

The Missteps Of Anti-Imperialist Reason

Bourdieu, Wacquant and Hanchard's *Orpheus
and Power*

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ARE AFRICAN and African-American Studies, as defined and practiced in the USA, tools of US cultural imperialism? Are discussions of race, racial inequality or racial oppression in other societies, when carried out by North Americans, to be viewed as 'brutal ethnocentric intrusions'? Are the terms 'race' and 'racism' pernicious concepts 'that the USA exports and imposes' on the countries 'dominated' by US cultural imperialism? And are self-consciously anti-racist studies, carried out in or about non-US countries, to be seen as proof of the infiltration of North American 'racistoid perspectives' into every national intellectual field? These are among the central propositions of a vigorous 1998 polemic by two French sociologists, Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, in an article which appeared in English translation in 1999 as 'On the Cunning of Imperialist Reason' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999: 44, 46, 48).

As proof, Bourdieu and Wacquant call attention to the recent transnational scholarly dialogue regarding race in Brazil, the country with the Western hemisphere's largest population of African-descended people. They denounce the 'imposition' of an 'American [sic]¹ tradition', 'model', and 'dichotomy' of race on Brazil through research carried out 'by [North] Americans and by Latin Americans trained in the USA' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999: 44). More broadly, they suggest that recent publications on race, racial inequality and racial mobilization in Brazil represent the transposition of an alien (US) problem into a society where the entire notion

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of 'race' makes no sense. For these French scholars, neither of them Brazil specialists, diasporic comparison between Brazilian and North American realities is by definition an 'ethnocentric intrusion' by the more powerful nation. In particular, they attack as 'ethnocentric poison' a 1994 monograph by Michael Hanchard on Brazilian 'Black Consciousness' movements, *Orpheus and Power: The Movimento Negro of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, Brazil, 1945–1988* (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999: 44; Hanchard, 1994).

As a historian with 20 years of research in and on Brazil, I will dissect Bourdieu and Wacquant's mischaracterization of the current US–Brazilian dialogue on the African diaspora in the New World. While sympathetic to the authors' anti-imperialist rhetoric, I will identify fundamental missteps and misjudgments that vitiate the intellectual and political project they claim to favor. After briefly characterizing their schematic model of transnational intellectual circulation, I will demonstrate their radical misrepresentation of Michael Hanchard's *Orpheus and Power* and place his contribution within the wider scholarly literature on the Brazilian dynamics of race and color. I end by emphasizing the limited nature of their contribution vis-a-vis the current boom in scholarly publications, by both Brazilians and North Americans, that address questions of race, color and nation in Brazil within a broader New World diasporic perspective (see French, 2000).

Intellectual Circulation, the 'McDonaldization of Thought' and Race

In eschewing euphemisms, Bourdieu and Wacquant have broken a contemporary taboo against referring openly to US imperialist domination and its accompanying ideological manifestations. They rightly reject the term globalization, which 'has the effect, if not the function, of submerging the effects of imperialism in cultural ecumenism or economic fatalism and of making transnational relationships of power appear as a neutral necessity.' This '[North] Americano-centric belief in "globalization"', they go on, is 'understood, quite simply, as the [North] Americanization of the Western World and . . . the entire universe.' The ability of globalization's architects to escape serious intellectual scrutiny and critique, they suggest, is by no means unrelated to 'the refashioning of social relations and cultural practices in advanced societies after the US pattern', which is 'nowadays accepted with resignation' if not a 'sheepish enthusiasm' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999: 42, 46, 43).

At their most cautious, Bourdieu and Wacquant criticize the 'diffusion of "US thought" in the social sciences' and, more particularly, 'the hegemony of US production' in the intellectual world market. At their more hysterical, they describe the export of North American scholarly ideas and concepts, 'often soiled and faded', as the 'rampant McDonaldization of thought'. US 'intellectual doxa with planetary pretensions' are rapidly becoming the 'commonplaces of the great new global vulgate that endless media repetition progressively transforms into universal common sense'. As

embodied in a series of ‘woolly and spongy’ terms, these noxious trends are expressed ‘in an extraordinary jargon, a terrible (and terrifying) international lingua franca’, that has increasingly ‘crossed the Atlantic in broad daylight or . . . been smuggled’ into Europe in the past decade. In this way, ‘notions of [North] American scholarly common sense [have come to] penetrate’ the intellectual field of target countries in the ‘insidious’ form of ‘isolated and apparently technical terms’ that function ‘as veritable political codewords and mottos’ (among the examples given are such neo-liberal orthodoxies as ‘labor flexibility’, ‘ghettoization’ and the ‘urban underclass’). These strains of US social thought, as they rightly note, are marked by a denial of class and ‘a kind of principled depoliticization of social and political problems’, which are ‘stripped of any reference to any kind of domination’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999: 50, 52, 46, 47, 52, 42, 53–4, 54, 43, 42, 49).

Yet the portrait offered by Bourdieu and Wacquant, in their haste, leaves them with an unanswered puzzle: how are we to explain the ‘extraordinary force of imposition’ of ‘American cultural imperialism’? As a partial answer, they cite the ‘driving role played by the major [North] American philanthropic and research foundations’ and the ‘internationalization of academic publishing’. However, they admit that these factors, even when ‘taken together[,] cannot completely explain the hegemony of US production’ in the ‘intellectual world market’. In explaining US preeminence, Bourdieu and Wacquant single out non-US collaborators for criticism: those semi-scholarly *‘passeurs*, “carriers” and importers of designer or counterfeit cultural products’ in the ‘target countries’ who are attracted by the ‘material and symbolic profits’ to be gained from ‘a more or less assumed or ashamed adherence to the model derived from the United States’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999: 54, 46–7).

The dynamics of US imperialism’s intellectual exports, Bourdieu and Wacquant argue, obey the same logic as other export ‘products of [North] America’s big cultural industry like jazz or rap’ or jeans: they ‘owe part of the quasi-universal seduction they wield over youth to the fact that they are produced and worn by subordinate minorities’. By analogy, the intellectual ‘false universalisms’ sponsored by the US take on a similar ‘allure of messages of liberation’ because of their association with ‘disciplines perceived to be marginal or subversive, such as Cultural Studies, Minority Studies, Gay Studies or Women’s Studies.’ Indeed, ‘progressive intellectuals’ from the US, or “‘intellectuals of color” in the case of racial inequality’, play a special role precisely because they ‘would appear to be above suspicion of promoting the hegemonic interests’ of the USA. In this way, such ‘mystified mystifiers . . . transport unknowingly the hidden – and often accursed – portion of the [US] cultural productions which they put into circulation’ throughout the world (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999: 50–1).

