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REPLY TO LOVEMAN

## THE ESSENTIAL SOCIAL FACT OF RACE\*

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*“Man [sic] is largely a social construct, and to deny a man the social meaning of his death is to kill him twice, first in the flesh and then in the spirit.”* —Gérard Prúnier (1995: xii)

In my 1997 ASR article (Bonilla-Silva 1997, henceforward EBS) I urged analysts to abandon the sterile soil of the “prejudice problematic” (Potter and Wetherell 1987) and to examine race-related phenomena from a structural perspective. I contended that *racialized social systems* emerged as part of the monumental changes that occurred in the world-system in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. I argued that these social orders are stratified along racial as well as class and gender lines. Racial stratification is always hierarchical; thus the race ascribed with the superior position enjoys social, political, economic, and psychological advantages over the group or groups ascribed with inferior positions. The core of my theorization—and the main reason for this debate—was my argument that after race-based structurations emerge, definite *socially* existing races arise, which develop distinct objective interests. As I wrote, “After the process of attaching meaning to a ‘people’ is instituted, race be-

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comes a real category of group association and identity” (p. 472). Despite changes in the meaning and content of the races (a society’s *racial formation* [Omi and Winant 1994]), the “social relations between the races become institutionalized (forming a structure as well as a culture) and affect their social life whether individual members of the races want it or not” (p. 473).

My theoretical advice challenged more than 50 years of sociological “common sense” on racial matters. The article, however, was very well-received in the discipline. Nevertheless, not everybody liked my alternative structural interpretation. Mara Loveman (1999, henceforward ML), for instance, has accused me of confounding categories with groups, reifying race, and maintaining an unwarranted analytical distinction between race and ethnicity. Although I will address each of her criticisms separately, I believe that our disagreement revolves around the centrality each of us assigns to race in the modern world. ML believes that because race is a socially constructed category, it is a lesser, colligated, and ultimately *contingent* phenomenon that may or may not have associational (group-level) significance. Accordingly she accuses me of elevating the status of race from an *external* to a *real* social category.

Like a growing number of social scientists, I contend that although race is not an essential category (no *social* category is essential) and in fact is highly malleable and historically-bounded (as *all* social categories are), it is nonetheless a central principle of social organization. Furthermore, I argue that race is a “social fact” similar to class and gender. Accordingly, race is a *real* and *central* social vessel of group affiliation and life in the modern world.

### CATEGORICAL CONFOUNDING OR LOVEMAN’S DEFLATION OF THE SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF RACE?

ML accuses me of confounding race as a *category* (an external matter) with race as a *social group* because I state that “in all racialized social systems the placement of people in racial categories involves some form of hierarchy that produces definite social relations between the races” (p. 469). She rejects

my claim that world-systemic racialization leads to the development of socially existing races because she believes “it is not axiomatic that membership in a category will correspond directly to experienced group boundaries or social identities” (ML, p. 892).

ML points out that the historical imposition of racial categorization on “peoples”—a term that I did not use to imply the existence of any preexisting unified racial, ethnic, or national groups—and the development of races as social groups are *contingent* matters. In typical Weberian fashion she argues that races exist only if they are conscious of their existence and act as a collectivity. She views the *social*—or, in Weber’s ([1956] 1978) language, *communal*—existence of race as *probabilistic*. For her, as for Jenkins (1994), race has a double status as an externally defined category and as a social category.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast, I argue that races exist as a *social phenomenon* wherever a *racial structure* is in place—that is, wherever there are social, political, and ideological practices that produce differential status between racialized social groups (races). Racial (and class or gender) consciousness is *always* a contingent matter in *all* social collectivities. Consciousness thus cannot be taken as the factor *determining* whether races have a social existence. According to ML’s Weberian logic, because workers and women in most of the world are not completely “conscious” of their “worker-

ness” or their oppressed status as women and do not act collectively in accordance with their interests, we should not regard them as “workers” or “women” but as members of externally imposed categories.

