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# **From Outsiders to On-Paper Equals to Cultural Curiosities? The Trajectory of Diversity in the USA**

## **Summary**

This paper examines the genesis and trajectory of diversity in the USA. It argues that unfortunately diversity was more a product of market interests and differential processes in the recruitment of workers at different times and for different purposes than a smooth process of incorporation of immigrant groups from different cultures and continents. At the end, diversity assumed a highly hierarchical form with blacks at the bottom and whites at the top within a framework of manifest destiny and inequality. Confronting an unequal status, non-whites engaged in group-based struggles that transformed them into political communities and the process into a social struggle. The paper concludes with a call for European countries to learn from this experience and try to preempt it by moving to incorporate newcomers in such a way that they become fully contributing members of the societies they enter within a mutually transforming process

**Keywords:** Diversity, Race Relations, Racial Politics, Immigrants, Identity Formation

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When I first visited the USA to attend graduate school, I went to Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana with a group of scholars from Latin America. Immediately after the plane landed, we were directed to the registration and admissions office of the university. We filled up a form and waited to be called upon. When I finally understood that the voice in the microphone was calling me, I approached the desk anxiously. It was my first time out of my home country and I did not speak much English. As soon as the clerk—a black woman—received my form, she pointed to a line in the application speaking in a loud voice that resonated throughout the auditorium—she had not turned off the microphone. After some repetitions, I understood what she was saying, “where are you from?” I replied, “Latin America.” “Why then did you identify yourself as white?” Showing my white arm I mumbled words without making any sense. Finally, I asked, “What is then my race?” “B R O W N,” she emphasized with a bit of sarcasm and incredulity. I looked around confused noticing that my colleagues were correcting their forms. I felt embarrassed. That moment marked the beginning of my racial transformation.

Understanding diversity is the foundation for mapping and measuring it. I depart here from the assumption that diversity is socially constructed. Thus, its understanding includes the reconstruction of the process that led to this or that particular version of it. Because a human being is only identical to him/herself, I further argue that diversity is at the root of being human. Thus, there is an objective foundation to diversity. Still, the ways in which it is cut, the variables used to define and measure it, and the connotations involved are specific to each society. Understanding diversity may be a descriptive exercise representing and sanctioning the status quo or a transformative engagement in a critical deconstruction/construction leading to the type of diversity we wish.

To comprehend the construct of diversity in the USA we need to survey the process that led to the racialization of people and social relations. At its core is the ascription of different statuses to labor recruits/immigrants on the basis of their race/place of origin. Such statuses were first imposed in the convergent practices of colonization and representation of the non-European “other.” Over time, US labor practices and imaginaries established a dominant black-white bipolarity that became the basis for representing all individuals and groups, for distributing rights and opportunities, and for determining social relations. In spite of some advances, the USA is still a society in which whiteness is a source of privilege and color one of disadvantage. Changing this

order may require undoing the essence and identity of US society. Indeed, today's "concession" to diversity may be a strategy of obfuscation and diversion rather than one of recognition and change. This situation calls for unconstrained openness in the analysis of US reality if we are to construct a new paradigm and practice of "diversity."

This paper engages in a cursory overview of the trajectory of diversification in the USA and its implications for measuring and mapping it. On this basis, the paper examines the implications of the US experience for the ongoing process of understanding, measuring and mapping diversity in the European Union.

## The Historical Trajectory

In Sweden, I have to assert myself each and every day as a Swedish. Here in the USA, I am treated as a black person. (Statement of a highly educated Swedish citizen interning in the USA for six months).

I start with a brief account of how today's major groupings became part of the USA to then provide a cursory summary of each of them and their overall conditions.

Europeans came to the USA as a result of imperial expansion of that region. Although class and national differences played a role in the distribution of opportunities and power among them, European settlers represented the colonial powers of Britain and Europe. Race did not limit their advancement. Although initially segmented into colonists and colonial people, after independence they entitled themselves to all the advantages of full citizenship. They were never enslaved, indentured or conquered. Over time initial nationalistic skirmishes gave way to their Americanization into the white race. In contrast, today's US four major non-European "racial" groups initially became part of the country through forceful colonization or their importation from outside Europe to perform specific duties under European submission. In fact, they were constructed into an

amalgam of lesser races as part of the colonizing and nation-building enterprise—and the corresponding European colonization of their places of origin.