Impatient and excessively judgmental, Bourdieu and Wacquant suffer from tunnel vision in their broad and undifferentiated caricature of ‘American’ intellectual trends and their international diffusion. They demonstrate

their most acute and striking blindness, intellectual and political, when they depict anti-racist intellectual movements and trends as a key example of US cultural imperialism in action. In their view, one of the most distressing developments has been the ability of this US ‘racial (or racist) sociodicy . . . to “globalize” itself over the recent period’, which they present as ‘one of the most striking proofs of the symbolic domination exercised by the USA over every kind of scholarly and, especially, semi-scholarly production’. For these French intellectuals, current efforts by North Americans to address questions of racial and ethnic oppression abroad inevitably reflect the general tendency of the [North] American world view . . . to impose itself as a universal point of view, especially when it comes to issues such as that of “race”’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999: 45–6).

For Bourdieu and Wacquant, the international appeal of this US racial discourse stems in large part from its ostensible anti-racism; in fact, the authors lump together both racist and anti-racist discourses from the USA and present the process as ‘the quasi-universalization of the US folk-concept of “race” as a result of the worldwide export of US scholarly categories’. US “theories” of “race relations”’ are little more than ‘thinly conceptualized transfigurations, endlessly refurbished and updated . . . of the most commonly used racial stereotypes’ that serve to justify the ‘domination of whites over blacks’ in US society. After noting the heavy weight of racial oppression in US history, they assert that contemporary US-derived ‘racial’ discourses primarily serve to ‘conceal’ the ‘caste division’ within North American society ‘by submerging it within the universe of differentiating visions “revised” through US lenses by means of “globalization”’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999: 50, 45). Thus, serious intellectuals must reject the North American pretension that their country’s experience can serve as the basis for a ‘universal standard whereby every situation of ethnic domination must be analyzed and measured’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999: 42).

To prove their point, Bourdieu and Wacquant turn to the US role in the debate ‘swirling around “race” and identity’ in Brazil, marked by ‘a similar, if more brutal ethnocentric intrusion’ than those they had criticized in the European case – and one that is all the more threatening since it touches on ‘a domain closer to political realities’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999: 44, 53). The last 20 years of research on racial inequality in Brazil are presented as a unilateral US imposition on a society substantially without racism. The process they depict is one in which

... a historical representation, born from the fact that the [North] American tradition superimposes on an infinitely more complex social reality a rigid dichotomy between whites and blacks . . . impose[s] itself in countries where the operative principles of vision and division of ethnic differences, codified or practical, are quite different and which, like Brazil, were until recently considered as counter-examples to the [North] American model’. (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999: 44)

US initiatives on race in Brazil, they insist, are designed ‘to encourage the leaders of the Movimento Negro . . . to denounce the category of *pardo* (an intermediary term between *branco*, white, and *preto*, black, which designates people of mixed physical appearance)’ in order to ‘mobilize all Brazilians of African descent on the basis of a dichotomous opposition between “Afro-Brazilians” and “whites”’. Moreover, these scholars follow ‘the [US] myth according to which all societies are “racist”’, even those in which ‘“race” relations seem at first sight to be less distant and hostile’ than in the USA (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999: 47, 44). ‘The diffusion of the US racial doxa within the Brazilian academic field’, Bourdieu and Wacquant suggest, has been fostered by Ford Foundation funding for programs of research and scholarly exchange on racial issues at Brazilian institutions – initiatives governed, they note irritably, by ‘US criteria of “affirmative action”’ which they believe poses ‘insuperable problems’ in Brazil given the absence of a white/black dichotomy. The intellectual current in this exchange, they insist, ‘flows in one direction only’ with Brazilians, especially in Black movements, being encouraged to retranslate the ‘salient social problems of the day into an idiom imported from the USA (ethnicity, identity, minority, community, fragmentation, etc.)’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999: 46, 50).

Curiously enough, given their color-blind stance, Bourdieu and Wacquant choose to call special attention to the ‘race’ of one such researcher, Michael Hanchard, described as an ‘Afro-American political scientist’ even though they do not introduce US authors with whom they sympathize, such as Carl Degler, as a ‘Euro-American historian’. They deem Michael Hanchard’s 1994 monograph *Orpheus and Power* to be the epitome of US cultural imperialism in this field. It is ‘ethnocentric poison’, they insist, for which antidotes must be sought and heeded (such as a recent book by another North American author, Anthony Marx, who is not identified as a ‘Euro-American political scientist’, and whose arguments are not in fact compared to Hanchard’s) (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999: 44).

Their indictment of Hanchard is simple and straightforward. Hanchard, they suggest, forgets that US racial conceptualizations ‘have their roots in the complex and controversial realities of [the United States as] a particular historical society, now tacitly constituted as a model for every other and as yardstick for all things’. Thus he ‘drag[s] along all of the particularities and particularisms [of the US case] without ever taking them consciously into account’. In particular, he applies North American racial categories to the Brazilian situation, with its color continuum, and simultaneously makes ‘the particular history of the US Civil Rights Movement into the universal standard for all groups oppressed on grounds of colour (or caste)’. Hanchard’s study, they claim, is further undermined by his dogmatic refusal to expose his ideas or desires to ‘the slightest empirical test’ in terms of Brazilian realities (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999: 42, 44).

