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African Americans in PWIs: A Post-Caste Conundrum

Abstract

This paper proceeds from a historical study in progress of caste in the United States. That study will argue that the distinctive feature of slavery in the United States was that --unlike in Brazil or the Caribbean -servitude in the Anglophone mainland developed a caste ideal, ideologized as "race". As with dalits in India, people identified as "black" in what became the United States an excluded hereditary caste destined ascriptively to the meanest labor, and excluded systematically and ideologically from the dominant ("white") group. Slavery ended in the 1830s in most of the North, but because caste and slavery are independent variables, the United States in its first half century was able to develop an integrated economy, a national culture, and a federal system based on "white" democracy -i.e., implicit acceptance of the caste ideal nationwide by the dominant white group.

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Free African Americans in the north by the 1820s learned that efforts at "uplift" met with a violent reaction by whites incensed at their success as a rejection of caste-ascribed subservience.. Their response was to challenge caste itself. In so doing they forced a split in the 1830s between white abolitionists who accepted *caste* and those ready to oppose it, even at the cost of national unity. The regional compromise of 1877 left southern whites free to maintain caste. Nationally, Gilded Age immigrants fought to be casted ("white"), making it possible for their children to attend white schools and their sons to join the army. Economically, union exclusion gave rise to a (caste-based) split labor market, inducing African Americans to scab -and white union members to attack them. And white race riots destroyed African American economic bases in cities in Indiana, Oklahoma, Florida, Illinois, Texas, Michigan, and elsewhere.

But the *legalized* caste system as of 1930 was gone a generation later. *Brown v. Board* and succeeding Supreme Court decisions withdrew legal sanction from caste, and federal legislation opened jobs and housing to African Americans and enforced voting rights. Today, a considerable and growing number of white Americans -certainly a majority of professional educators --see themselves as fighting against "racism" At the same time, many, perhaps most, black American academics see racism as in the academy as a stubborn ongoing problem.

Implied in the prevailing vision of the American past is the notion that the "nation" was made up in the 18, 19th, and early 20th centuries of European-Americans who enjoyed casted status, but that it now includes those later admitted to full citizenship The nation -in the prevailing vision - became progressively accommodating of outsiders --Catholics, Jews, Southern Europeans, Asians, Hispanics - and, finally, (even) of African Americans. The vision is essentially individualist and goal-oriented: one becomes "American" by seeking the American dream of accumulation, consumption, and social mobility. African Americans' access to the American Dream is viewed as validating the vision of the Founders of a truly universalistic national democracy.

In the taxonomy of caste in the United States, this vision is that of an "imagined community" (Bernard Anderson) rooted in the ideology and caste privileges of the (European-) American past

But caste created a community, the African Americans, that was excluded from that imagined community into which the –in the prevailing vision-- hopes to *integrate* them. But that vision, for African Americans, was shattered in the early 19th century, when they lost all hope of inclusion through community "uplift". An African American "imagined community" emerged with its own view of its, and America's, past, and of Black Civilization.

Not all historically-derived "imagined communities" are nations, but all of them reject attempts to negate them. The conundrum of African Americans trying to make peace with the liberal values of predominantly white institutions is that such institutions hope to gain from a Black presence a validation of the prevailing vision of the national past. That vision is the modern version of a caste-based past, and implicitly rejects African Americans' "imagined community" as part of the national past. In an ironic way, just as outcasted African Americans a century ago survived by validating the ideology of caste, in the early 21st century they survive by validating the prevailing dominant culture ideology which negates the "imagined community".

Only recognition of caste and its role in American history can create a national culture that can enable European- and African-Americans to acknowledge each other as members of a truly plural society -and make America able to function in the post-western world of the late 21st century.

Presenter

Richard Sigwalt holds the BA from Macalester College, an MA in Modern European History from the University of Iowa, the PhD in Comparative Tropical History from the University of Wisconsin/Madison, and a JD from the Marshall-Wythe School of Law, College of William and Mary. He has taught African, JS, US Constitutional, African American, World, East Asian, Latin American, and Middle Eastern History at Radford University, William and Mary, Howard University, Universite Cheikh Antah Diop Jniversity (Dakar, Senegal), and Luther College, where he now teaches. He also spent ten years with the Voice of America, five as head of the Swahili Service