysis of newspaper coverage of El
Día de la Raza (the October 12 anniversary of Columbus’ “discovery” of the
Americas), in which writers spoke in heartfelt fashion about the “soul” and
“spirit” of the raza-nation as a “feeling,” while also displaying a eugenic social
hygienic concern for the health of the nation’s body, threatened for example
by home-brewed chicha (maize beer), and also naming racialized collectivities
(negros, indios, mestizos) and locating them in a racialized moral geography of
the nation. This notion of race challenges standard oppositions between biology
and culture that are common in the social sciences. One of these writers, for
example, opposed “territories, languages, and ethnic similarities” to “spiritual
community, tradition, and genealogy” as bases for a collective identity (262).
Although Saade glosses this as an opposition between the material and the spiri-
tual, it is interesting to see language placed on the side of the material, while
genealogy is spiritual.

While most of the authors appreciate that Latin American concepts of race
at that time (and arguably still today) tend to merge what we would now see
as “culture” with biology –although I would add that this merging was evident
in other regions, colonial and metropolitan– not all of the contributors to this
volume do so. Fernando Devoto notes that Argentinian intellectuals deployed
a cultural definition of social collectivity, which he opposes to ideas of “race”
—and thus, also, to racism— that define it based mainly on biological criteria. This
misses precisely the possibility that ideas of race can include more than strictly
biological criteria—and indeed that such ideas have been, and are today, more
the norm than the exception.

I was also intrigued by Casaús Arzú’s argument that in Costa Rica, El Salvador,
and Guatemala, mestizaje never gained traction as an ideology of nationhood, as
it did in Mexico and Brazil. Instead, elites were intent on eugenically whitening
their nations as much as possible, invisibilizing black and indigenous populations,
and/or physically eliminating them through genocide. There is no denying the
extreme violence visited upon indigenous peoples in El Salvador in the 1932
massacre or in Guatemala in the 1980s and 1990s, but Casaús Arzú’s analysis
seems to ignore the fact that mestizaje in Mexico, and especially in Brazil, went
hand in hand with powerful elements of whitening and eugenic improvement,
or that anti-indigenous violence in Brazil has, historically and today, reached
alarming levels. It also seems a bit odd to put Guatemala alongside Costa Rica
as very whitened nations in which indigeneity is invisible.

There is not room here to cover each of the book’s ten chapters, but Pérez Vejo
and Yankelevich are to be congratulated on a great achievement in consolidating
discussions of race in Latin America.

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BARBARA WEINSTEIN: The Color of Modernity: São Paulo and the
Press, 2015

Em The Color of Modernity—São Paulo and the Making of Race
and Nation in Brazil, Barbara Weinstein realiza um cuidadoso e bem documentado estudo
da Revolução Constitucionalista de 1932 e do IV Centenário de São Paulo para
mostrar, como o próprio título da obra sugere, que a formação da nação brasileira
repousa sobre o racismo, ou seja, a modernidade brasileira não é tão mestiça
como sugere a ideologia nacional!

Como outros estudiosos, inclusive os maiores expoentes da sociologia do
período pós segunda guerra mundial, a autora parte do princípio de que as for-
mações econômico-sociais dependem tanto das estruturas econômicas como
dos “discursos de diferença e dos modelos de poder político e cultural que
eles produzem” (p. 2). Com o objetivo de apresentar a premissa central do seu
estudo, Barbara Weinstein inicia questionando a ausência de reflexividade de
Ela observa que Hirschman, apesar de crítico do desenvolvimentismo, acabou