American Indians preceded European occupation. Europeans entitled themselves to their lands and estates pushing survivors of the associated massacres and diseases into reservations (Mann and Zatz 2002). Next, white occupation and eventual appropriation and annexation of half of the territory of Mexico turned its native residents into a second-class, conquered population under the aegis and arbitrariness of European colonizers who established an occupational and social divide resembling the system of castes.<sup>1</sup> De facto or de jure, Mexican laborers were chronically limited in their rights and possibilities. Similarly, the USA took Puerto Rico away from Spain in the so-called Spanish-American war of 1898 and subjected the island to colonization. Although progressively granted concessions, Puerto Ricans still bear a colonial condition; calls for independence have been quelled; and the status of the island is still largely in limbo.

Meanwhile, Blacks were brought in as slaves, remained in that condition for centuries, were granted some rights at different conjunctures, and gained, largely on paper, the full citizenship and rights of whites only in the 1950s and 1960s. Lastly, Chinese were recruited for indentured labor in the railroads. For a long time, they maintained the status and image of their ancestors. Limited initially to industries such as laundry or food preparation, they developed economic niches known as Chinatowns and eventually moved into other occupations and industries closing the gap with whites better than the other non-white groups. Much of this, as explained below, has to do with

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<sup>1</sup> This spirit was maintained through the years as a factor in determining the immigration of Mexicans. The bracero program temporarily importing Mexican labor for work in the USA (1942-1964) explicitly stated that these recruits should be limited to occupations for which there were no US workers available. Such criteria became part of all other guest worker programs negotiated with Latin America and even in immigrant categories based on occupations in shortage as determined by the US Department of Labor.

development in Asia and the selective immigration of highly educated people from India, Japan, and the developing countries of the Pacific Rim.

As a result of their respective forms of incorporation into the US labor market and society, American Indians, Latinos, blacks and Asians became subordinate and marginal labor, each with limited or no political rights. The price of their immigration was chronic marginalization and overexploitation, suppression of their original identities, and imposition of white ways and rules. Such conditions prevented them from “adopting the cultural traits dominant in the United States” (Rose and Rose 1948) and from availing themselves of the opportunities for advancement monopolized by whites in power. Over the years, people from their same homelands joined in inheriting the ascriptions of their ancestors. Although, their struggles opened up choices or mitigated their conditions, new entrants continue filling these “boxes.” Once boxed into a racial category and labor market, group members got limited occupationally; were ascribed ceilings and wage ranges; inherited stereotypes; accumulated adverse conditions, structural limitations, and negative identities; and were trapped in hierarchical and more or less inflexible social relations. Such race-based ascriptions reproduced the standing and conditions of each group, initially through legally sanctioned differential statuses and, over time, through corresponding structural arrangements and inherited practices.

The USA census traditionally classified all people as either black or white while keeping records of their nationality.<sup>2</sup> In 1977, the Bureau of the Census, through Directive 15 of the Office of Management and Budget, divided the population into five races (sanctioning the constructs described here), namely American Indian or Alaskan

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<sup>2</sup> In the USA, one single drop of black blood makes a person black. Given the predominately sociopolitical nature of race, the perception was that if people were not white, they were black—or proxies of them. Eventually the struggles of other (racialized) political communities challenged this bipolarity making room for other racial formations.

Native; Asian; Black or African American; Native Hawaiian of Other Pacific Islander; and White. This directive also created the category Hispanic, specifying that this was not a race but an ethnicity. The US imaginary and practice, however, racialized them along the same lines, coloring them “brown.” Many countered with the term Latino to oppose the determination of their identity by their former colonial condition—(“Hispania” was the Latin name of the European Peninsula that included Spain and Portugal).

Although this classification sought to measure the progress of non-whites vis-à-vis whites—through indicators such as education, employment and income, its implication was the sanctioning of race as the defining characteristic and identity in the USA. Controlled by whites, the process of racialization ascribed identity and condition on the basis of origin—amalgamating into a single racial category people with different cultures, ethnicities and nationalities. This construct reflected the historical European process of construction of themselves and “the other” that was part and parcel of the colonization enterprise. It also functioned as a self-fulfilling prophecy to the extent that the race ascription largely determined the possibilities and conditions of each group. The boxes below provide a cursory description of the major five “racial” groups in the USA and their comparative condition—as determined through this process.

