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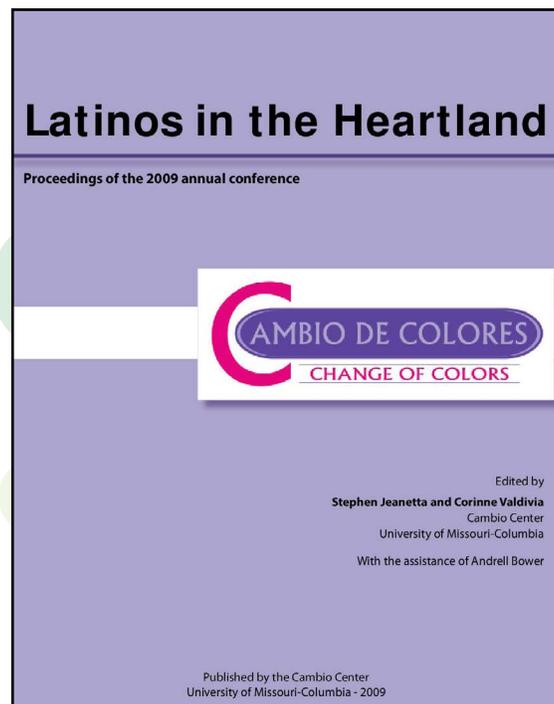
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U.S. Race Politics: Learning from the Experiences of African Americans

Kenneth M. Burke

Washington University



Abstract

This research details three markers in the history of race and ethnic relations through a theoretical lens that addresses them from an African American perspective to illustrate what Latin Americans can learn from the experiences of blacks in American politics. The three markers include Chief Justice Taney's decision in *Dred Scott* (1857), the Supreme Court's decision in *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978) and Harold Washington's Chicago Mayoral Campaign in 1983. These events offer a critique and praxis of pluralism in traditional political theory and do shape the political landscape for race and ethnicity. Where they offer perspectives for racial and ethnic minorities in the United States to learn from, Latin Americans in particular, given controversies surrounding recent immigration patterns, can gain from knowledge and the analysis of the events. Likewise, the African American community can gain from Latin American perspectives. Through shared, periphery frames of reference, the brief history, and the environment surrounding the markers, in advancing a common ground from a critique of traditional political theory, the research thus provides direction for theory development that respects the value of pluralism despite its failures from theory into practice.

Keywords: immigrant policy, minority pluralism, race and ethnic relations

► U.S. Race Politics: Learning from the experiences of African Americans

Kenneth M. Burke, graduate student, Washington University College in Arts and Sciences

“They [African Americans] are not included, and were not intended to be included, under the word ‘citizens’ in the Constitution, and can therefore claim none of the rights and privileges which that instrument provides for and secures to citizens of the United States.”

– Chief Justice Taney, Majority Opinion, *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857)

The prevailing theory of race and ethnicity in American politics is pluralism. The pluralist’s “melting pot” model of race relations originated from liberal political theory that maintains the U.S. political system is one that assimilates and accommodates racial and ethnic minorities into the fabric of American life, through which they achieve opportunities for political participation and social mobility. Critiques of the pluralist theory are not at all uncommon. In particular, perspectives critical of liberal pluralism maintain that, given the experiences of African Americans from slavery to civil rights and even today, “these pluralist models are inappropriate” (Barker, Jones, & Tate, 1999, p. 8). Accordingly, the theorists of the critiques developed alternative theoretical lenses based on colonial theories of race relations and the analysis of core and periphery, dominant and subordinate group relations. The theories share much in common with theory all too familiar to the study of Latin American politics. The relationship between them establishes a common ground that offers the potential to advance theory development on political participation and coalition for racial and ethnic minorities.

Three events represent the history of the African American experience in the United States to illustrate the critique and praxis of pluralism from a minority perspective. However, the critique of pluralism can easily turn on itself. Bridging the history with concerns in the Latin American community today, the research thus aims to develop ideas for reciprocal frames of reference based on learning.

It would be misleading to compare contemporary Latin American experiences to the historical experience of slavery, aside from the political symbolism.¹ The three events concern issues pertinent to Latin Americans: citizenship and legal status, human rights and the preservation of those rights and political participation.