For Bourdieu and Wacquant, the problem with *Orpheus and Power* goes still further: like other North Americans, Hanchard seeks ‘to prove

that, contrary to the image that Brazilians have of their own nation, the country of the “three sad races” . . . is no less “racist” than others and that Brazilian “whites” have nothing to envy their North American cousins on this score.’ Indeed, they claim that Hanchard believes that, ‘worse yet, Brazilian *racismo mascarado* [masked racism] should be regarded as more perverse precisely on account of being dissimulated and denegated’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999: 44)

Given such dismissive and powerfully derogatory language, the reader might rightly expect the authors to offer a strongly-stated and carefully argued critique of Hanchard’s book. If their claims were accurate, it would be relatively easy to cite chapter and verse to demonstrate the egregious nature of Michael Hanchard’s errors. Yet the authors, surprisingly enough, offer not a single quote or direct page citation from *Orpheus and Power*. While crippled by a superficial knowledge of the relevant social scientific literature on race, they offer a scandalous misrepresentation of the central propositions of this significant recent contribution to the debate regarding race, color and nation in Brazil. Indeed, readers familiar with Hanchard’s book would immediately recognize the false nature of Bourdieu and Wacquant’s claims about the use of the US/Brazilian comparison in *Orpheus and Power*.

‘Race’, ‘Racism’ and ‘Racial Mobilization’ in *Orpheus and Power*: An Afro-North American Perspective on the Brazilian Racial ‘Puzzle’ or ‘Conundrum’

Bourdieu and Wacquant criticize Hanchard for deploying three ‘out of place ideas’ that they define as being essentially and peculiarly North American: a conceptualization of race and its boundaries, the idea of racism, and the practice or rhetoric of racial mobilization. Yet they are simply wrong when they assert that Hanchard utilizes racial categories drawn from a US conceptualization of ‘race’ defined through descent. In fact, Hanchard rejects, at both a theoretical and practical level, an essentialist (not to mention a biological) concept of race. ‘Races’ and racial differences, he insists, are socially constructed (Hanchard, 1994: 14, 1991: 86–7) and he emphatically rejects the notion that ‘race’ is a known quantity or that it can be read or understood automatically due to its link to phenotype (appearance).

Hanchard’s constructionist approach to race, which is not uncontested within the Afro- and Euro-North American communities, allows him to frankly admit that ‘in a country such as Brazil . . . any approach that automatically presumes the existence of two or more phenotypically distinct “races” would severely limit a researcher’s efforts to empirically and theoretically account for the “race” in question. . . . There are no “givens” to ethnic or racial affiliations’, he goes on, and their ‘meaning and interpretation are always subject to revision, change, [and] negotiation’. Brazil’s distinctiveness, he concludes, resides in the fact that ‘the absence of racial

or ethnic “givens” is more profound [in Brazil] than in other polities’ (Hanchard, 1994: 15).

Thus Hanchard is far from offering a recycled version of the North American ‘folk concept’ of race. ‘The term race, as it is used in this study’, Hanchard writes, ‘refers to the employment of phenotypical differences as symbols of social distinction. . . . These symbols, meanings, and material practices distinguish dominant and subordinate subjects according to their racial categorizations.’ Unlike Bourdieu and Wacquant, however, he does insist that ‘race in this regard is not only a marker for phenotypical difference, but for status, class, and political power’. In this respect, ‘race relations are power relations’ through which emerge ‘modes of racial consciousness’, defined broadly ‘as the dialectical result of antagonism between two or more groups defined as “races” in a given society’ (Hanchard, 1994: 14, 1991: 86–7). Dissenting from a race first and foremost position, he challenges as problematic ‘the very notion of a singular unitary consciousness that can mobilize an entire social group . . . given the array of cleaving variables (gender and class among them) that complicate forms of identification.’ Finally, he also warns that ‘an uncritical effort to highlight the relative autonomy of ethnicity and racial dominance vis-a-vis class relations’ runs the ‘risk of reductionist determinism’ (Hanchard, 1994: 97).

Hanchard’s embrace of the concept of ‘social race’ (a term coined by Charles Wagley [1959]) brings with it a recognition that the dynamics of, and discursive structures surrounding, the subordination of African-descended peoples in the USA and Brazil differ in important ways. Unlike his French critics, Hanchard recognizes that there are racisms and not simply *racism* at work within the African diaspora: the existence not of ‘racism in the singular’ but rather in the plural to use Paul Gilroy’s words (Hanchard, 1994: 17). Denying that there are better or worse racisms, Hanchard clearly recognizes that systems of ethno-racial domination vary not only in their intellectual rationales, modes of operation and daily manifestations but in their impact on the subjectivities of both the super- and subordinate groups. Thus, Hanchard joins with other scholars who have recently called for renewed attention to the variation in the forms and terms of racial oppression and thus resistance (Butler, 1998; Segato, 1998).

As with their other claims, Bourdieu and Wacquant are mistaken in their placement of *Orpheus and Power* within the context of 70 years of sustained research and discussion of race relations in the Americas, with a special focus on the Black experience in Brazil. Since the 1930s, various generations of scholars – Brazilian, North American, European and African – have tackled the difficulty of incorporating Brazil into the same conceptual framework with the distinctive US case. Stances have shifted across time, depending upon the political conjuncture within their respective societies, but discussion has tended to revolve around the question of where to place the emphasis – on differences or similarities between the historical experience of racial slavery and its aftermath in the USA and Brazil (Hellwig, 1992; Guimarães, 1995a, 1995b). In no case, however, did

scholars of race and color in either society deny that one could encounter both alikeness and distinctiveness in the histories of African-descended peoples in these two New World societies.²

The criticism of Hanchard offered by Bourdieu and Wacquant would, in fact, have been far more appropriately directed against the dominant trend in the research on race and color in the 1980s. It was during the late 1970s that a new political and intellectual activism regarding race and racism emerged both within Brazil, with the founding of the small but visible *Movimento Negro Unificado* (Unified Black Movement or MNU), and among Brazilian and foreign scholars. Denunciatory in nature, this wave of research radicalized the revisionist criticism of the 1950s and 1960s that had first discredited Brazil's claim to be non-racist. Operating in solidarity with Black protest in Brazil, the generation of scholars after 1978 tended to adopt a quantitative approach designed to prove, once and for all, the falsity of the racial democracy myth. In doing so, they hoped to strengthen incipient Black movements by providing intellectual support for the proposition that Brazil's race relations system was better understood as fundamentally bi-racial rather than multi-racial in nature and that the inequalities affecting African-descended peoples were related to pervasive patterns of prejudice and discrimination.