ML’s discussion of Brazil illustrates weaknesses in her critique. Her theorization, comments, and citations (e.g., Wagley [1963a, 1963b] and Harris [1964]) suggest that she believes Brazil is a society with no socially existing races because, in her estimation, social actors in Brazil are not “conscious” of their “raceness.” Is she right? I believe that the sources she cites do not support her claim. Wagley (1963a, 1963b), for example, represents the old and mythical view of Brazil as a “racial democracy.” He, Pierson (1942), and Harris (1964) were the first American social scientists to broadcast the myth of Brazil as a racial democracy (Skidmore 1974; for an early critique, see Fernandes 1969).<sup>2</sup>

This interpretation, however, has been largely superseded since the 1970s. Hanchard (1994), whom ML cites to criticize my suggestion that there are socially existing races in Brazil with different objective interests, argues that racial hegemony in Brazil has “neutralized racial identification among non-whites to a large degree” (p. 6). He does not believe, however, that black and white Brazilians lack any “racial” sense or interests (Hanchard 1994, chap. 4). Hanchard (1994) does not deny the objective existence of racialization, racial discrimination, and racial stratification. His primary goal is to explain how racial hegemony in contemporary Brazil (the notion of Brazilian exceptionalism) poses serious obstacles to activists of the

<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, Jenkins (1994) noted in his essay that most “social collectivities can be characterized and, to some extent, defined in *both* ways” (p. 201; emphasis added). In Jenkins’s estimation, analysts choose to refer to social collectivities as categories or groups, depending on their analysis of the balance “between internal and external” factors (p. 201). The problem with ML’s dualistic interpretation of social collectivities is that it hinges on a subjectivist reading of social life. For ML, as for Weber, objective status differences between social collectivities (for example, *class situation*) are not communal unless actors say loudly and clearly that they are distinct collectivities and act accordingly. As Weber ([1956]1978) states, “[R]ace creates a ‘group’ *only when a neighborhood or the mere proximity of racially different persons is the basis of joint (mostly political) action*” (p. 385; emphasis added). For a more elaborate discussion of the problems in subjectivist and historicist treatment of social collectivities, see Therborn (1980).

<sup>2</sup> Despite Wagley’s (1963a, 1963b) notable theoretical contributions (e.g., his notion of “social race”) and historical contributions, he accepted not only the notion of racial democracy but also the white supremacist view of the Brazilian elite. For instance, in *An Introduction to Brazil* (1963b), he describes Brazil in typical Latin American style as a “‘cultural mosaic’ of Lusitanian, American Indian, and African elements” (p. 9). He concludes, however, that “Brazil is made up of three races and its culture is derived from three continents, but its major institutions, its language, and its basic ideal patterns of behavior are European ones, modified and developed in the New World environment” (pp. 23–24).

*movimiento negro*. In fact, he concludes that there “are more similarities than dissimilarities between racial politics in Brazil and in other polities where people of African descent reside” (p. 157; also see Hanchard 1999).

The great majority of contemporary scholars on race in Brazil suggest that blacks and whites constitute objectively meaningful social groups (Andrews 1991; Fernandes 1969; [1969] 1994; Hanselbag 1985; Hanselbag and Huntington 1994; Skidmore [1983] 1994). Even though Brazilian racial hegemony involves negating the significance of race, black and white Brazilians make subjective distinctions along racial lines, as reflected in all kinds of social interactions such as marriage and hiring decisions, friendships, housing choices, and cultural representations (Andrews 1991; Cardoso and Ianni 1960; Telles 1992; Twine 1998; Winant 1994).

Black and white Brazilians exhibit a racial consciousness, albeit more fragmented and less political than that of racial minorities in Western nations (Benjamin and Mendonça 1997; Butler 1998; Hanchard 1994; Kraay 1998). Although black Brazilians’ racial consciousness occasionally has been evident in *political* organizations and movements (e.g., the *Frente Negra* of the 1930s, the *Movimento Negro Unificado* in the 1970s, and the multiple black organizations in contemporary Brazil), it is more often expressed *culturally* in religious practices (e.g., *Candomblé*, *Xango*, *Alagoas*, *Tambor de Mina*, *Macumba*), festive events (e.g., carnival), and other “nonpolitical” forms (e.g., *Quilombismo* or *Capoeira*).

To properly understand Brazilian race relations—and, for that matter, race relations throughout Latin America—analysts must recognize that the system in Brazil is triracial rather than biracial and is buttressed by “shade discrimination” (Lewis 1963). There is an intermediate, highly malleable group of “morenos” or “pardos” (tan colored mulattoes) that arguably stands between blacks and whites (Andrews 1991; Winant 1994). Although its overall social status is very close to that of black Brazilians (Andrews 1991; Silva 1985; Twine 1998), this intermediate group’s presence and self-consciousness as *being different* constitute yet other powerful reasons for the limited degree of political consciousness and unity among black Brazil-

ians (on this point, see Wade 1997). Whereas white elites point to this group as evidence of the lack of racism in Brazil, many blacks regard it as a potential source of upward mobility through intermarriage.