INDIAN OR NATIVE AMERICANS were the original inhabitants of the territories occupied today by the USA. They were and are still divided into many different tribes or nations scattered throughout North America. Although the first contacts with the British were highly positive when natives gave them a helping hand, they were followed soon by a bloody process of conquest leading to the establishment of a British colony and a westward expansion that would only end in the Pacific Ocean. It included the extermination of American Indians by contagion of European diseases or violent death and their confinement in reservations. Although the British, the French and the Spaniards managed to turn some natives into cheap labor or slaves, others escaped this fate and ended in reservations. Over time, many American Indians remained in reservations while many others urbanized under meager conditions becoming largely invisible, highly dependent pools of downgraded labor or the unemployed and downtrodden.” Eventually, since the civil rights movement, the USA classified them as “minorities.” In spite of these conditions, a number of them has achieved an education or a decent economic status and has managed to advance or become leaders of the American Indian cause.

BLACKS were brought in as slaves to work in plantations or to provide indentured servant and then slave labor throughout the country. After centuries of resistance and struggle, they gained freedom from slavery late in the 18<sup>th</sup> century but had limited rights and opportunities remaining an overexploited labor market segment, segregated by pay, occupation, and residence, and with barely any political participation/representation. Although the civil rights movement won them equality in the eyes of the law, in practice the structural matrix of class, nationality oppression and racism was never removed and, hence, they remained politically and economically in the bipolar opposite position of most whites. The insufficiencies/deficiencies accumulated over centuries of subjugation became a pervasive and permanent condition of disadvantage and marginalization (i.e., economic dominance, institutional segregation, self-fulfilling stereotypes, and the associated economic, cultural, political and social ills characterizing the group). Today, they bear a disproportionate share of the problems of US society. They have been assigned various derisive names at different times of their development. A sector of the community countered by advancing the term African American that is part and parcel of their struggle for recognition as a group with a home and a nation.). Reflecting the ideology or, more broadly, the residues of cultural dominance, the Webster dictionary defines black through terms such as "darkness," "absence of light," "soiled," "dirty", "wicked," "evil," "cheerless and depressing," "marked by anger or sullenness," "calamitous," and "deserving of, indicating or incurring censure or dishonor." As a group, blacks are the third largest population in the USA after whites and Latinos.

HISPANIC refers to immigrants from South of the US border. This group includes a highly diverse population by nationality, ethnicity, culture, race and practically any other social category. Mexicans constitute the largest subgroup, followed by Puerto Ricans and Cubans. They were first incorporated as conquered people after the US invasion and forceful annexation of Mexican territory. Despite the Guadalupe treaty allowing them to cross the border freely and granting residents full rights of citizenship, *de facto*, they became servant labor. Although many Mexicans lived in the US Southwest and in fact possessed and cultivated the lands, they became conquered and dispossessed in their own land. Over time, Mexico became the main provider of a highly flexible and exploitable workforce to the USA with limited rights, *de facto* second class citizens. An undocumented status has turned many of them into an unprotected labor pool undergoing the most extreme levels of exploitation. Although exhibiting the highest levels of labor participation, they share many of the conditions of blacks or are at a disadvantage due to their immigrant status and lower political representation. Puerto Ricans became part of the USA through conquest and colonization as a result of the so-called Spanish-American war. Although the USA made them citizens in 1919, they are also part of the low-end labor pool suffering from the deprivations listed for blacks. Despite the *de facto* annexation to the USA, Puerto Rico remains underdeveloped and constitutes a reservoir of cheap labor both in the island and in continental USA (Puerto Ricans are almost equally divided between the island and the continent). This division entails deep differences in language, identity, standing, and status. Puerto Rico is the poorest of all of the US territories. The Monroe doctrine claiming the nations of the Americas as "area of influence" of the USA has turned Latin America into an "American backyard" giving the USA the right to intervene whenever it feels its interests are threatened. *De facto*, this doctrine made Latin America a US colony and its citizens colonial people. US presence and intervention in the region continues producing huge population dislocations; many dislocatees come to the USA as refugees/casualties of these relations. Authors such as Acuña (1984) and Barrera (1979) characterize the condition of Latin America vis-à-vis the USA and the condition of Latinos in the USA as a continuum of "race"-based domination and disadvantage. Latinos were also classified as minorities after the Civil Rights movement.

The category ASIAN refers to people from the Asian continent living in the USA. Workers from china and Japan were recruited by the USA in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as indentured labor for construction of the railroads. Although—as is the case for people from the third world recruited for work in the USA—the idea was that they would return home after their job assignments, many of them moved from the railroads to agriculture with so much success that states enacted laws to prevent them from competing with whites. Finally, Chinese immigration was banned in 1882 and Japanese in 1909. Immigration of other Asian nationals took place at different times in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Some of them came as refugees of communist takeovers. Others came as specialized, cheaper labor. Chain migration followed. Asians were also classified as racial minorities after the civil rights movement. Given the high levels of development in some Asian countries today, the view of Asians has improved and their immigration increasingly includes highly skilled personnel.