At its most strongly stated, the post-1978 scholarship asserted that Black and white should be considered the fundamental racial categories in Brazil, rather than Black, mixed and white or white and non-white (for the most sustained argument to this effect, see Andrews, 1991a). In doing so, they could be said to have adopted the MNU's political tactic as the basis for their intellectual analysis (see Gomes da Cunha, 1998 for the political logic underlying this movement tactic). At the same time, the aim was clear: to expose the falsity of Brazil's long-standing claim to be a race-free society by mobilizing statistical evidence (especially the newly-available national household survey Pesquisa Nacional por Amostragem de Domicílios [PNAD]) to reveal, contrary to the common belief of Brazilians of all colors, that there were significant racial inequalities, however you measured them. At the very least, scholars such as Nelson do Valle Silva (1978, 1985), Carlos A. Hasenbalg (1979a, 1979b, 1985), Charles Wood and Jose Alberto de Magno Carvalho (1988), and Reid Andrews (1992) produced striking findings that contradicted Brazil's deeply held national belief that there were no racial impediments, as such, to upward mobility or success (for more recent work in this vein see Telles, 1992, 1993, 1994; Lovell, 1994; Reichmann, 1999). Moreover, they tended to rebut, with statistical evidence, the supposition that mixed race Brazilians occupied a distinct 'middle' position between Black and white (the 'mulatto escape hatch' hypothesis as it had been christened by Carl Degler [1986]).

Looking back, the literature's provocative emphasis on the similarity between the USA and Brazil could be seen to flow from a flawed, if laudatory, understanding of what constitutes anti-racist solidarity. When vulgarized and converted into stump speeches, however, this iconoclastic

stance came close to postulating an essentialist or primordialist dogma of race (that is, the assumption, in Michael Hanchard's words, that 'blacks have a unilateral position regarding their own blackness [identity and experience] ... [that is,] a presumption – that blacks are the same, oppressed the same everywhere and must respond in an absolute [and similar] fashion') (Hanchard, 1991: 91–2).³ Hanchard rightly recognizes the limitations of such homogenizing and 'totalizing discourses within [the] Afro-Diasporic experience', and he frankly admits that hopes for 'universal, absolute affinity for and between Afro-Diasporic peoples have been as illusory as the formation of an international proletariat' (Hanchard, 1991: 92).

Thus, Hanchard refuses to adopt a rhetorical solidarity based on a romantic vision of commonality. Nor does his analysis depend upon the hope, briefly held in the 1980s, that the Euro- and Afro-Brazilian resistance to racial mobilization would evaporate under the combined impact of a new generation of Afro-Brazilian activism and committed scholarship (Winant, 1994: 86–7). The simple solidarity response is best exemplified in the writings of US sociologist Howard Winant (1996), who claims, for example, that by 1988 'a substantial consensus existed among [Brazilian] blacks [and even most whites] that "racial democracy" was a farce and a fraud and that racism continued to dominate Brazilian society.' By contrast, specialists on Brazil, including recent works by Twine (1997) and Sheriff (1997), are far more realistic about the depth and extent of this much anticipated unmasking of Brazilian racism. As Graham notes, the myth of Brazilian racial democracy 'has been thoroughly debunked in scholarly opinion over the last thirty years or so, but it remains deeply entrenched in elite and popular opinion even among blacks.' Mitchell also notes the 'dogged persistence of the myth's credibility' and its entrenchment in Brazilian culture. 'Unlike previous researchers [who] were preoccupied with directly challenging the myth of racial democracy,' he goes on, 'Hanchard instead points to the myth's continuing power, as he incorporates it into a systematic analysis of Black protest' in an effort 'to explain certain nagging questions remaining in the wake of the erosion of the racial democracy myth in academic circles' (Mitchell, 1995; Graham, 1995).

Although critical of Brazil's national myth of racial harmony, Hanchard insists that the differences between Brazil and the USA must be confronted and not merely swept under the rug in the name of solidarity. Hanchard's recognition of difference, however, does not lead him to assert that the Black experience in Brazil is nothing like that of the USA (the position staked out by Bourdieu and Wacquant). Instead, he rightly insists that the distinguishing features of Brazilian racial and ethnic dynamics do not preempt comparative discussion with other societies, even the USA (Hanchard, 1994: 78). Hanchard sensibly proposes to bring Brazil into the North Atlantic discussion through a grounded approach that takes cognizance of difference in light of similarity. While recognizing fundamental divergences in the scope, scale and intensity of 'racial mobilization' in

Brazil, Hanchard nonetheless reminds his readers that 'the absence of Afro-Brazilian racial solidarity is not total', even if 'its presence is without focus or direction' when compared to the US or South African examples (Hanchard, 1994: 80).

Hanchard's explicit and restricted focus on political mobilization based on race does lead him to put 'non-political' questions of Afro-Brazilian culture or identity to one side.⁴ This allows him, however, to state the challenge facing comparativists in its most compelling terms: 'Why has there been no sustained Afro-Brazilian social movement in Brazil comparable to the civil rights movement in the United States or nationalist insurgencies in sub-Saharan Africa and parts of the New World during the post-World War II period?' (Hanchard, 1994: 5). Why is it, he goes on, that 'Brazil, the country with the largest population of blacks in the New World has a black population with one of the lowest levels of racial consciousness in the Americas'? (an irony which 'was not lost on black Brazilian activists' he adds) (Hanchard, 1994: 95).⁵

Hanchard's 1994 study was path-breaking, Graham (1995) notes, precisely because of the sharpness with which it tackled the question of why black protest, which has occurred and does occur in Brazil, and 'movements of black solidarity have been few and far between, short-lived, and until now ineffective. Why does the myth of racial democracy persist? How is racial domination politically constructed and maintained? Where are its limits? How is it challenged and contested?' These are precisely the 'questions [that] trouble students of racial subordination in Brazil', noted Denise Ferreira da Silva, as well as

... students of comparative race relations, and more importantly (from a self-interested point of view) ... those of us involved in the project of fostering racial emancipation in Brazil. ... How is racial exclusion possible without overt racial discrimination, and more or less explicit mechanisms of racial segregation? Why do such high levels of racial exclusion not entail the emergence of race consciousness, and the consequent political mobilizations among black Brazilians? Why do black Brazilians lack a separate (racial) identity? (Ferreira da Silva, 1998: 222, 204)

