
Is it fruitful, wise and efficient to speak of “race” (and perhaps even of “class”) in analyzing cultural, social, or political processes in the Caribbean? Can such a term as “race” be appropriated for the analysis of social and cultural structures today?

The fundamental epistemological problem underlying this volume – the proceedings of an Eichstätt Catholic University symposium of 1987 – is an old one, much discussed of late. In the early Fifties, Lévi-Strauss’s Race and History raised a question which was then explored, with specific reference to Latin America and the Caribbean, in major studies by Magnus Mörner (1970) and M.G. Smith (1984). There is no doubt that ethnic formations have an extremely important influence in the social structure of plantation and slave society.

However, although an older work like Moreau de Saint-Méry’s Description [...] de la partie française de l’île de Saint-Domingue can give an account of the complicated system of racial mixture and relationships in 18th-century Haiti, and speak of this as being organized in “treize classes distinctes, quant à la nuance de la peau,”1 social scientists feel somewhat uneasy, two centuries later, about speaking of “race” and “race relations.” In Spanish, French or German, this choice of terminology today sounds even more uncomfortable than it does in English; American theory, at least, in an age of Political Correctness, would prefer something like “interethnic relations” to the tricky term “race.”

We can certainly attribute it to the honesty of the editor of this volume, Karl Kohut, that he does not pass over this problem in silence. In his introduction (9–17), we read for example:

Jeder, der das Wort “Rasse” benützt, setzt sich dem Verdacht aus, ein Rassist zu sein und bewußt oder unbewußt faschistisches Gedankengut zu vertreten. [Anyone who uses the word “race” lays himself open to the suspicion of being a racist, and – consciously or unconsciously – of being a representative of fascist ideology.]

Unfortunately, this reflection is decidedly more convincing than Kohut’s conclusion that there are regions of the world which cannot be analyzed without using the term race (9).

The essays collected in this volume try to argue between these two poles – the necessity of “race” as a category of social analysis on the one hand, and the precarious or even politically dangerous status of the concept as a source of possible misunderstandings on the other – a manoeuvre between Scylla and Charybdis.

1 Moreau de Saint-Méry, Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l’île Saint-Domingue, vol. I. (Critical edition by Blanche Maurel and Etienne Taillemite; Paris, 1958): 86ff.; “thirteen distinct classes, distinguished by the colour of the skin.” Of course, we have known since at least the beginning of this century that to be “white” does not necessarily refer to skin-colour, but to a type of social behaviour and social status.
Barbara Potthast analyzes the process of acculturation on the Mosquito Coast during the 17th and 18th centuries by means of the terms “race mixture,” and refers to the Mosquitoes as a “colonial tribe.” Four contributions deal with literary transpositions of the problem. Sabine Horl Groenewold discusses Sab, an anti-slavery novel by the Cuban writer Gertrudis Gomez de Avellaneda (75–84). Ineke Phaf makes a plea for the analysis of literary motifs (“Motivforschung”) – an investigative strategy which is commonly regarded as old-fashioned but which she associates with a model identifying “Konstanten in der literarischen Wahrnehmung [constants of literary perception]”. Ranging freely over temporal, spatial, and generic differences, her analysis of Stedman, Cabrera Infante and Lezama Lima (85–98) concludes that the motif of the female mulatto is “ubiquitous.” Jürgen Martini’s treatment of V.S. Naipaul’s Guerrillas (99–114) centers not so much on the question of “race” as on the sexual aspect of the novel. Ulrike Bergmann discusses the acculturation process in Anglo-Caribbean juvenile literature (115–32), while an article by Wolfgang Viereck gives an account of the sociolinguistic situation in this area. Hans Haufe, in a well-documented contribution, deals with the complicated architecture of the Columbian city of Mompox, reading it as a “meeting point of different cultures” based on the distribution of water within the urban structure (153–82), while Stephan Palmié writes on transcultural aspects of Afro-Cuban religious practice and the “blanqueamiento” of Abakuá (183–98).

The central problem of the volume, however, does not reside in the contributions themselves. It is located in the “approach,” in what Lévi–Strauss called the “original sin” of anthropology:

The original sin of anthropology ... consists in its confusion of the idea of race, in the purely biological sense (assuming that there is any factual basis for the idea, even in its limited field – which is disputed by modern genetics), with the sociological and psychological production of human civilizations.4

“Race” is not a term that can be applied to the analysis of social and culture processes. It connects elements of nature, culture, and society in a manner inappropriate to a critical social science. Even Magnus Mörner is not at ease in his employment of the concept: his readiness to speak of “race policies,” “race distribution,” and “race relations” needs to be weighed up against his prefatory admission that “race” is a term which cannot be defined unproblematically and which should therefore be used with great caution.5 This is no quibble over words. We are fully aware of the importance of sex in everyday life as well as in cultural production; but no-one today would speak of “sex” in discussing “gender.”

In Kohut’s volume, there is one article which is aware of this potential confusion of ideas. Unfortunately, there is not enough space to cite all the rich material and prolific reflections contained in the paper by Felix Becker.6 Connecting theoretical positions, material from the

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2 A term used by Mary Helms, 1969; 1971.
3 Two articles cannot be taken into consideration in this review. A paper on “Provisorische Hypothesen für eine philosophische Interpretation” deals with the theme in such obvious terms as to obviate discussion; and a piece on Marcus Garvey is so impoverished and misguided at the factual level that it is beneath criticism. Neither paper should have been published.