

MEJORANDO LA RAZA

Latino/a Nationalisms, the Seductions of Whiteness, and the Coming Disarticulation of the Black-Brown Elite Coalition

BY EDGAR RIVERA COLON

The peculiar vocation of the Marxist left is to think and prepare for the worst while assuming that our practice will produce the best of all possible changes—democratic socialism. It is this double notion of optimism of the will and the pessimism of the intellect that allows us to engage in the science of historical materialism: to think the inherent contradictions of capitalism.¹ One of the central organizing principles of American capitalism is race not simply as the ideological reflection of economic hierarchy, but rather as a system in its own right of distributing material and symbolic wealth. Michael Omi and Howard Winant have defined race as “a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies.”²

Thus, race both contains and manages contradictory conflicts and interests while, at the same time, producing a hierarchy of racialized bodies which runs from the more human to the less human. Of course, those with lighter skin colors accrue material benefits from the subordination of those with darker skin colors; these “benefits” run a wide gamut from the probability of a well-dressed Black man getting a taxi on a busy Manhattan street to the life expectancy differences between whites and people of color.

The utter oddity of race in America is best demonstrated by the experiences of those people who are not easily classifiable as white or people of color: a question accompanies them as they traverse the racialized social ambits of late twentieth century America—what are you? This question points to a stark reality in the contemporary version of the American racial dispensation: one is not a viable social being without a racial identity. Thus, the race card is not a game played but an admission ticket to American social intercourse. Simply

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put, without a clear racial identity, one is going on a train with no real point of origin or destination.

Moreover, to appreciate fully the dynamics of race in America, one has to calculate the impact of class, gender, and sexual hierarchies which are all part of the picture in producing what social scientists blithely call “social reality.” It is easy to get lost in trying to plot the various effects of these multiple and interlocking systems of the social distribution of material and symbolic goods, but the essential point is fairly straightforward: American capitalism is organized through hierarchies of race, gender, and sexuality. We can imagine private property and commodity relations as the wellsprings which feed and are fed by the “tributaries” of race, gender, and sexuality. Nonetheless, this is simply a useful metaphor and, like most metaphors, lacks the rigor of historical contextualization.

The pioneering work of historians such as David R. Roediger have documented that race, like class, has a history in America.³ Simply stated, whiteness is a social process and not a state of being. Thus, ethnic/racial groups which were once quite literally beyond the pale (e.g., southern Italians and Irish immigrants of the 19th century) of whiteness and its material benefits are now the very exemplars of white privilege and status. It is precisely this process of incorporation of non-white subjects into the realm of normative white privilege that serves as a starting point for my reflections on the possible configurations American racial/ethnic politics may take in the not-too-distant future.

More specifically, I am concerned with the consequences of what at first glance may appear to be nothing more than a fact of demography: by the year 2010, Latinos/as will be the largest non-white racial/ethnic group in America. In all likelihood, this fact will precipitate a whole host of Latino/a nationalisms (some of which are already manifesting themselves in various cultural and political movements within different Latino/a communities). The task of progressive Latinos/as will be to reposition these emergent nationalisms to address the central question of American democratic renewal today: the redistribution of material and symbolic wealth. Yet this task must be informed by an analysis which comprehends the racial history and contemporary racial/ethnic landscape of American capitalism. To that end, this essay will address what I am calling the

coming disarticulation of the Brown-Black elite coalition. The present racial/ethnic political conjuncture requires such an analysis precisely to avoid the past becoming a prelude to the coming transformations which our erstwhile marker of 2010 is sure to inaugurate.