The first event and marker occurred before the Civil War. *Dred Scott* was a St. Louis slave at a time when debates over slavery divided the country. Missouri, through the Missouri Compromise, agreed to statehood as a slave state to balance the number of slave and free states. Scott lived in free states before being sold as a slave in Missouri. Based on the argument that his enslavement began in territories in which slavery was illegal, Scott spent a good part of a decade fighting for his legal emancipation. Becoming an event that catalyzed the Civil War, the subtle but more direct impacts involve the legal implications for blacks with the Supreme Court decision in *Dred Scott v. Sanford* (1857) that ruled *Dred Scott* could not sue in the courts because he lacked the rights of citizenship. The relationship between the historical ruling and questions over Latin American rights and citizenship today evidently prove complicated but worth exploring.

The ruling, opinioned by the Chief Justice of the Court, provides a rationale for colonial theories of race relations that identify blacks as a colonized people within the U.S. The rationale correlates with colonial and neocolonial theories of Latin American politics in Latin America. The theories assign the negative consequences of colonialism to “relations imposed by actual or formal colonial masters on the development of native peoples,” rather than “caused primarily by economic, social, or cultural patterns

¹ Capitalization of immigrant labor in the South from the influx of Latin Americans with globalism, through the corporatism of a global political economy, carries with it a distinct political symbolism. For more information, see Peacock, J.L., H.L. Watson and C.R. Matthews (2005), *The American South in a Global World*, Chapel Hill:North Carolina Press.

that had developed within those societies” (Vaden & Prevost, 2006, p. 156). Theorists of race relations in the U.S. employ a comparable logic.

Ratified in 1865, the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution ended slavery. The Fourteenth in 1868 overthrew Chief Justice Taney’s decision inasmuch as it extends rights and privileges of citizenship to all “persons born or naturalized in the United States,” based on equal protection under the law and right to due process. With citizenship granted after emancipation, the Amendment somewhat undermines the colonial argument developed in the 1960s and 1970s. As with comparing the labors of Latin Americans in the U.S. to slavery, we might equally question the appropriateness of equating the contemporary experiences of African Americans to colonial situations in Latin America. Nevertheless, while overthrown, *Dred Scott* justifies the underlying sentiment of examining their experiences through a colonial lens.

Inasmuch as the theorists of U.S. race and ethnic relations recognize the flaws and use the correlations to colonialism as primarily an analogy, the somewhat inside-out reversal of their colonial identification within the actual borders of the colonizer remains noteworthy. Today, given the waves of Latin American immigrants and the simplification of Latin American legal status, reflecting a historical ambivalence toward immigrants in the U.S., the question of citizenship remains a difficult topic of concern because immigration has a complex social, political, and economic dynamic of immigration (Burke, 2008). Without philosophizing on free choice and engaging in a complicated discussion of the global economy for the sake of length and time, issues concerning the relationship between immigrants and a government within its sovereign authority do demonstrate the commonalities.² They relate to questions over immigrant legal rights and citizenship in the same way that African American theorists note the historical significance of *Dred Scott*.

Furthermore, it is important to note that legislation passed during the Reconstruction Era did not automatically create an environment of freedom and equality for naturalized citizens. State governments and the perceptions and actions of whites did not entirely align with amended Constitution. Laws such as the 1865 Black Codes serve as an example of continued obstacles designed to “put black citizens in a state of near slavery by limiting their rights and privileges” (Loevy, 1997, p. 3). From 1866 into the late 19th century, Congress attempted to pass early civil rights legislation, but the spirit of the Era became undermined given the changes in political party attitudes (see Maltz, 1990). With the civil rights cases of 1883, ruling on the Fourteenth Amendment justified many injustices against blacks, to say the least, and led to the “separate but equal” ruling in *Plessey v. Ferguson* (1896) and segregation.

Alongside the attempts to legislate civil rights, *Missouri ex rel. Gaines v. Canada* (1938) sought to challenge *Plessey*, but not until *Brown v. The Board of Education Topeka* (1954) did the Supreme Court rule against “separate but equal.” The *Brown* case became a catalyst for the civil rights movement. Finally, in 1964, the Civil Rights Act passed, but the challenges did not end and the struggle continues today. The legal and legislative history as it concerns African American citizenship and human rights proves to be insightful for ethnic minorities in America. Although of a different nature, beginning with the issue of rights, the social environment for Latin Americans faces comparable challenges that illustrate the critique of liberal pluralism.

