
Mara LOVEMAN, *National Colors: Racial Classification and the State in Latin America* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2014)

Without wishing to recover a tired cliché of “civic” v. “ethnic”, this fine comparative sociology of 300 years of classifying and counting people by race in Latin America suggests that, next to the much-belabored civic and ethnic models of nationhood, known especially from the European context, there is a third alternative for building and integrating national societies: racial nationhood. It consists of the idea of “race mixture,” the regenerative, progress-promising mixing and blending of the racially diverse settler, immigrant and indigenous populations that make up the societies of Latin America. But the more interesting contrast is not with Europe, where “race” has simply been a non-flyer for nation-building, but with the United States. Here, next to its northern model of race-blind egalitarian democracy eulogized by Tocqueville, there has been a southern model of racially divisive *Herrenvolk* democracy as competing, and for all too long, predominant nation-building project. At least since Frank Tannenbaum’s classic comparison of race and slave systems in the Americas,¹ comparative sociologists and historians of race have been puzzled by the starkly different experiences of the United States, where race has served to lastingly and categorically divide and exclude people, up to the present day, as not a few would argue, and south of the border, where race from the start has served the exact opposite function of inclusion, most extravagantly in the Mexican notion of *raza cósmica* (cosmic race).

What does *National Colours* add to this picture? This study purports to resolve three “puzzles” surrounding racial nationhood: first, why did postcolonial Latin American states, beholden to a Republican ideology, happily continue to classify by race in the early 19th century, thus prolonging the Spanish colonial legacy that they heartily detested; secondly, why did “race” suddenly disappear from the census around the mid-20th century; and, thirdly, why is it having a mighty come-back in the early 21st century? Loveman offers one common answer to these developments: they were “driven by politics” [8]. This

¹ Frank Tannenbaum, *Slave and Citizen*. Boston: Beacon Press 1946.

is, I submit, a bland answer. But to her rescue, what more could one reasonably say, in fact, about almost anything in the human theatre? Moreover, underneath the bland logo of “politics” plausible explanations are provided for all three developments.

Instead, my main quibble is different: I would not call at least two of the three developments tackled in this book “puzzles” to begin with. Strictly speaking, a puzzle is something unexpected or perplexing given the current state of knowledge. But every student of comparative race relations, even one not familiar with Latin America (which, of course, is an unlikely creature to meet because a comparison of the Americas is what much of the field consists of), would exactly expect this outcome: for much of the 19th and early 20th centuries, “race” was everywhere an official way of classifying people and ordering political life, and it would be strange to expect Latin American states to be exempted from this *doxa*; then race went underground in the post-WWII era of internationally codified universal human rights; only to be recovered as identity option, as well as remedial policy target, in the current era of multiculturalism. Apparently, what Loveman finds puzzling—for the sake of academic etiquette, I suspect—is not really so, at least if one does not expect Latin America to stay immune from international trends. This is not to say that she does not deliver fact-filled, well-observed, and nuanced historical accounts, much of it on the basis of original data. They are worth the read and make this book an important contribution.

Let’s proceed in the chronological order that structures the book. Loveman begins with a compellingly dark picture of colonial Spain’s “casta system,” in which indigenous people were classified as mere “resources”, mostly for the purposes of coercive labor. This system, a transplantation of Castile’s status-based *fueros* into the colonies, was of a mercantile logic, where according to *uti possidetis* the size and fixity of colonial populations determined the colonizers’ claim to territory [49]. The castas made for an astoundingly complex formal racial taxonomy, each element of it endowed with a distinct set of legal privileges and—for the multitude—liabilities. Interestingly, however, Indians, if mixing with Spaniards, would be assimilated by the third generation, while for blacks (owing their presence to slavery) this possibility did *not* exist. Accordingly, an Indian mixing with a Spaniard in the first generation would produce a *mestizo*; if the *mestizo* met a Spaniard in the second generation, the result would be a *castizo*; but if the *castizo* mated a Spaniard in the third generation, the offspring was—a Spaniard! By contrast, the unluckier black linking up with

a Spaniard would produce a *mulato*; a mulato and a Spaniard made for a *morisco*; if a morisco procreated with a Spaniard in the third generation, we get a *torna atrás*; but the torna atrás mixing with a Spaniard in the fourth round would yield a *tente en al aire* (literally: suspended-in-air), who was—a mulato! So there was no escape from permanent second-class status for the offspring of black slaves—even if, as Loveman reports, the status of “white” could be bought in the late 18th century (an option though for only a “few”). In all, the Spaniards excelled as champions of racial geometry.

Against this backdrop, it indeed may appear “puzzling” that this game continued after the revolution. The Creole nationalists, with a “proper liberal face” [81], who emerged victorious from the independence wars of the early 1800s, and who set out to create “national citizenries” of formally equal “Chileans,” “Peruvians,” etc., would continue to include a race question in their decennial census, the latter having become by the mid-1850s the badge of modern nation-stateness. So of Loveman’s three “puzzles,” this one comes closest to being one—at least from a purely domestic perspective, bracketing the international context of ascendant race science and official racism. Thickening the plot, the post-colonial counting by race occurred *against* the recommendation by the International Statistics Congress (ISC), in its first convention in 1853. Founded by the famous Belgian statistician Adolphe Quetelet to standardize the modernist quest for his nation-constituting “Average Man” across countries, the ISC later even eschewed the proxies of language and religion to avoid “primordial” hatred and violence [94]. Why did Latin American states not heed the statisticians’ call for racial abstention? First, Loveman intriguingly shows that Latin American states, despite lacking the requisite infrastructure and faring only peripherally, if at all, in the increasingly influential international statistical community, enthusiastically embraced the census, because this made them categorically similar and comparable to the advanced nation-states of Europe and the United States. But, secondly, nationhood is not only a template prescribing similitude; there has to be particularity too. And Latin American particularity came through the pursuit of a “hybrid” approach on the race question, prescribing “racial mixture” as alternative to German-style ethnic and French-style civic nationhood. Again: this was the age of official racism and race science, in which Arthur de Gobineau and others had propagated that racial mixing bred degeneracy. But from this optic Latin America, where race mixing under the Spanish and Portuguese colonizers had a long