The present political wreckage that remains of the coup attempt by the right wing of the Republican Party needs to be one of our starting points for this reflection on race. For it is in this failed project that we will find the seeds of a new strategy or orientation that is sure to emerge from the ranks of the “more reasonable” elements within the Republican Party. At this point, the radical right or religious right is in complete disarray with Paul Weyrich of the far right Free Congress Foundation arguing for a retreat from the political system since an “alien ideology” is in power at the moment. Weyrich is counseling his ideological comrades to circle the wagons and let the outside world go to hell in a handbasket. Of course, this “retreatist” political line is being opposed by the likes of Gary Bauer, who still believes that the cultural right represents the majority of Americans and a cultural “life and death struggle” is the only honorable option. However, in the final analysis, this type of debate between the different currents within the radical right of the Republican camp is just so much marginal drama. The emergence of George W. Bush as frontrunner for the Republican presidential nomination in the year 2000 indicates that the non-culturalist wing of the party is slowly gaining ascendancy in the decision-making circles of the Republican National Committee.

George W. Bush, with his homey Texas drawl and halting Spanish, represents the Republican version of Clintonian centrism. The key to this Republicanism with a human face is the multicultural rhetoric that Bush and his camp espouse. The strategy appears clear: forget the Black vote and try to woo the Latino/a vote by pointing toward Bush’s political support of Latinos/as in high offices in Texas, his support among the Latino/a electorate in his recent gubernatorial race, his family values rhetoric, his economic conservatism, and his commitment to crime-fighting through his advocacy of the death penalty. All of the above indicates a political current within the Republican ranks which intends to seize the center from the Clinton wing of the Democrats by espousing certain forms of a globalist multiculturalism, moderation on social issues, punitive uses of the justice system (e.g., mass incarceration of young Blacks and Latinos

who make up a large sector of what Marx called “surplus labor”), and a fiscal conservatism that masquerades as common sense by deploying the language of good stewardship and returning the people’s patrimony through a regime of tax cuts. In order to achieve this reclaiming of the “Great American Center,” the Republicans will have to make headway into the growing Latino/a electorate if they wish to assemble a viable electoral coalition that will make them the masters of the first decade of the 21st century.

If, as Lenin contended, a society rots like a fish from the head down, then the Republicans will look to create and/or buy out certain “leaders” from the largest Latino/a communities first and work their rot down to the masses of Latinos/as. From my perspective, given the sycophantic relationship between most elected Latino/a political officials and the Democratic party, the Republicans may have to invent a few Latino/a leaders in order to propel their divide and conquer project between Black and Brown elites.

In this regard, the use by the Giuliani administration of figures like Ninfa Segarra, a Puerto Rican woman and former Maoist turned Republican Deputy Mayor, to add color to the City’s management team may be instructive for the erstwhile renovating wing of the national Republican leadership. Segarra herself appears with the mayor during his periodic community meetings acting as his expert on education, especially with regard to bilingual education. Of course, Giuliani opposes real bilingual education or multi-lingual education in general, arguing that English language competency is the key element to upward mobility for all the Spanish-speaking children in the public school system. According to this argument, English acquisition is upward mobility—forget that the group which has produced some of the greatest English language writers remains largely outside the confines of the upper middle classes: African-Americans. Nonetheless, the Segarra “model-minority-as-government-official” tactic has its value as an object lesson. No doubt the national Republican leadership has studied the Giuliani administration as a test case of what might be possible for a politically reoriented party with national ambitions.

Nonetheless, the recent police execution of a West African immigrant and the unprecedented mass mobilization in reaction to this state killing, culminating in the largest civil disobedience campaign

against police brutality in recent memory, point to weaknesses in the Giuliani administration and, simultaneously, to fissures within the coalition that mounted the campaign itself. It is to these fissures that the Republicans must attend if they plan to take advantage of what is emerging as a fight among the petty bourgeois political leadership elements within the Black and Latino/a communities.