Hanchard addresses these difficult questions, which are not even grasped by Bourdieu and Wacquant, through a very specific qualitative research strategy. Given his highly focused interests, he studies not African-descended Brazilians as a whole but rather the minority of Black activists that *have* constructed a 'self-conscious Afro-Brazilian identity' based on the politicization of racial difference. How has such a politically consequential form of racial consciousness emerged, Hanchard asks, in a society so averse to the concept of 'race' and so hostile to the mobilization of 'racial difference' (Hanchard, 1994: 79)? How and why do some Brazilians of African descent come to a consciousness of 'race', 'assume their Blackness'⁶ and decide to act upon it in a political way? Hanchard's reflections on these

issues derive from the interviews he conducted with 60 movement leaders in an effort to understand ‘how, based on incidents in their personal lives, they arrived’ at their Black activist position.⁷

In its focus on racial identity, *Orpheus and Power* represented a significant shift in the scholarly literature in 1994 given the link between the still-prevailing emphasis on quantitative data on race and shared anti-racist goals. Statistics on racial inequality, after all, seemed to offer objective evidence, to be used in denunciations and consciousness-raising, in contrast to murky discussions of the ‘racial’ identity of African-descended Brazilians, which seemed to undermine the struggle by introducing subjectivist ‘confusion’. Running against the current, Hanchard re-introduced an earlier ‘anthropological’ focus on ‘race’, understood as a discursive phenomenon, and he did so precisely at a moment when one senior scholar of prominence, Thomas Skidmore, had declared that the days for such research were over given the ‘hard’ data now available on race (for the full potential of a rich anthropological approach, see the wonderfully stimulating ethnographies by Burdick, 1998 and Sheriff, 1997). In the same 1992 article, Skidmore also embraced the then-prevailing race relations wisdom that Brazil was moving towards bi-raciality while the USA, in contrast, was becoming more multi-racial (Skidmore, 1992, 1993).

Orpheus and Power was not unique in its examination of the ‘Black Consciousness’ movements that emerged during the massive labor and popular insurgencies that marked the struggle against the Brazilian military regime in the late 1970s. Yet Hanchard’s approach is original, even controversial, precisely because, as Fry (1995) notes, Hanchard is quite ‘unlike most previous authors on the Brazilian Black Movements who have, in one way or another, been linked to them, and have tended to repeat the rhetoric of public meetings.’ His distance from the simple solidarity mode is based on his stance as an Afro-North American with a diasporic vision who seeks to better understand the basis for and obstacles to the creation of a mass Black politics in Brazil. His concern is, in Mitchell’s words, with the ‘possibilities for and constraints on Black activism’ within the Brazilian part of the New World’s African-descended population (Mitchell, 1995).

Hanchard offers his most suggestive comments regarding the difficulties of mobilizing racial identification in Brazil in a chapter entitled ‘Formation of Racial Consciousness’. As with earlier scholars, he recognizes that the variability in self-designation in Brazil and the lack of dichotomous racial categories do make phenotype ‘an even more precarious base for collective mobilization than it is in other multiracial polities’. Yet he uses the life experiences of several activists to demonstrate that the Afro-Brazilian experience is marked by a relative but by no means ‘absolute lack of racial identification’. To capture this distinction, he suggests, the phenomenon is best described as the distinction between faint resemblances (‘a matter of disposition, attitude’) and strong resemblances, far less common, which emerge from and ‘operate at specific historical

moments' of polarization and conflict ('the historical moment') (Hanchard, 1994: 78, 80).

As befits a constructionist approach to race, Hanchard thus emphasizes the distinctive historical trajectory of Brazil, compared with other countries, in a broadly similar but less systematic way than in a recent book by Anthony Marx (1998) that is praised by Bourdieu and Wacquant as a welcome antidote to Hanchard. Unlike the USA or South Africa, 'the absence of external threats and dichotomously segregated society [in Brazil] has precluded the necessity of strong resemblance in absolute, one-dimensional terms' which combines with the absence of the type of 'self-sufficient [Black] institutions and collective projects' in Brazil that constituted, so-to-speak, the 'silver-lining of racial segregation' in the US case. Using the idea of a family of resemblances, strong and weak, Hanchard suggests that the aim of the Black consciousness movements is to turn 'faint resemblances into strong' ones. This oppositional Afro-Brazilian identity, Hanchard admits, is still 'not widespread enough to catalyze the mass of Afro-Brazilians' and is thus 'largely operative between activists and their [small] Afro-Brazilian constituencies ... [in those places] where the *movimento negro* has relative strength ... Even [Black activist] individuals who would be free to wield a more forceful version of Afro-Brazilian identity among the masses are hesitant [to do so]', he adds, 'for fear of alienation in a society where strong resemblances are not mutually reinforced ... [Thus there are] practical difficulties involved in extending Afro-Brazilian strong resemblances to a mass public' (Hanchard, 1994: 78–80, 82).

Orpheus and Power convincingly demonstrates that the emergence of an oppositional racial agenda among some Afro-Brazilians, however limited its mass appeal to date, helps to illuminate the dynamics of racial subordination and resistance in Brazil. The book makes a special contribution in helping North Americans to grasp not only 'why African-Brazilians are not African-Americans' (the title of the wonderful talk by Anani Dzidzienyo, Brown University's Ghanaian-born Brazilianist and long-time student of race and color in Brazil) but also why 'Brazil is not (Quite) the United States' in terms of Blackness (the subtitle of an excellent recent article by a Black Brazilian sociologist and activist Denise Ferreira da Silva [1998]).