pedigree, had to appear inferior. Revaluing the stigma, the Latin American answer was that, on the contrary, race mixing was regenerative and progress-enhancing. Through inserting race questions in periodically held censuses, Latin American states could show that because of gradually diminishing black and Indian numbers their societies were inevitably marching into a “whiter” and “lighter” future (obviously, blacks could now be assimilated, much in contrast to the colonial past—how and why that interesting turnaround happened one does not learn in this book). Naturally, in the age of racism Latin Americans could not be post- or anti-racist, “better” people, as it were. The hope of being whitened over time through mixing rested on the “presumption of a natural hierarchy of races” [170], which Latin American elites shared with those further north and in Europe.

From the 1950s, when race science and biological determinism had lost their legitimacy cache, Latin America simply moved with the winds of time, replacing “race” with “culture” questions in the census. Cuba and Brazil alone resisted the trend—Cuba in a polemical clinch with the United States, to demonstrate through its race figures the lack of racial inequality; and Brazil, in anticipation of things to come, being captured “by activists concerned with racial inequality” [245]. This second puzzle in Loveman’s triplet is much less of a “puzzle” than the first. Importantly, this was the moment that *mistizaje* “replaced whitening as the official national ideal” [232], so that racial nationhood proper moved into place. The “Indians,” who previously had often been counted separately to express their non-belonging to the nation, were now included but still set to disappear, through the census-attested diminishing number of people living on dirt floors, chewing coca leaves, or walking barefoot—the cultural markers of Indianness at the time. Blacks even “eclipsed from view” entirely because they could not be captured by registering cultural and behavioral characteristics.

Finally, in the age of multiculturalism and identity politics, we arrive at the last but smallest of the three puzzles in this book, the contemporary “resurgence of official ethnoracial classifications” throughout Latin American states. Loveman calls it a “tectonic, ideological shift” [308]. The metaphor incidentally attests to a limitation of her “politics explains all” demarche because tectonic plates, whatever they are in human affairs, are surely larger and other than politics. This is not to say that what is said in this respect is implausible. Loveman shows how a “confluence of domestic and international processes” resuscitated race in terms of “cultural liberty”

that the state now has to respect or even further. By 2013, only 6 of the totality of 19 Latin American states covered in her book did not recognize diversity in their constitutions, and—helped by an international human rights regime strongly going into this direction in the mid-1990s—the protection of indigenous rights became the centerpiece of this trend. If Loveman had taken note of Will Kymlicka’s remarkably somber swan song of “global multiculturalism”,² she would have to concede that Latin America was not simply mirroring the international trend in this respect but rather “exceptional,” as Kymlicka argued. Whereby, I concede, we again arrive at a “puzzle” of sorts, though not one on Loveman’s radar, who simply deems the Latin Americans as copying the others. But this is not so. Western Europe was in a full retreat from multiculturalism by then, while the postcolonial states of Asia and Africa had never embraced it in the first place. Leaving aside the quibble, the important matter is: to the degree that multiculturalism continues to ride high in Latin America, “mestizaje” is giving way to “multiethnicity” as dominant state norm, thus putting in question nothing less than the entire Latin American alternative of racial nationhood. In addition, as Loveman notes in a deft footnote, it is doubly ironic that Latin America seems to be moving away from the idea of mixed race at the very moment that the United States, in its latest census, is set to embrace it. Visibly irritated by the trend, Loveman registers the limitations of all sorts of minority groups, including blacks, vying for “indigenous status,” because this is the dominant game in town and at the international (UN) plane. And she finishes her impressive 300-year review of southern-hemisphere census-taking and race with the suspicion that “public backlash” against multiculturalism is on the horizon even in the Latin American exception. But among the more eyebrow-raising pieces of her book are those about the vanguards of global capitalism, including the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank, pushing for a “new international norm of multicultural nationhood” [297], making the kow-towing to the maxims of “cultural liberty” and “development with identity” the hard condition for handing-out dollars.

National Colors is without doubt a major contribution to the literature on comparative race relations, and it is likely to remain the book of reference for anyone interested in the Latin American politics of race and census-taking for years to come. What one misses in it is a more pronounced and systematic comparative grid, either

² Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Odysseys*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007.

inter- or intra-American. In fact, to the degree that this work is comparative, it is mostly in a longitudinal sense, with the main cross-national contrast-drawing being between Latin America combined and the United States. Alas, this inter-American contrast-drawing is mostly indirect and anecdotal, relegated to preface and footnotes. And aren't there stronger variations within Latin America, which would have allowed its states to be grouped into distinct clusters? National cases are mostly cited when illustrating an argument or pointing to an anomaly. This is perfectly fine and legitimate for the author's chosen purpose of homing in on the three central (temporal!) puzzles. But there is an air of randomness surrounding the use of cases, leaving "Latin America" a bit of a mash, with a limited story-line. In the end I asked myself, what have I learned? While filled with often original information, the book's informational value is limited by the constant, not always transparent, febrile jumping from country to country vignette. Perhaps we are touching here the limits of qualitative comparison, because the N is so large. Nineteen cases, and not just the usual two or three, are just too many to compare, at least within the in-depth qualitative design that the author has opted for. Might less have been more?

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