Specifically, the relatively low media profile of elite Latino/a leaders in the coalition which led the assault against police brutality is indicative of the balance of forces within elite sectors of the Black and Latino/a communities. Further, since the Black elite has a more solid institutional base within the Black churches as well as a longer history of struggle for social and racial justice in New York City, specific leaders can project their takes on justice issues as being exhaustive of the opinions of people of color in New York City. In one sense, the Black elites benefit from an institutional infrastructure (middle class in its vision and practice) that is disciplined, diffuse enough in class composition to produce multi-class mass mobilizations, and, most importantly, Black-controlled. Moreover, Black elites are heir to a long tradition of anti-racist activism (some of which has been explicitly anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist) informed by a trenchant nationalism inflected in left-wing or right-wing manifestations according to what the conjuncture of macro-sociological forces will allow (e.g., U.S. domestic political economic developments or the global politics of U.S.-based capital).

For example, Al Sharpton is decidedly not Martin Luther King, not just due to personal differences but because King lived at a time when American capitalism was under assault both at home and abroad. Thus, King was able to move to the left throughout his public life because the mass movements unleashed by the Civil Rights struggle constantly shifted public debate toward ever more radical alternatives. Sharpton, on the other hand, has had to build a coalition from different social material conditions: what Marxist geographer Neil Smith has aptly named the “revanchist city.”⁴ That is to say, a New York City which has succumbed to the national elite policy consensus of reducing the welfare state (through outright cuts in spending or privatization of social services), the mass incarceration of youth of color, police state tactics in dealing with the informal drug economy or political dissent of any stripe, and the reassertion of white

supremacy in the organs of culture (e.g., the defeat of the rainbow curriculum in the public school system).

This is, to use the words of French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, the actual “political conjuncture” that faces the likes of Al Sharpton as he tries to forge what I like to call the Popular Front from Above (PFFA).⁵ This Popular Front from Above is a coming together or condensation of divergent elite or petty bourgeois sectors mostly from the Black and Latino/a communities, although by no means exclusively from these two sectors, in reaction to their systematic marginalization from the levers of municipal power that were “their inheritance” until the strategic defeat of the liberal-left Dinkins coalition by the Giuliani coalition of conservative white ethnics and “pragmatic” white liberals. The PFFA was able to surmise correctly that the killing of Amadou Diallo would reinvigorate a mass movement which would seek to redress not only the brutality of the NYPD in neighborhoods of color, but also to challenge the economic austerity and political repression of Giuliani’s revanchist state. The PFFA’s challenge has been to direct this popular discontent toward creating an unfavorable political climate for Giuliani (jeopardizing, with any luck, his prospects for higher elected office or appointment to a position within a future Republican federal administration) while at the same time containing this mass mobilization within the framework of redressing the democratic institutions of the state as opposed to constructing an alternative to challenge the state in the name of popular radical democracy.

Thus, to prevent any ideological or tactical confusion, the Black elite leadership of PFFA has made the Latino/a elite leadership fall within its ranks or risk total political inefficacy and/or media invisibility. This subordination of the Latino/a elite leadership to the Black elite leadership in the PFFA bodes badly for the future of intra-elite relations among people of color. Why? Well, the simplest answer would be that there is no greater wrath than that of a petty bourgeoisie scorned, but that would attribute a psychological explanation to what is essentially a contradiction of social class—as the electoral power of Latino/as surpasses that of African-Americans, the Latino/a elite should lead the coalition to broker a new racial dispensation with the white ruling class in New York City. Moreover, they fully expect to be players in brokering a new balance of forces in the ongoing race

war on a national level in accord with their share of the electoral-demographic pie. It is precisely their burgeoning resentment at their constricted role in the recent political tumult as well as the cold adding up of electoral numbers that will impel the Latino/a elite leaders to struggle for leadership of the PFFA on a local and national level.