### REIFICATION OR LOVEMAN’S MISUNDERSTANDING OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM?

ML accuses me of reifying the existence of races—of treating races as “things” (p. 893). Although she admits that I recognize the malleability of the races (p. 893) and the variability in life chances based on class and gender among members of the races, she insists that I do not problematize the “boundaries—and the boundedness—of the ‘races’ themselves” (p. 893).

ML’s view suggests that she misunderstands the “changing same” quality (Gilroy 1993) of all socially constructed categories (Berger and Luckman 1966; López 1996; Mills 1998). On the one hand, race, like other socially constituted categories, is a human creation and thus exhibits a high degree of malleability and permeability not seen, for instance, in biologically determined categories (although even these change through evolution and interaction with human ecosystems). I point out in my article that races are not “things” but relations. The content of race, its materiality, and the interests of racialized actors, can only “be recognized in the realm of racial relations and positions” (p. 472). Viewed in this light, “races are the effect of racial practices of opposition at the economic, political, social, and ideological levels” (p. 472). On the other hand, although all human constructions are historically contingent, after we construct them as sources of human classification and division, real hierarchical relations of opposition emerge. These relations, in turn, become institutionalized in class, gender, or racial structures, which are themselves subject to contestation and change. Hence “race,” like “class” or “gender,” is *always contingent* but is also *socially real*. Race operates “as a shuttle between socially constructed meanings and practices, between subjective and lived, material reality” (Hanchard 1994:4).

ML contends that I do not consider the boundaries of race: For example, I state that

race is less salient in Latin American countries than in the United States, and yet these societies still have a racialized social system. Thus, ML argues, it is evident that I treat race “as the *same* ‘thing’ in each of these places as in the United States” (p. 893, emphasis in original).

At no point do I suggest that the construction of race in the United States is similar to that in *any* Latin American country. As a dark-skinned Puerto Rican who is viewed and treated as “black” in many areas of the United States, as a “trigueño” (tan, the intermediate racial group) in Puerto Rico, and as a member of the dominant racial group in countries such as Haiti, Jamaica, and Saint Lucia, I would never posit that “race” is the same everywhere. I endorse the view that analysts interested in understanding racial matters in *any* society must examine the historical process of racialization, the particularities of the racial formation at any point in history, and the regional variations of this formation within a country.

To learn whether Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Brazil have a racialized structure, even though race plays only a small publicly acknowledged role in those societies, readers may wish to consult Moore (1995), Rout (1976), and Segal (1995) on Cuba, Kinsbrunner (1996), Sagrera (1973), and Zenón-Cruz (1977) on Puerto Rico, and the references cited above for Brazil. The point I made in my 1997 article was not that race was the “same thing” or operated in the same fashion in Latin American countries as in the United States but rather that race exists *socially* as a *different* and yet *real* incarnation in these societies.

ML misunderstands how races operate as social constructions, as evidenced in her comments on the current fluidity of racial categories in the United States. In her view, the controversy over people of “mixed race” illustrates the fluidity and permeability of racial boundaries and renders meaningless my argument about the existence of races with dissimilar interests (pp. 893–94). The fluidity of racial boundaries, however, is not a new phenomenon. Since this nation was created, the boundaries of “blackness,” “whiteness,” and “Indianness” have been porous. Among other things, this permeability allowed the offspring of interracial unions the option of

“passing.” In addition, it is a non sequitur to claim that because the boundaries of races are fluid, these constructions do not exist. Does anyone doubt the existence of fundamental classes with divergent interests because analysts have suggested that there are “contradictory class locations” (Wright 1985), or that there exist two genders with different interests because analysts have pointed out a continuum of sex types (Rothblatt 1995)?

### RACE AND ETHNICITY: SIMILAR CONSTRUCTIONS, DIFFERENT HISTORIES

ML’s third criticism of my article is that I make an unfounded distinction between race and ethnicity. Specifically she points out that such a distinction is unwarranted and “reflects the ingrained North American bias in the sociology of ‘race’” (p. 894). I agree with ML’s assertion that racial and ethnic categories as social constructions are remarkably similar. They resemble constructs such as nation, nationalism, and citizenship. All entail “imagined communities” (Anderson 1983) based on the ideas of common origin, history of a “people,” and traditions. Yet even though constructs exhibit similarities, one is not necessarily warranted in regarding them as being the same, in subsuming one under the other (i.e., race as a special case of ethnicity), or, more significantly, in assuming that they produce the same social effects.