Although many Asians--especially refugees and descendants of earlier immigrants from china—have suffered through conditions that are similar to those of other minorities, highly skilled Asian immigrants and their descendents have been very successful in the USA earning them the designation of “model minority” for others to follow.

WHITE is the term used for European immigrants to the USA. They constitute the majority in US society. Although each European nationality was challenged by other immigrant European nationals, eventually they all “melted” into what we know today as whites or the white race. As members of the colonizing group or as Europeans, they placed themselves at the top, have controlled economic and politics in the USA, and have entitled themselves to all kinds of advantages and privileges denied to other groups. The white race is associated with all that is good. European domination of the world and the way in which Europeans see themselves are reflected in the ways the term is defined in the Webster dictionary, namely as “the antagonist of black,” “unsullied,” “pure,” “incandescent,” or “impassioned.” Notice that whites from Latin America, although preferred over other races in that region for the immigration purposes, are not considered whites in this analysis. Instead, they are classified as Latinos.<sup>3</sup>

In short, diversity in the USA resulted from the construction of people into racial groups on the basis of their relationship to European colonization and, specifically to the distinct statuses ascribed along these lines to labor recruits from different regions of the world. The rationale is the self-assigned superiority of Europeans and the associated “manifest destiny by divine providence” to spread civilization to the rest of the world and its peoples. By self-definition, the USA is a nation of white Europeans. No matter how much they prove themselves, members of other races are excluded from the entitlements of white privilege. They are “the other” for ever—no matter what generation they belong to or how much they have assimilated into so-called white culture and values.

## **Evolving Patterns in US racial relations and identity construction**

The problem of this university is that it has too many minorities. It looks very much like an urban ghetto. (Attributed to Provost of a large US urban University)

This section examines more detailed dynamics associated with the construction of difference/diversity in the USA. Expanding on previous considerations, it shows how race has become the main identifier and mechanism of distribution. In particular it shows the deep inequalities associated with diversity in this society.

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<sup>3</sup> Again, although the US Census bureau explicitly recognizes the diversity of races among Latinos, for all practical matters, Latino has become a racialized term standing for race as much as the other groups mentioned. Hence, we chose to define as whites only those with a direct European ascendancy.

### The Matrix of Assimilation

Assimilation is at the heart of the construction of US identity. Immigrants from Europe eventually adopted the US identity leaving behind their former cultural and national identities and ethnicities: new generations assumed a dominant single *American* identity while nationality became a secondary, if at all recognized identifier. The metaphor used for this transformation was that of a “melting pot.” It implied that an American identity was the synthesis of the different (European) cultures. (De facto, the primary matrix was British.) Whereas Western and Nordic Europeans considered themselves higher stock deeming Southern and Eastern Europeans lesser stock, over time, “construction” of “the other” brought them together around a single identity based on their collective claim of racial superiority over the rest. Articulated to reflect their experience, this construct became the founding imaginary of the US identity and myth.

At the roots of this matrix is a bipolar process of differentiation between *us* and *them* that reflects European domination of the world. According to Rose and Rose (1948) “the exploitation of inferior peoples was interpreted as a right or a duty of superior peoples.” The process worked through self-construction of (white) Americans as holding the desirable characteristics along with construction of people from the Third World as representing the opposite, undesirable traits in various degrees. Expressions of this polarity include pairs including civilized-uncivilized, rational-irrational, lascivious-virtuous, primitive-modern, moral-immoral are the basis for European—for our case white—rule and redemptory action vis-à-vis “others.” Although this became also the rationale to demand the assimilation of non-whites into the *American melting pot*, the matrix somehow froze the hierarchy through designation of *the other* as inassimilable.

### The Black-White Polarity

The US population was condensed/reduced to a white-black bipolarity reflecting the two extreme traditional relations/statuses (slave or downgraded labor versus master or free men and women). From practically any perspective, they were discursively and materially constructed as the opposite of each other. For Rose and Rose (1948: 24), white identity is based on the “downing of the other” and racism is an integral part—I would say the crux—in the construction of nationhood in the USA. Similarly, Winant (1994: 43) describes the “construction of whiteness as anti-blackness.” In other words, white is the suppression of the other along with a never-ending process of rule and/or advantage.

Although the end of slavery and the Civil Rights movement supposedly changed slave-master dialectics into dialectics of racial domination first and racial hegemony next (Winant 1994) assigning blacks equal status in the eyes of the law, the bipolarity stands for the extremes mentioned or for mitigated versions of them. In the daily discourse, the condition of blacks is described as “the black problem” or the “white man’s burden” detracting from the ultimate source of the black condition—slavery and racism.