'Race' and Social Mythologies in Brazil, France and the USA: Double Standards and Bad Faith

The indignation with which Bourdieu and Wacquant condemn *Orpheus and Power*, without serious engagement or argument, can stem only from their confidence that they do, in fact, know something about race and color in the 'country of the "three sad races"' (a patronizing and dated essayist's cliché about the Brazilian 'national character'). Despite the fact that "'race" relations [in Brazil] seem at first sight to be less distant and hostile' than in the USA, they say, US cultural imperialism is intensifying its efforts 'to impose' its own poisonous understandings of race on that country's distinctive vision of ethnic difference. The existence in Brazil of a continuum of

color from Black to white, with hundreds of ‘intermediate and partly overlapping categories’, combined with the absence of hypodescent, they argue, stands in sharp contrast to the rigid and dichotomous racial categories of the USA. They point out the irony that, at the very moment when US agents preach a racial struggle of ‘Afro-Brazilians’ against ‘whites’, ‘people of mixed origin [in the USA], including so-called “blacks”, are trying to win recognition of a mixed race [North] American category rather than being “forcibly” classified under the single label “black”’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999: 44–5, 47).

While criticizing the USA for its inflexible attachment to the myth that it is an exceptionally fluid, open and classless society, Bourdieu and Wacquant charge that North Americans are engaged in a brutal imperialist assault, through the false charge of racism, on ‘the image the Brazilians have of their own nation’. Until recently, they assure the reader, Brazil was considered a counter-example to the “[North] American [racial] model” (according to a classic study by [US historian] Carl Degler)⁸ and they go on to cite another ‘classic’ article, by US anthropologist Charles Wagley, to show that the concept of ‘race’ varies in the Americas (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999: 44–5). Yet Degler’s reading of the Brazilian literature led him to conclude that ‘color prejudice and discrimination [do] exist in Brazil, as they still do in the United States’ (Degler, 1986: 268). And the cycle of UNESCO-sponsored race relations research of the 1950s, of which Wagley was a key participant, was ‘unanimous in detecting racial prejudice’ even if some, like Wagley, ‘were timid in interpreting the prejudice observed’ (Guimarães, 1999: 77; Fontaine, 1980: 123–4).⁹ Since 1945, as John Burdick (1998: 1) recently wrote, ‘three generations of scholars have produced a shelf of studies that reveal the reality of Brazilian discrimination on the basis of color . . . the question is no longer whether a Brazilian’s color influences her life chances, but how.’

With all its peculiarities, the Brazilian system of race and color, after all, is still based upon a clear racial hierarchy in which whiteness/Europeanness is valued and blackness/Africanness is stigmatized. These societal norms and practices are linked to racist stereotypes and derogatory somatic norm images that degrade blackness (Blanco, 1978). In this regard, ‘racism Brazilian style’ differs from racism in the USA primarily in its focus: a prejudice against appearance in Brazil (*preconceito de marca* or phenotype) versus a prejudice against origin or descent in the USA (*preconceito de origem* or genotype) according to the classic formulation by Brazilian sociologist Oracy Nogueira (1959, 1985; see also Viveiros de Castro Cavalcanti, 1999).

Bourdieu and Wacquant try to downplay the realities of prejudice and discrimination in Brazil, by contrasting the Brazilian situation with the ‘radical ostracization or stigmatization without recourse or remedy’ to which they believe Blacks are subjected in the contemporary USA. After describing the US scene as if little had changed since the 1950s, they go on to characterize the relation between Blacks and whites in the USA as ‘closer to

that between definitively defined and delimited castes' (a remarkably controversial proposition they toss out with little elaboration or justification).

Yet the crude and exaggerated USA/Brazil contrast utilized by Bourdieu and Wacquant was already anachronistic in 1971 when Degler published *Neither Black Nor White*. Degler concluded by observing that scholars and journalists during the pre-Civil Rights era in the USA routinely contrasted race relations in Brazil and the USA, 'usually to the discredit of the latter'. Such studies inevitably received 'a warm welcome from North Americans wishing to point up the racist character of race relations in the United States', he observed, and strong approval in Brazil from 'those who wanted to emphasize the racial democracy of their country'. Yet many Brazilian scholars, even at that time, rejected the Brazil/USA comparison precisely because it served 'to obscure, if not to deny, the existence of prejudice and discrimination in Brazil': 'all goes well [racially] because it is not as bad [in Brazil] as in the Deep [US] South', in the words of Luiz Costa Pinto in 1952 (Degler, 1986: 268).¹⁰

Having read the 'classic' Degler book with as much care as they did *Orpheus and Power*, Bourdieu and Wacquant also fail to notice that Degler actually holds to the 'imperialist' conclusion they reject: that the two countries are more alike than different in terms of race after the 1960s. Since the segregationist 'practices that once distinguished the United States from Brazil are now largely gone', Degler wrote, 'perhaps the time has now come to recognize that today the comparison of race relations in the two countries is not always favorable to Brazil'; he even went on to predict 'the likelihood of increasing discrimination' and a further growth in 'racial tension and color prejudice' there (Degler, 1986: 268; see also Andrews, 1991b: 4, 241–4)!

Yet Bourdieu and Wacquant are not without recourse here. After all, they say with a flourish, Brazil is marked by the 'virtual absence' (a strangely murky choice of words) of 'two typically US forms of ethnoracial violence: lynching and urban rioting' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999: 45). Such naivete is touching, as Kim Butler has recently observed:

Although it is true that the horrors of racial terrorism, such as lynching, that occurred in the United States did not take place in Brazil, this alone does not negate the social impact of the ideologies of racism and racialism. Such reasoning confuses racism with animosity, violence, and prejudice, none of which need be present to have a racist ideology. (Butler, 1998: 49)

The reasoning behind Bourdieu and Wacquant's comment on the absence of racial lynchings is also surprisingly narrow. One of Wagley's most important observations, in his 1959 article, was to call attention to the racialized nature of class in Latin American countries such as Brazil where darker and lighter, in terms of appearance and race, are highly correlated with the lower and upper extremes of the social structure. It is not unreasonable to link this reality to the strikingly high levels of violence in Brazil, not

only structural violence, but also lynchings, vigilantism and police killings (of which the massacre of street children receives the most attention). The victims are far more likely to be darker than those who ‘really matter’ and, although they are not killed explicitly in the name of their ‘race’ (which *is* important), their color does make it all the more easy for the middle and upper classes, which are overwhelmingly white, to ignore and distance themselves from the fate of such *favelados* (shantytown dwellers) or *marginais* (marginals).