The primary reason why I argue that race and ethnicity are different is that they are produced by different histories. Races and racisms (ideologies accompanying racial structurations) are historically linked to the *history* and *consequences* of colonial encounters; ethnicity is connected to the history of nation-state formation (Balibar and Wallerstein 1991). Race is a fairly modern human creation dating to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and is connected to the extension of the modern world-system to Africa, the Americas, and Asia. To dominate the “New World,” European states developed a structure of knowledge-meaning that created a notion of the “West”; this notion facilitated racializing the inhabitants of the core as superior and those of the periphery (the “others”) as inferior and as filling a subservient role in the world-system’s division of labor

(Balibar and Wallerstein 1991; Hopkins and Wallerstein 1996; Markus 1994).

Ethnicity, except for primordialists such as Smith (1986), is an even more recent creation, connected to late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European processes of transition from sovereign states into nation-states and to immigration of “nationals” to foreign lands.<sup>3</sup> European and (later) non-European states promoted “ethnicization” in their attempts to develop a sense of “peoplehood” so as to make internal disintegration less likely. This process was not perfect; it led to the emergence of numerous ethnic minorities—segments of the population in the nation-state who felt that they were outside the process and thus became national minorities (Balibar and Wallerstein 1991; Stavenhagen 1996). Hence ethnicization typically invokes the language of place (“Where are you from?”) rather than the language of phenotype (“What are you?”) (Wade 1997). The history of American ethnicity is even more recent because many of the traditional “ethnic groups” that migrated to this country were ethnicized in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Thus, for example, most historians agree that European peasant immigrants were not “ethnic” and that most called themselves peasants, Catholics, *Cysarskimi* (“the Kaiser’s people”), or other names with local referents.

There are two other reasons to keep race and ethnicity separate. First, race initially is assigned externally, whereas ethnicity is often a matter of self-assertion. Second, race is intrinsically connected to power relations and hierarchy; ethnicity is not. Race is a way of *otherizing*, of excluding. Ethnicity is a way of asserting distinctiveness and creating a sense of commonality (Cornell and Hartmann 1998:27). As Anderson (1983) has observed, “[N]ationalism [which always creates and recreates ethnic-based peoplehood] thinks in terms of historical destinies, while racism dreams of eternal contaminations” (p. 136). *All* social divisions based on race are intrinsically about power and lead inevitably

<sup>3</sup> I acknowledge that social actors probably had a sense of identity rooted in place, customs, traditions, and even religious beliefs before the establishment of nation-states. As historians have documented, however, those identities were localized, varied, and thus less “primordial” than those following the rise of nation-states.

to divergent interests among the races (EBS, p. 470).

The recent violence in the former Yugoslavia and in Rwanda is often regarded as *prima facie* evidence that ethnic divisions are as contentious as racial divisions in the modern world, if not more so. Yet, despite the conventional view that these conflicts are based on ancient “ethnic hatreds,” analysts almost unanimously agree that they are not ethnically based. The consensus about the struggles in the former Yugoslavia is: (1) that the “ethnic” groups in conflict today are the product of late nineteenth-century nationalist movements in the Balkans by people who, like all Europeans, formerly identified themselves in local terms; (2) that these groups generally lived together in peace until World War II; and (3) that the roots of the recent conflicts are to be found in contemporary issues such as the machinations of politicians (e.g., Serbian president Slobodan Milošević, Croatian president Franjo Tuđman, and Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadžić). These individuals, as Silber and Little (1995) point out, “had nothing to gain and everything to lose from a peaceful transition from state socialism and one-party rule to free-market democracy” (p. 35; also see Cigar 1995; Udovićki and Ridgeway 1997). The consensus on Rwanda is remarkably similar (Destexhe 1995; Prunier 1995).

I acknowledge that ethnicity involves an element of externality (e.g., the creation of an ethnic group by interested parties such as state agents or classes) as well as power (e.g., the conflictual quality of many ethnic relations). The degree and the frequency of events, however, are always relevant in any theorization. Weber’s own theory of open and closed relationships, for example, which ML favors as a lens through which to interpret racial and ethnic phenomena, depends on degrees because, as Weber acknowledges, *all* social relationships are partly open and partly closed (Weber [1956] 1978:43–46).