### Racialization/Construction of non-Black-non-White Groups and the Racial Hierarchy

The white-black dichotomy suppressed, overshadowed or ignored non-whites-non-blacks in the USA. Their smaller numbers and lesser visibility contributed to this. According to Winant (1994), attention to non-black-non-white groups is recent and is related to their racialization since the 1960s.<sup>4</sup> Authors attribute this racialization to the

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<sup>4</sup> This may be true to the extent that such groups achieved national recognition as separate *racial* formations around this time. It speaks to their emergence in the national scene as fully constituted political communities. But their objective conditions and their identities were clearly distinct from the beginning. They did not coincide with the US Bureau of the Census simplified classification. For instance, national prevailed over continental identity in the cases of Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cuban and other Latinos. American Indians did not view themselves as part of a single nation... As Professor Samuel J. Holmes echoed in 1926, “Mexicans are a race almost as distinct as the Niger, especially the Indians who form a very large component of this race. We are inviting another race problem for solution. (Romo 1996: 90).

growth and sprawl of non-whites-non-blacks, the black power movement radically breaking blacks off from the civil rights compact, the initiative of non-blacks-non-whites to organize into separate political communities, the emergence of a minority scholarship, and the search for inclusion in affirmative action programs and slots. We can add white self-affirmation through demonization of the other.<sup>5</sup>

Encouraged by the Civil Rights movement and directly opposing white domination, groups eventually fought to reinstate their nationalities, cultures, and other forms of self-affirmation. They reacted against the amorphous and convenient non-white construct by differentiating themselves as political communities of resistance and opposition to white rule. Turning negative racial ascriptions on their heads, the various non-white aggregates adopted the white imposed label to fight back. The crude homogenization of highly diverse peoples into single place-based “continental” races provided the numbers.<sup>6</sup> Once the initial, most flagrant battles had been won, national, cultural and ethnic differences started resurfacing revealing newer and newer forms of diversity—challenging along the way the entire white discourse. Today, groups strategize conveniently between the larger racial formations and self-determined new identities—especially those based on nationality—depending on the issue at hand. Still, the white project continues insisting on the black-white divide to assure its dominant position.

### The Racial Hierarchy

The late process of racialization established a gamut of races. Although self-organized around common ascription, non-white races were still the product of white

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<sup>5</sup> Notice again that white racialization includes description of self through the positive cultural values in the European dictionary and ascription of the negative opposites to the other. Whites extended this bipolarity to other racial groupings within a new, manipulative paradigm that opened up the door for differences among non-whites, as described in the ensuing discussion of the racial hierarchy.

<sup>6</sup> The case of blacks has been unique in that their identity was abstracted from their continent, ethnicity or country of origin turning them into a homeless race primarily characterized as the antithesis of white.

hegemony. Whereas whites secured their dominant position vis-à-vis the rest, non-whites found themselves in the awkward position of having to compete against each other for white favor. The result was a racial hierarchy between the extremes of white (top) and black (bottom). Fitzpatrick (1978) and Massey (2000) argue that the lighter the color of a person, the higher the standing and thus the degree of discrimination s/he is subjected to. To the extent that racial groups embrace this race for position, they legitimize the competition without addressing the issue of race-based ascription. Conveniently, the (white-controlled) media has been particularly active in stirring racial feelings (e.g. Chang and Diaz-Veizades 1999; LeDuff 2000; Miles 1992). Here, whites are the race to imitate: the more groups take distance from their own and look and act white the better and vice versa (the closer to blacks the worst). In practice, such a game has pit races against each other in a struggle for white recognition. It has turned whites into the referees deciding on the worth of the rest.<sup>7</sup> Within racial groups, the hierarchy is determined by ranges of color and proximity to whites (e.g. through interracial marriages). This competition is self-defeating as it detracts from the struggle against race-based advantage, encourages mutual racial hostility, legitimizes the status quo, pushes intra-community relations into a competition for whiteness/white favor, and reassures white control of racial relations while perpetuating their race-based advantage.

