

THE GREAT AWAKENING

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Abstract: In the United States racism finds its strongest expression in the relations between whites, Negroes and East Asiatics. Racial and ethnic labels generally have negative connotations and they were the cause of many wars and genocide. The use of terms like “Black”, “Red” or “Yellow” in a country like the United States where powerful elite belongs to the group of “Whites” places members of the subordinate groups at social disadvantage. These labels are usually imposed on dominated groups by the dominant groups and do not reflect the views of the dominated. As Franz Fanon argues, “This is an arbitrary exercise of power that is usually motivated by perverse goals and often has direct consequences for the dominated.” The term “Black” for sure was not invented by Blacks. It seems to have been the invention of the slave owners who wanted only to oppress and control a population considered by them inferior and in consequence worth suffering such treatment.

Key words: racism, slavery, culture, conservation, ethnicity

Often when Americans intend to affirm race, they affirm a distinctive ethnic way of life and when they practice racism, they substitute facile ideas and images for meaning and understanding. It is obvious that it is difficult to hate people whose culture is understood, but easy to hate people who are imagined to embody a label that means “inferior” or “dangerous”. In the US ethnicity can work within groups to create peaceful social relations, but race is the one which works across groups to disrupt or destroy the “Others”. Naomi Zack emphasizes that:

“Ethnicity is particular in myriad ways while race is abstract. Ethnicity is like sand, race is like fog. But race militarizes our thinking from ideal general types outward and downward. If we disabuse ourselves of false biologicistic theories of race we are left with ethnicity in all of its multiple concrete forms.” (Zack, 101)

“Sand” and “Fog” may be seen as good metaphors for race and ethnicity because they are real things in the world and they are as real as the differences existing between ethnic groups.

The terms *race* and *culture* cannot be easily separated either. The first definition of race was in the late 18th century and used to talk about specific peoples who were as readily identifiable by their behavior as by their physical appearance. Observers did not find so much correlation between the physical and the moral; they saw or thought they saw only peoples who looked, acted and perhaps even thought differently from themselves.

Early in the 19th century the term *race* was beginning to take hold to describe broad groups of people and this led to questions about their origin, their number, their destiny and the effect of race mixing between such groups. Most thinkers in the 19th century saw the racial as manifesting itself in both physical aspects and moral, but also cultural ones. In our time the distinction between the cultural and the racial tends to be regarded as the greatest achievement, the solid rock on which all thinking on this topic must be based, but we need to understand its history better. (Garcia, 128-9)

Critical accounts of “culture” as a term – of which there are sufficient examples to comprise something like a genre – almost always begin with vexation, and exclamations at the word's ambiguity. For Raymond Williams in *Keywords*, “Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language.” More recently, the prominent anthropologist Eric R. Wolf singled out *culture* for a discussion of “perilous ideas,” while Stephen Greenblatt’s entry in *Critical Terms for Literary Study* begins by arguing that the traditional definition of culture by E. B. Tylor “is almost impossibly vague and encompassing, and the few things that seem excluded from it are almost immediately reincorporated in the actual use of the word.” The rhetorical function of this encounter with ambiguity is to bring coherence out of confusion, to show how the terminological anxiety can be banished. Paul Gilroy in his book *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness* wants to clarify some of the distinctive attributes of black cultural forms which are both modern and modernist:

“They are modern because they have been marked by their hybrid, Creole origins in the West, because they have struggled to escape their status as commodities and the position within the cultural industries it specifies, and because they are produced by artists whose understanding of their own position relative to the racial group and of the

role of art in mediating individual creativity with social dynamics is shaped by a sense of either reluctantly or happily divorced from the everyday lifeworld.” (Gilroy, 73)

The mixture of languages and forms extends, of course, to cultural themes and tropes as well, and to readerships which are differentially positioned.

The idea that races are fixed permanently rather than produced was already widespread in the second half of the 19th century. Alain Locke has what might be called a functional and dynamic definition of race: “Race operates as tradition as preferred traits and values and when these things change culturally speaking, ethnic remoulding is taking place.” (Harrised, 195) In other words, Locke tries to retain a place for inheritance, but without thinking of it primarily in physical terms. Locke’s position is that instead of *culture* expressing the race from which it arises, *race* is “*a cultural product*” (Harrised, 193) in the sense that “the cultural conditions must explain the race traits”. (Harrised, 194) It is in this way that Locke reversed the relation of race to culture. He saw not only that each ethnic group is “the peculiar resultant of its own social history” (Harrised, 194), but also that a broad sense of race is one of the operative factors in a culture.