There is a final irony to Bourdieu and Wacquant’s combination of a very peculiar and unduly negative characterization of US racial dynamics with an overly generous and positive reading of the Brazilian racial scene. In doing so, they are merely the latest in a long list of naive foreign observers and social scientists who have been taken in by ‘the ambiguity and evasiveness of the Latin American racial ideology, especially in its Brazilian form’, as Pierre Fontaine noted in 1980, leading to the erroneous conclusion ‘that there is no racial problem [in Brazil] (though such a position is no longer seriously held by scholars)’ (Fontaine, 1980: 111).¹¹ Indeed, there has not been a single attempt by a Brazilian, in recent decades, to build a scholarly case, based on evidence as opposed to ideal or myth, that Brazil is in fact a society without racism. Simple affirmations of Brazilian racial democracy are encountered only in the folk wisdom of Brazilians who do not conduct scientific research on the topic.

In this sense, the Brazilian myth of racial democracy is broadly similar to the myth of the USA as a uniquely open and meritocratic society with opportunity for all who put in the effort. Yet Bourdieu and Wacquant decisively attack this dearly-held US image of what it wishes to be. ‘Rigorous comparative studies’ based upon statistical research, they say, have debunked the North American notion that the USA is an exceptionally fluid society, with high rates of social mobility, in contrast to the rigid social structures of the Old World (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999: 51). Yet this tactic of criticism (the USA *is* like Europe), as well as the type of evidence used, also characterized the Brazilian race scholarship after 1978 attacked by Bourdieu and Wacquant. A wonderful contribution in this regard was George Reid Andrews’ excellent 1992 article, entitled ‘Racial Inequality in Brazil and the United States: A Statistical Comparison’, that upended the Brazilian conviction that Blacks *obviously* did better in Brazil than in the USA.

Bourdieu and Wacquant clearly hold to a double standard when they compare the USA versus Brazil. They offer an excessively harsh and negative depiction of the racial situation in the USA and are intolerant of its national mythology; by contrast, they offer an excessively tolerant and positive depiction of the racial situation in Brazil while embracing its national mythology without criticism. How did they come to feel such a stake in defending Brazil’s national honor against the North Americans? And what would lead critical French thinkers, prominent opponents of neo-liberalism and imperialism, to make excuses for racial inequality in Brazil

and to take up the cudgels against internal and external critics of Brazil's all-too-imperfect racial democracy? Why are they so unforgiving of US illusions yet so accommodating of Brazilian ones?

The answer may perhaps be found in their discussion of US efforts 'to replace wholesale the national myth of "racial democracy" . . . by the [US] myth according to which all societies are "racist"'. For the authors, this procedure makes of the 'concept of racism' not an 'analytic tool' but a 'mere instrument of accusation' within a logic, not of scientific inquiry, but of a trial. It is only in an incredulous footnote that one begins to sense what is really at stake for Bourdieu and Wacquant (1999: 44, 53):

How long will it be before we get a book entitled *Racist Brazil* patterned after the scientifically scandalous *Racist France* of a French sociologist more attentive to the expectations of the field of journalism than to the complexities of social reality?

Could they be invoking Brazil, perhaps, as part of an effort to defend the honor of France? Could they be preemptively debunking those who might use the US example, rhetoric or scholarly methodologies to threaten their own country's mythic national construction of itself as universalistic and, by definition, non- if not anti-racist?¹² Might they be making opportunistic use of Brazil in order to attack intellectuals, especially US left-wingers or Afro-North Americans (or perhaps, closer to home, Arabs or North Africans) who would be most threatening to their cherished sense of Frenchness?

In adopting a posture of shared victimhood with Brazil at the hands of US imperialism, Bourdieu and Wacquant appear to display the same 'vainglorious nationalism' as Brazilians do when they preempt critical self-examination by judging their country only, and positively, against the USA in terms of race (Gomes da Cunha, 1998: 247). If racism is by definition what North Americans do, then neither France nor Brazil can be called racist. Such a gesture is also quintessentially Brazilian; it is what sociologist Florestan Fernandes once called Brazil's most deeply-held prejudice: 'the prejudice of not being prejudiced'. As anthropologist Robin Sheriff was told by an elite informant in Rio: 'There isn't [racial] violence in Brazil, nothing. It's not like the United States, you know?' (Sheriff, 1997: 409).

Bourdieu and Wacquant know too little about the realities of race or thinking about race in Brazil or the USA for their article to be useful or helpful. At best, their polemic sheds light on the feelings of two important European intellectuals, their dream of France, and the dystopia they see in the 'United States of America' (treated simplistically as a monolith). In summary, their article is best understood as a cry of frustration from within the North Atlantic imperialist world, a defensive polemic marked by the authors' striking over-sensitivity and clearly expressed sentiment of honor besmirched.¹³ In its overblown rhetoric, rich in gendered metaphors of illicit processes of seduction and penetration, the authors reveal a lack of

confidence and acuity that produces embarrassing errors of evaluation – of Brazil, the USA and France.