### The Majority-Minority Divide

An outcome of the Civil Rights movement was the establishment of programs to close the gap between whites and non-whites. To qualify, people had to be members of a designated racial minority. To profit from this, non-racial groups fighting for their own causes (e.g. females and the handicapped) gained the minority designation and, suddenly,

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<sup>7</sup> For a discussion and illustration of this issue, see Dzidzienyo and Oboler, Eds. (2005).

a majority of the US population qualified as a minority (non-whites + females + people with disabilities and so forth). Although affirmative action programs played a major role in the growth of middle class racial minorities (often tied to government jobs), their main beneficiaries were well-connected white women. Lastly, establishment of these programs of redress implied public recognition of racism along with acceptance that only through such interventions could mobility take place among racial minorities. In fact, when affirmative action was challenged in the courts on claims of reverse discrimination, Justice Harry Blackman wrote, “In order to get beyond racism, we must first take account of race. There is no other way. And in order to treat some persons equally, we must treat them differently. We cannot—dare not—let the equal protection clause perpetuate racial supremacy.” (Cited in Frederickson 2002: 143). Even Thomas Jefferson, a slave owner recognized that “There is nothing more unequal than equal treatment of unequal people.”

As much as affirmative action and similar efforts tried to address the problem of racism, in practice, they carried the divide to a new level. Controlled by whites, these programs became mechanisms of patronage and promotion of those minorities they wanted to assist. The Democratic Party used them to capture the black vote (Barbaro 1977). By focusing on blacks, not only did they help break up the Civil Rights compact but promoted inter-racial rivalry. For Barbaro (1977), this initiative caused groups to “move inwards” rather than work together in a common struggle against racism. Along the way, it reinforced white supremacy and control.

Although the term minority refers to the proportion of a group in the general population, it also speaks to the condition of *minor* (under tutelage, underdeveloped, lacking in personhood, or unable to respond for him/herself). As a result, minority often

stands for a dependent condition of non-whites on whites. Since the 1970s, in fact, the term has assumed a derogatory tone suggesting that minority condition, not merit, explain the middle class position of many blacks and Latinos in the USA.<sup>8</sup>

### The Denial of Racism

The access to power of the Christian Right and its fundamentalist discourse recently has been accompanied by the re-emergence of white supremacist groups, denial of racism, and the attribution of the disadvantaged condition of non-whites to cultural traits, values and behaviors. Analyses emphasizing the declining significance of race and the ascending significance of class have contributed to efforts to bury the issue of racism. Along with them came the replacement of languages of under representation, racial discrimination, segregation and alike for others of individual responsibility, social mixing and, lastly, diversity. As a result, not only has the mainstream denied any responsibility for the condition of racial minorities but it has voted against programs of redress. In fact, the welfare program was largely defeated on grounds that it supported black dependency.

### **Standing, Identity and Race in the USA**

To sum up, race has been and is still the major force in the distribution of class, opportunities, access and power in the USA. A person's standing depends largely on his/her position vis-à-vis whites. In the same way as European nationals eventually merged under a single white race, there was a push to categorize all non-Europeans as blacks. However, a number of factors—explained earlier—differentiated Third World peoples into separate races pushing them into a competitive race for white favor.

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<sup>8</sup> When I first became tenure track faculty in the USA, one of my colleagues told me in a meeting, “you have to realize that you do not pair up to the rest of us; if you are here is because you are a minority and that was who we were recruiting; in an open field, I am sure, you would not have been selected.”

## Diversity: a new term, a new reality or an old form in new Clothes?

At a visioning meeting of our university, a Latino member of the visioning team asked about the level of diversity in that particular unit. The unit head volunteered this answer: our diversity is so unique that we have people from all kinds of nationalities; in fact, we have faculty from all the continents with the only exception of the Antarctic. Only when the Latino member asked more specifically for racial diversity did the unit head include race in the diversity mix.

Today, the term diversity has become a fashionable replacement for traditional dualisms such as majority-minority or white-black as well as for inclusion of all the groupings forming since the 1950s to demand equal rights and opportunity.

Unfortunately, it may have as many definitions as users. In the USA, progressives have used it to advocate equality in difference and conservatives to dissimulate the issue of inequality, focusing the conversation instead on the token admission of difference.

Highly opposed for centuries by the white majority in power and resisted to the end through tactics such as the call for “equal but separate,” diversity can be just another oxymoron. In fact, it has come to replace the old emphasis on inequality with one of difference. Meanwhile, racial and other inequalities are still as dominant as pervasive in the distribution of opportunities, power and resources.