Locke’s view of cultural assimilation was such that, even though a relatively “pure” race could have a highly mixed culture even though “blood intermixture” or “physical assimilation” might or might not accompany or even precede cultural assimilation, race itself was ultimately nothing else than a culture – type understood in terms of culture heredity. This was reflected some years later in his accounts of the process of hybridization, a process that was reflected in the name of “Afro-American” which he understood as a sort of “cultural hybrid” (Harrised, 192).

In this context, Locke recognized that “blood intermixture” also played a role in cultural assimilation. Locke’s conception of race is based on the recognition that races insofar as they exist as defined populations, are not so much given as produced.

In the late 1940s and the 1950s, in the wake of a war that pitted American democracy against Nazi fascism and racism, the social science community finally proves ready to embrace the new racial liberalism presented in *An American Dilemma* (1944), the landmark study by Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal. This scientific revolution was less revolutionary among black thinkers, who had long attributed

most racial differences to culture and environment. “Negro writings from around the turn of the century,” wrote Myrdal, commenting on this black environmentalist tradition, “sound so much more modern than white writings”. The Negro writers constantly have proceeded on the assumption, later formulated by DuBois in *Black Reconstruction*: “. . . that the Negro in America and in general is an average and ordinary human being, who in a given environment develops like other human beings. . . . This assumption is now, but was not a couple of decades ago, also the assumption of white writers.” (Myrdal, 1944)

At the inaugural meeting of the first major black learned society, the American Negro Academy, which took place in 1897, W. E. B. DuBois presented a speech entitled “The Conservation of Races.” Describing race as “the central thought of all history,” he defined the races as vast families “of human beings, generally of common blood and language, always of common history, tradition and impulses.” “American black people”, he maintained, “must cultivate their racial gifts in order to deliver the full complete Negro message of the whole Negro race” to the world. DuBois embraced race as an organic distinction between human beings in order to call for the cultural uplift of the black race, which he conceded from “the dawn of creation has slept, but half awakening in the dark forests of its African fatherland.” He predicted: “We are the first fruits of the new nation, the harbinger of that black tomorrow which is yet destined to soften the Teutonic whiteness of today.” (DuBois, 1897: 817, 822) DuBois even returned to the kinship provided by history:

“But one thing is sure and that is the fact that since the fifteenth century these ancestors of mine and their descendents have led a common history; have suffered a common disaster and have one long memory. The actual ties of heritage between the individuals of this group vary with the ancestors that they have in common and with many others. ...But the physical bond is least and the badge of color relatively unimportant save as a badge; the real essence of this kinship is its social heritage of slavery; the discrimination and insult and this heritage binds together not simply the children of Africa, but extends through yellow Asia and into the South Seas.” (DuBois, 1940: 117)

The shared areas of the American ideal can be realized more fully by diverse provincialism in harmonious cooperation: “We are Americans, not only by birth and by citizenship, but by our political ideals, our language, our religion.” (DuBois, 1986: 258) Though DuBois also articulated the limits of the

American identity, he was confident that the Negro would fulfill “his distinct mission as a race” on this shared background (DuBois, 1986: 257).

Yet the early twentieth-century upheaval in American racial thought embraced black as well as white thinkers. Early fans of Boas, whose ideas converged with the environmentalist tradition in black thought, African-Americans thinkers were among the first to embrace and publicize Boas’s work. In so doing, many of these thinkers had to reconsider some of their own ideas, including the very concept of ethnology. During the first quarter of the twentieth century, African-American ideas about race were profoundly shaken up by black disillusionment over the worsening race relations that followed World War I. This dislocation was compounded by the forces of black migration and European immigration, which reconfigured the nation's demography and democracy.

Of all Americans, African-Americans had the most at stake in what W.E.B. DuBois foresaw in 1903 as “the problem of the twentieth century”: the problem of the color line (DuBois, 1982: xi). In any case, during the first quarter of the century, this color line was the most pressing problem they faced. Considering the racial violence and racist invective against the Negro, the black future in America looked grimmer than it had since the end of slavery.

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