SUMMARY - CHAPTER 3

Race and Citizenship in the New Republics

In the wake of independence, defining citizenship in the traditionally hierarchical Latin American society was a “daunting” task. The early republican period saw the passing of many reforms to the traditional caste and race orders. These reforms were idealistic in nature and spirit, but the inequality of former caste and racial orders also continued in spirit in one form or another. In Peru, the racial divide was geographically entrenched and less changeable. Moreover, this divide contributed to national stability.

In Mexico and Argentina, the conquests of Porfirio Díaz and Julio Roca, respectively, dislocated thousands of indigenous people and imposed forced labor on them with an eye to appropriating their resources. Indigenous people attempted to appropriate the liberal ethos for their own cause but were rebuffed by liberals who were more concerned with a national project. And this project defined the indigenous population as an indistinct part of the population.

The Stain

The example of the emancipated slaves of Haiti, who created the first republic in the world, reveals the contrasts in the historical, cultural, and philosophical make-up of different Latin American societies.

In some areas of Latin America (Peru, Venezuela, Argentina, etc.), the large slave populations were not fundamental to the national economic production. In Brazil and the Caribbean, they were. It is important to note that slave populations also had different cultural definitions from one region to the next. The process of emancipation, once initiated in Latin America, slowly spread and took hold. Gradually, pressure and restrictions on slavery increased more and more and, on October 7, 1886, slavery came to a complete halt in its last Latin American bastion, Cuba.

Different Paths

While slavery was morally untenable, it was economically productive, and in general the cultures of slavery persisted in many Latin American countries even alongside the emancipation movements. These cultures, however, differed in their constitution. In Cuba and Brazil, in contrast to the US, to be black was not necessarily to be a slave. However, in Latin America, even after most slaves were freed, the blacks still faced a great deal of racism. In post-emancipation societies that were weak and loosely held together, the black population had less legal power control over the conditions under which they worked. And often they were replaced by foreign labor.

In Brazil, former slaves eventually integrated into the urban, economy-driving sections of Brazilian society. But the stigma of blackness continued as the northeast of Brazil came to be associated with a poor black population, while Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo were associated with urban wealth and civilization.

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In Cuba, the freed slaves often put family and community interests ahead of individual interests. They thus invested their citizenship and participation in society with a powerful moral dimension. In an environment of extreme race stigmatization, the Independent Party of Color emerged to fight for the rights of blacks. It was, however, completely smothered after a series protests led to a violent army response that left 6,000 protesters dead.

The Documents: Limiting Citizenship

1. In this article, Brazilian race scientist Raimundo Nina Rodrigues argues for a cultural, racial, and religious definition of blackness.
2. In this essay, the Cuban criminologist Fernando Ortiz redraws the parameters of black identity according to allegedly dangerous religious practices that are pernicious to civilization.
3. An open manifesto reinterpreting the attacks on blackness in the wake of the 1912 protests.