Unfortunately, in the USA, neoliberal strategies have appropriated it to redirect the conversation away from distribution and social justice. In the same way they renamed freedom fighters terrorists, war opponents antipatriots, or affirmative action reverse racism, they are trying to replace *racism* and *inequality* with diversity. In this case, they can turn the conversation of racism into one of difference changing the agenda of racial redress for one of racial blame—on grounds that racial/cultural traits and behaviors cause the inferior condition of non-whites and, thus, racial minorities should relinquish their race-based struggles and engage instead in bootstrapping. Social proposals such as income mixing (often a code for race-mixing) are based on the assumption that the presence of middle-income families (often a code for white) will have a positive impact on low-income (non-white) families. This can be easily read to mean that if non-whites are exposed to the good habits, work ethics and values of whites, they will succeed. Meanwhile, they are being told that the issue is not race but values and behaviors. This can be a coded rebirth of Manifest Destiny and White Supremacy.



Although sympathetic to the concept of diversity within the proper context, racial minorities in the USA prefer terms that disclose their condition of oppression over those that obscure the nature and source of that diversity. Also, with diversity came a package of claims of individual responsibility (as opposed to equity) accommodating the social agenda to the exclusive interests of a self-serving white controlled marketplace. This is clearly reflected in dominant society's reaction to increased racial diversity. In fact, when the last censuses suggested that whites would be in the minority by the year 2050, the conversation turned to dangers of "the brownization of America" proposing tough immigration laws, English only, criminalization and deportation of undocumented workers, closing off of the borders and denial of citizenship to the sons and daughters of (Third World) immigrants among many others. Vigilante initiatives such as watching of the border on the part of armed volunteers or minutemen, reporting of undocumented immigrants to the authorities, and harassing of Mexican workers augment by the day.

In this context, the shift from race inequality to diversity has the immediate impact of effectively obscuring the role and nature of race in US society so as to subtly maintain the status quo of racial domination. Diversity in fact has come to list less charged categories such as culture, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual preference, handicap, origin, language, and so forth. In this way, society can comply with diversity through practically any mix. Along the way, society and its institutions no longer have to address the matrix that has been the basis for the construction of inequality in the USA.

### **Defining, Measuring and Mapping Diversity**

If diversity is socially constructed, its measurement and mapping are mere representations of a particular social product. They are not neutral but have the mark of the inspiring definitions, expectations and assumptions. Thus, in measuring diversity we can uncritically depart from the given-constructed or develop our own concepts or our path to the desired form of diversity. More often than not, measuring diversity is about measuring inequality or simply verifying distributions. Alternatively, we could focus on the sources of inequality and difference, their processes of production and reproduction, the beneficiaries and "victims" of that particular order, the structural mechanisms turning them into permanent conditions, the multiple and specific forms of construction or suppression of the other, the relationships of power, and so forth. Short of a social effort

to construct the type of diversity a society wishes, measuring and mapping of diversity can be a mere exercise in futility. Next, I point to factors from the US experience that are worth considering in the definition and nature of diversity as well as in understanding the source of inequality and, hence, the construction of a dignified diversity.

First of all, it is important to qualify the term diversity properly. As mentioned for the USA, the unqualified use of the term may actually turn it meaningless. What is the exact composition of diversity? Are we talking about racial, nationality, ethnic, cultural or gender diversity, all of the above, or else? Are any of these terms used as a proxy for race or other socially charged categories we wish to cover up? Do all the groups in the mix have an equal standing? Does any combination fulfill the criteria for diversity? What do we mean by diversity? To the extent that the term diversity includes highly dissimilar components it can become a distraction rather than a meaningful analytical term—much less so if use it as the basis for policy and program development.

Secondly, we need to determine the purpose for measuring diversity. Do we want to measure the status quo or to measure progress toward a desirable form of diversity? Do we want to identify and eliminate the factors producing inequality or to graph the trajectory of inequality over time? Each of these options represents a different exercise. Disadvantaged groups can use data to demand redress. Groups in power may want to show progress from point A to point B. At the end of the day, measurements are highly political. Perhaps the most meaningful exercise consists of producing data to measure the ways in which inequality is reproduced, opportunity distributed, or access limited, along with measurements of success and failure in addressing it. More often than not, data are used officially today to describe the “deficits” of those at the bottom and justify their condition through a circular argument of justification.