Rulings on affirmative action cases pose questions over the preservation of rights. Following the civil rights era, universities developed alternative admission or affirmative action programs. No legal challenges to the programs surfaced until a white, male student was denied admission into the medical school at the University of California’s Davis campus and sued the state university system in *Bakke v. The Regents of the University of California* (1976). In the case, the court ruled against racial preference as a defining state interest and that the student be admitted. The California court upheld that the Constitution protects all individuals, maintaining the unconstitutionality of race criteria for affirmative action in

university admissions.

When the case went before the Supreme Court in *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978), the Court Justices affirmed the ruling on the program but “reversed insofar as it prohibited the defendant from according any consideration to race in its future admissions process” (Regents, 1978). Specifically, with strict scrutiny of proof that the program counters societal discrimination, the Court ruled that a classification system for racial preference in admissions is itself justified as a state interest under the legal protections of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The fact that the California Supreme Court undermined the Civil Rights Act in their ruling on the Fourteenth Amendment’s equal protection clause is rather telling.

Affirmative action remains a delicate issue for racial and ethnic groups as well as for minorities in general. The legal issue becomes a matter of whether minorities remain subjected to “second class” citizenship and exemplifies what Barker, Jones and Tate (1997) discuss as the politics of uncertainty for race and ethnicity in American politics. The Texas courts in *Hopwood v. Texas* (2000) again ruled against racial preference, but the U.S. Supreme Court did not hear the case. *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003) affirmed the decision made in the *Bakke* case. However, the future of affirmative action appears difficult to predict given the split among “justices regarding whether Title VII and the Fourteenth Amendment permit affirmative action” (Kaplin & Lee, 1995: 270). Here, the critique of liberalism and the American “melting pot” theory of equality and freedom for all can potentially find greater justification but can equally turn on itself. At this point, it is important to examine the target of the critique.

Chicago politics proves noteworthy for investigation. “Machine politics” that support the hierarchical decision-making power of an administration and consolidate that power to dominate elections, historically dominate Chicago. Richard J. Daley, taking the office of the mayor in 1955 until his death in 1976, serves as a primary example of Chicago’s political machination. Discontent with Chicago politics from citizens of all walks of life surfaced by the end of Daley’s tenure. Although the political machine traditionally caters to immigrants and capitalizes on the minority vote, it illustrates another critique of pluralism. Notwithstanding the administration’s controversies during the Civil Rights Era (see Grimshaw, 1952), the Chicago machine subordinated blacks, and Latinos communities equally felt their concerns.

Taking collective action with a coalition of Mexicans, Puerto Ricans and progressive whites, the African American community mobilized “to actualize its civil rights at the ballot box” (Cordova, 1999, p. 39) and challenged the machine’s old guard. The community nominated Harold Washington, who accepted and became the first African American mayor of Chicago. In the same way that African American voters “came alive,” the election also “ushered an era of unprecedented electoral participation by Latinos and signaled the rise of a Black-Latino coalition and progressive agenda” (Cordova, 1999, p. 32). The election of Washington affirmed liberal pluralism by challenging a system that claimed to service its values but contradicted its principles in practice. This fact deserves attention when examining the critiques.

The discontent with machine politics brought forth the praxis of pluralism, which remains important when investigating racial and ethnic political participation and the social development of their coalitions, but Washington did not completely put an end to the discontent. With delicate questions about the motivating means and ends of the dynamic, race and ethnicity remain essential variables in the political environment today. If the prophet of the political machine Milton Rakove (1975) proves correct in predicting that the Chicago machine shall survive and “probably be the first of the new black and Spanish-speaking machines which will develop in the years to come” (p. 19), what will the implications for the further growth of the coalition be?

The affirmation of pluralism at the time of Washington’s 1983 mayoral campaign need strengthen a shared and common ground through which all racial and ethnic populations might advantage from

the genuine practice of its ideals. The historical markers and events illustrate the subtle and direct commonalities between African American and Latin American politics. From the complicated questions over citizenship and legal status, the struggle for human rights, the preservation of those rights, and political participation, the history offers a relevant frame of reference in developing perceptions on the experiences of Latin Americans today. Establishing a basis for political coalition, the perspectives, including points of view on peripheral relations and colonial identifications, provide strong directions for knowledge of the similarity and difference in their political, social and economic outlooks. From which, recognizing the complex racial and ethnic dynamic, theory building in the politics of race and ethnicity need recognize the values of pluralism rather than undermine them by dwelling on its failures in practice.

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