Finally, I address ML’s accusation that I am using the United States experience to interpret racial and ethnic phenomena throughout the world. This applies to me insofar as I live in the United States and belong to a nation colonized by that country. These facts, despite my protestations, may influence my writing. ML fails to acknowledge, however,

that our conceptual and theoretical choices *always* reflect our background, training, disciplinary choices, and even our personalities. All knowledge is “socially located” (Harding 1996); this applies to me as well as to Loveman. I have chosen to make a distinction between race and ethnicity for the reasons discussed above. I have also made that distinction because the conceptual elimination of race and the utilization of ethnicity as the mantra for interpreting ethnic, racial, and national phenomena are usually associated with the unwillingness of members of the dominant race “to accept responsibility for the problem of racism” (Essed 1991:28).

Nevertheless, I believe that there is some room for healthy disagreement on ethnicity and race. For example, I find useful the works of Stavenhagen (1990,1996), Olzak (1992), and others who treat race as a special case of ethnicity. Yet, I also find useful the work of Winant (1994) and of Feagin and Vera (1995), who maintain a distinction between racially and ethnically based dynamics. I am not, however, persuaded by the arguments of those who suggest that these categories should be treated as variants of the same phenomenon. Even so, I acknowledge the possibility that more theoretical and historical work on racialization and ethnicization may lead to a new synthesis.

### LOVEMAN’S GROUP-MAKING VERSUS THE COMPARATIVE STUDY OF RACIAL STRUCTURES

ML proposes Weber’s notion of “social closure” and Barth’s idea of boundaries as the “*foundation* for sociological inquiry into the construction, reproduction, or decline of symbolic boundaries” (p. 897). She suggests that these concepts are central to the development of a comparative sociology of group-making (“us-them”) (p. 897). Although these notions are not incompatible with my structural theorization, ML’s strategy for how to use them is. She does not ground the analysis of race and ethnicity in the sociohistorical processes (past and present) that create and recreate them as real social categories; therefore her analytical strategy is not only faulty but profoundly antisociological.

If the important consideration is analyzing boundaries and the strategies of closure used

to maintain those boundaries, there is no logical reason to retain *any* category of analysis. If researchers aim to analyze “group-making” processes based on “us-them” divisions, those who accept ML’s epistemological world would study human practices and, through some unspecified process, would classify them as “racial,” “ethnic,” “gender,” “sexual,” “class,” “club,” “fraternity,” “neighborhood,” “left-handed,” or any other possible us-them categories. Therefore ML’s “sociology” of group-making entails the abandonment not only of race (and ethnicity) but of *all* sociological categories of analysis. This categorical and conceptual looseness is one of the main criticisms of Barth’s (1969) work on boundaries and one of the problems with much of the contemporary work on identity.<sup>4</sup>

In contrast to ML, I suggest that analyses of racially stratified societies would benefit from a structural approach. I believe that analysts should conduct comparative work on racialization in various settings with the goal of determining the specific character of the *racial structure*—the mechanisms, practices, and social relations responsible for the production and reproduction of racial inequality. For example, Lewis and I (Bonilla-Silva and Lewis 1999) have examined the United States racial structure in the post-civil rights period. We argue that since the 1960s, a “new racism,” characterized by covert, institutionalized, and apparently non-racial practices, has emerged and accounts for blacks’ inferior status in contemporary America. In another project, Forman and I (Bonilla-Silva and Forman forthcoming) argue that “color blind racism” has replaced Jim Crow racism as the central racial ideology supporting the “new racism.” Finally, after examining the racial discourses of various Western nations, I (Bonilla-Silva forthcoming) suggest that they are converging because central components of their respective racial structures are converging as well.

ML undoubtedly will regard the analysis of racial structurations and racial formations as “reified.” The Weberian-inspired situationalist perspective that she proposes, however, reverts to pure historicism, whereby

<sup>4</sup> Bourdieu (1980) himself makes this criticism of “subjectivist sociologies.”

race, class, gender, and other historically constituted and recognized forms of social division are mere probabilities in the world; it reverts to the study of boundary-making. More significantly, her explanation does little to help members of the “them” categories to change the world. As long as “reified” blacks in the United States are still lynched by individual whites (as in the recent case in Jasper, Texas) and are 4.3 times more likely than whites to receive the death sentence (Bell 1992:332); insofar as “reified” white Brazilians are 8.5 times more likely than black Brazilians and 5 times more likely than *pardos* to receive a college education (Silva and Hanselbag 1992); and as long as black Puerto Ricans have little access to political, economic, and social resources, I, a “reified” black-looking Puerto Rican, will continue to study racial structurations throughout the world.

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