Thirdly, is the issue of agency. As mentioned for the case of the USA, originally only whites in power had agency in the construction of races. Race was the expression of the European “downing of the other” (Rose and Rose 1948: 24), anti-blackness (Winant 1994: 43), subjugation, and demonization. Eventually, racialized groups appropriated the corresponding condition to organize into political communities and fight back. In this way, race became as much a basis for struggle as for domination. I argued elsewhere (Betancur 2005) that in the USA, whites in power not only continue controlling the racial

discourse but also relations between racialized groups. Agency, hence, is at the heart of the control and construction of diversity. The quest for dignified diversity is thus as much a quest for agency. What kind of racial diversity can we have when the components of that diversity lack the necessary agency or standing to construct their own identity and difference and to negotiate the terms of diversity? When we are talking about cultural diversity, are we referring to cultures as understood by whiteness or as lived and perceived by the members of each culture? How much can cultures or identities survive in a foreign land denying them agency? What type of agency is healthy for a culturally diverse society? How sustainable is such a society? Such analyses actually may reveal that we are truly talking about diversity as a temporary condition towards assimilation, that we want the culture without the agency (as in a museum), cultural subjugation, or else. Can there be true cultural diversity without the proper cultural agency?

Fourth, to the extent that racialized groups did not have much of a choice in determining their identity, less to construct themselves into races, eventually, they had to work around their imposed racial designation to fit in, gain access to the options established for them or fight back. Not only were they constructed into the opposite of Europeans/whites but were assigned the task of imitating the latter—without the right to ever be like them. As a result, they eventually turned the imposed racial identity into the basis for their struggle for equal opportunity and the right to be selves. In this way, diversity assumed a different dimension, that of political communities in contention. The understanding of diversity requires examining this dialectics and the corresponding implications for diversity—as well as its measuring and mapping.

Lastly, to the extent that diversity is socially constructed, we can choose between the status quo and a different form of diversity. The US experience speaks to a process in which a self-designated group in power constructs the other to serve its interests of privilege and domination. A different, dignified diversity implies the deconstruction of what exists and the construction of a new form. It requires a deep understanding of the past and the mechanisms of maintenance of that order. It calls for elimination of such structures and the discourses supporting them (e.g. ethnocentrism, manifest destiny, and

victim blaming). It is almost akin to self-determination as “the other” should play the central role in his/her self-definition and claim of difference. It entails a deep transformation of the ways in which we view ourselves and the others or in which we decide that there are others, who they are and in which ways they are “others.” It is certainly not a mere exercise on paper but a deeply transformative political action.

Implications of the U.S. experience for the ongoing process of understanding, measuring and mapping diversity in Europe

The discussion of diversity in Europe has been the result of new immigration waves—and the establishment of the European Union itself. Although non-Europeans have been part of Europe for some time, they were highly invisible before. The recent riots in France and the traditional uneasiness of immigrant groups in various European countries suggest a path with many of the characteristics of the USA. They in fact may be the first spontaneous step toward organization of non-European groups into political communities of struggle. Testimonies featured by CNN in the week of January 23, 2006 in Europe, evoked the isolation and segregation, lack of opportunities, police harassment, race profiling, and cultural suppression of racial minorities in the USA.

I would venture to say, no offense intended, that such evidence points to similar features of race/place of origin-based inequality as in the USA. Although diversity is viewed mostly in cultural terms in Europe, indicators suggest differences in socio-economic condition associated with immigrant status but, especially, with the jobs and opportunities available to immigrants from former European colonies. This is not to reduce the European to the American experience. Obviously, each has its own framework and challenges related to new immigration and the associated diversity.

As the European population ages, as low or negative reproductive rates limit the available work force, as globalization produces massive uprooting and displacement in the Third World, and as Eastern Europeans seek opportunities in the rest of Europe, migration will continue. The opportunity is here for Europe to revisit its own trajectory in the construction of social diversity, to study the experiences of societies like the USA and South Africa, and to determine whether or not this is the type of future it envisions for itself.<sup>9</sup> How Europe reacts now contains the clue to the future of diversity and social relations in the continent. It may decide to fully incorporate immigrants as contributing members or to turn them into permanently marginalized ethnic others. The former would represent a unique contribution to an increasingly globalized world. The latter would likely repeat the US experience of social conflict and alienation. Along these lines, Europe can choose to enforce a politics of management of inequality or to engage in deconstruction and reconstruction of diversity. Actually the most manageable route may be the effective incorporation of the new groups within an environment of opportunity and dignity. In this way, many conflicts will be avoided and social integration will contribute greatly to the construction of the future Europe wishes. Should European society pursue this, it needs a high level of reinvention of itself to accept as its own people from other cultures and beliefs. It has to deconstruct its past construction of them as inferior others or else and engage in unique efforts to build a positive diversity.

Immigrants are a crucial part of the future of a society; they also represent the major sources of new diversity. The strength of immigrants, I believe, will be the strength of Europe. The weakness of immigrants will be the weakness of Europe.

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<sup>9</sup> People in the USA start realizing the implications of its own version of diversity not only in terms of the associated conflicts but also in terms of the costs of their permanent marginalization.

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