Notes

1. In an unwitting capitulation to US imperial arrogance, Bourdieu and Wacquant use the term ‘American’ to refer to the USA although the residents of the countries of the entire New World are in fact ‘Americans’. This is an issue of some sensitivity in Latin America where citizens of the USA are often referred to as North Americans. For lack of a better alternative, I will follow this Latin American practice despite the slight to Canada’s national specificities.
2. By its very nature, comparison has no role to play if the things being compared are entirely the same or entirely different (Mörner et al., 1982). For a schematic rendering of similarities and differences between the US and Brazilian experience of African-descended peoples see French (2000).
3. For the critique of ‘primordialist’ assumptions, see the stimulating article by anthropologists John and Jean Comaroff (1992) that also lays out a fruitful theoretical discussion of the origin of ‘races’ as well as the emergence and subsequent transformation of ‘racial’ consciousness.
4. Hanchard stands out from other scholars and activists precisely because of his unwillingness to equate African survivals or Black cultural resistance with Black political mobilization against racism and racial inequality. His stance on Afro-Brazilian culture and religiosity has led to sharp and fruitful disagreement by other scholars (Burdick, 1998; Butler, 1998; Segato, 1998). In addition, Hanchard also wades into the internal debates within Brazilian ‘Black Consciousness’ movements over the role of ‘culturalism’ within movement strategy (Bairros, 1996; Hanchard, 1996; Gomes da Cunha, 1998: 232; see also Burdick, 1998).
5. A sense of alienation can accompany some variants of Brazilian Black activism as in a 1992 English-language article by two MNU leaders. Racism in Brazil, they write, ‘permeates every area of national life ... So successful[ly ...] that the majority of the Brazilian population has difficulty in identifying racism, when it occurs ... Because it is so deeply rooted in our everyday lives, Brazil is one of the few places in the world where it can be said that there is an acceptance of racism by those who suffer under it.’ Thus racism operates in Brazil not only through ‘the domination of the majority of the population by a minority but also by the tacit acceptance of and collaboration with its maintenance with minimal protest by that majority’ (Caetano and Cunha, 1992: 86).
6. For Brazilian Black activists, the process of ‘conscious-raising’ challenges African-descended individuals to ‘assume their Blackness’, a distinctive terminology compared to the Afro-North American case. Florestan Fernandes (1989) discusses the *Negro assumido* within the middle-class in relation to its opposite: the *Negro de alma branca* (the Black with a white soul). See also the discussion of ‘Becoming *Negro Assumido*: The Discourse of Conversion’ in Robin Sheriff (1997: 418–27).
7. Anthropologist John Burdick (1995) has questioned Hanchard’s ‘rather exclusive reliance on the spoken discourse of leaders’, with no direct observation, from below, by non-leading participants, or from outside of the movement by ‘Afro-Brazilians who, for whatever reason, have decided to give it a wide berth’. Yet Hanchard’s exclusive focus on Black activists (*negros assumidos*) does reveal the

movement's striking dilemmas with compelling clarity. The rich potential of a non-activist focus is well revealed in Burdick's fascinating 1998 monograph on women in Rio de Janeiro as well as in Twine's provocative, if less fully developed, recounting of the interviews about race she conducted in rural Rio de Janeiro (Twine, 1997). Sheriff (1997) provides a sensitive rendering of discourses about race and color by activists and non-activists, whites and non-whites, and both the poor and the middle class in Rio de Janeiro.

My only regret is that Hanchard did not more comprehensively explore his interview material and combine it with a more extensive analysis of the movement's intellectual production. On the latter point, Hanchard has been criticized by one MNU reviewer for underestimating the Brazilian Black movement's own capacity for 'theoretical and practical elaboration'. As an example, Bairros cites Hanchard's failure, in applying a Gramscian-derived theory of hegemony to the Brazilian case, to 'pay attention to its configuration within the Black movement itself' (Bairros, 1996: 178, 180) where it was, as Gomes da Cunha (1998: 229) observes, the primary currency of movement discussion in the 1970s (as it was in the left as a whole).

8. Bourdieu and Wacquant show considerable naivete in selecting Carl Degler's *Neither Black nor White* as their 'classic study' of record. While useful especially to North Americans, the book is largely derivative and consists, for the most part, of a gloss on the results of field research carried out in Brazil by scholars from Brazil, the USA and France during the 1950s. The importance of Degler's book, in fact, lies less in what it reveals about Brazil than in what it shows us about shifts in the US intellectual field between the days of Frank Tannenbaum in the late 1940s and the Civil Rights revolution of the 1960s. The new preface to the 1986 edition provides further illustration of the US ideological shifts that have occurred since that time.

9. The existence of racial prejudice and discrimination in Brazil (now glossed as Brazilian-style racism) has in fact been the consensus of scholarly opinion going back to the classic UNESCO-sponsored studies of the 1950s – whether conducted by Brazilians like Florestan Fernandes, Thales de Azevedo or Luis Costa Pinto, North Americans like Charles Wagley and Marvin Harris, or the Frenchman Roger Bastide. The results of scholarly research, as Andrews recently observed, makes clear that 'racial inequality, prejudice, and discrimination are social facts that are deeply inscribed in Brazilian life' (Andrews, 1997: 25).

10. Two decades later, Afro-North American historian Leslie Rout vigorously attacked the 'long charade played with Brazilian race relations' by white, largely US, authors in the first half of the 20th century when they presented 'the Brazilian racial situation as relatively paradisaical ... in order to vent their spleen upon a segregated United States of America', especially 'the propensity of white southerners to lynch and burn'. It was, he concludes, 'the construction of a fantasy which would have deleterious effects upon the study of Brazilian history' through its underestimation of racism Brazilian style. It was, he hoped, a 'conspicuous example of the kind of intellectual dishonesty future historians [and sociologists] should scrupulously avoid' (Rout, 1973: 485–6, 488). This use of Brazil as a weapon, on the US terrain, was also common to Afro-North Americans in their encounters with Brazil in this century (Hellwig, 1992). Although not often commented upon, even the most uncritical visitors' accounts in the collection demonstrated a perception of similarity as well as difference between the two racial realities.

11. Observers often take ‘the lack of talk about racism in Brazil’, as Robin Sheriff notes, ‘as prima facie evidence that racial prejudice and discrimination, as a set of social and/or political problems, are not significant enough to provoke discussion’. And critical comments by North Americans about racism in Brazil are disregarded by these same observers ‘as ethnocentric judgements, made because [North] Americans obsess over their own “dilemma” to such a degree that they fail to understand that no such dilemma exists for Brazilians’ (Sheriff, 1997: 126). Her detailed and sensitive analysis of the multiple discourses (and silences) about race in Rio offers a welcome rebuttal of these by now hackneyed defenses.

12. One is reminded of Roland Barthes’ semiotic analysis of the cover photo of an issue of *Paris-Match* offered to him by his barber. It depicted a young Negro, in a French uniform, probably saluting the tricolor. It is clear, he writes, what it is meant to signify to the French reader: ‘that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any color discrimination, faithfully serve her flag, and that there is no better answer to [its] detractors . . . than the zeal shown by this Negro’ (Barthes, 1972: 116).

13. Bourdieu and Wacquant describe, in several places, the humiliation involved with the process of ‘symbolic domination’ of Europe by the USA. After all, they point out, many of the US exports they denounce were originally ‘borrowed’ from Europeans who ‘now receive them as the most advanced forms of theory’. And these misreadings, they go on, are now ‘in the process of being imposed in [their distended North] American form upon the Europeans themselves’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999: 53, 43).

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