The “rational” (I use rational here in its instrumental and not its normative sense since ruling classes, whether liberal or reactionary, do not recognize norms which do not coincide with their crass material interests) sectors within the Republican party are just as good at smelling a blood feud as their counterparts in the Democratic wing of the white ruling class. I use the word “blood” here quite deliberately in order to describe the kind of antagonistic political contradiction which exists between petty bourgeois Black and Latino/a political leaders on both the local and national level. The white rulers of this country have been enormously successful in both consolidating and expanding their power precisely because they have been able to supersede any dogma that leads to tactical or strategic inflexibility in their pursuit of the only dogma they truly care about: white supremacy and the free market. So, one solution which has helped them negotiate crisis after crisis has been to solve blood feuds through changing the precise definition of what it means to be of the blood or, more to the point, of the white race. Thus, they have allowed untold millions of Irish, Italians, and even Jews to assume the mantle of white skin privilege as long as this inclusion meant that the pillars of white supremacy and private property/commodity production were not challenged.

It strikes me that this is what is in the offing for sectors of the Latino/a petty bourgeoisie, not only in New York City, but in the nation as a whole: they are to be included in the blood—granted the privileges of white skin—as long as they are willing to accept the propriety of capitalist social relations and the social—if not biological or cultural—superiority of whites (after all, reasonable elites of various racial backgrounds do have their considered differences). The ethnic/racial history of Dade County, Florida during the last three decades could be read as the first post-60s example of the whitening of a Latino/a population—the Cubans—in order to discipline and

disenfranchise masses of working class Latinos/as of all stripes, African-Americans, and Haitians.

Oddly enough, it will not be through the denial of Latino/a culture that this whitening will occur, but rather through the celebration of the putative strength of Latino/a culture: the emphasis on family life, social solidarity, and tolerance of supposed racial difference among the “rainbow peoples” of the Latino/a Diaspora.⁶ Specifically, it is through a sanitized version of a pro-Latino/a multiculturalism that this process will be achieved. Moreover, the constant framing of Latino/a issues by many Latino/a academics and cultural workers as ethnic issues rather than problems of racial justice or challenges within of white supremacist regimes will lend cultural and intellectual legitimacy to the racist Latino/a nationalism that is sure to come.

By 2010, Latinos/as will be the largest non-white racial/ethnic group in America—an incontestable demographic prediction. Demographic speculation: by 2010, George W. Bush will be one of many Spanish-speaking elected officials in the U.S. The only difference between George W. and his counterparts will be that these other Republicans will have Spanish surnames to boot. Of course, my speculation will remain just that if and only if progressive Latinos/as, among others, begin to articulate a distributive radical politics that addresses both capitalism and white supremacy. Obviously, my phrasing of this problematic betrays my own social formation as a university-trained intellectual: capitalism and white supremacy are separate phenomena only in the realm of analysis. In the confused and vivid motion of real life, they are inextricably co-penetrating phenomena which must be dismantled by a movement which will take this contradiction as a starting point and not as an addendum. Progressive Latinos/as must attend to these dynamics or suffer the fate of complicity with forms of Latino/a nationalism which white bourgeois patriarchy can easily reconstitute for its own purposes.

NOTES:

¹ This follows Frederic Jameson’s notion of historical materialism as a science found in “Five Theses On Actually Existing Marxism”, *Monthly Review* 11, Vol. 47 (April 1996), pp. 1–10.

² Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p.55.

³ See David Roediger’s *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991) for a seminal historical study on how

32 RACE TRAITOR

race and class are inseparable in analyzing the social formation of the American working class.

- ⁴ Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (New York: Routledge, 1996).
- ⁵ On the popular front both from below and above, see Michael Goldfield's "Black Liberation, Working-Class Unity, and the Popular Front: A Reply to Mel Rothenberg", *Against The Current* 78, Vol. XIII No. 6 (January–February 1999), pp. 45–48.
- ⁶ On the "Rainbow People" controversy, see Clara Rodriguez's *Puerto Ricans: Born in the USA* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1991), Ch. 3 and Roberto Rodriguez-Morazzani's critique of the "Rainbow People" thesis as subordinating race to culture in "Beyond the Rainbow: Mapping the Discourse on Puerto Ricans and Race" found in *The Latino Studies Reader: Culture, Economy and Society* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), pp. 143–162.