

Race, Culture, Domination : uses and misuses of the social sciences

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This meeting is being held at a time which forces us to re-evaluate the basis of some of the assumptions which have entered sociology over the past four decades or so: briefly from the Students Revolts of the 1960's and 70's as well as from the emergence of what has been called mass culture.

The words, now popular beyond the Social Sciences, speak for themselves: Post-Capitalist, Post-Modern, Post-Christian.

These emerge out of the context of what was seen as the end of ideology even where this was not mentioned. Ideology was now disassociated from the struggles which had marked it in those by-gone years of Modernism i.e. the beginning of the twentieth century to the end of the nineteen-fifties. Capitalism and the conflict and struggles was also finished. The only unfinished business was in the areas of women, ethnic groups and working class (or feminist or ethnic) culture. Within this Raymond Williams' *The Long Revolution* became important, not as a book or an epoch with questions whose answers required comparative research in order to discern universal and variable, immediacy and transformation. Rather it was disassociated from another book of its time: Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of literacy* and more crucially the anti-Depression, Post-Second World War II reforms marked by the economist John Maynard Keynes and in Britain coupled with the Labour Party Prime Minister, Clement Atlee and in the United States of America coupled with Roosevelt and his New Deal.

It is these reforms which partly constrained the Liberal Capitalism which had marked the Western Europe and the USA. This had emerged in the mid-nineteenth century and had sucked in often by force much of the world's economy. It had also established "freedom." There were the important "Emancipations" of slaves, of Catholics from Britain's Penal Laws, and of Jews in Britain from the political discrimination. Eric Williams in his *Capitalism and Slavery* illustrates the articulation between liberal free enterprise at this juncture in Capitalism, and the necessity for free markets and for free labour. The passage from Trading Company to Colonialism in the Indian Sub-Continent and eventually in Africa, and the Free-trade Famine in Ireland were as much part of this as was the final destruction of Amerindian population in North and in South America. The constraints on this "freedom" which had by the 1920's issued in calamity in the form of the Great Depression, also constructed the Welfare State in much of Western Europe and in Canada and the United States. It also gave an impetus to

the anti-colonial struggle and eventual Independence beginning with Ireland's 1916 Easter Rising to the end of White political domination in Southern Africa. The reification of culture, achieved through the selectivity of Raymond Williams' Long Revolution and through the substitution of "Cultural Studies" for Philosophy, Sociology or Social Anthropology, distracted us from looking at the transformation within Capitalism which was neither Post-Capitalism, Post-Modernism nor yet Post-Christianity. It was rather the dominance of Finance Capitalism with its deregulation of Finance Institutions, its Hedge Funds and its use of the electronic revolution. Coupled with this was the rise of mass culture, not as resistance as was fondly supposed but mass culture as an important component of the Entertainment Industry and an important part of the transmission of the non-literacy of the consumer society. The search for a left ideology based on the "Young Marx," on Gramsci, on Heidegger through the Existentialism of Jean Paul Sartre, through Louis Althusser's the "last instance" and his use of epistemological rupture through Lévy Strauss' structuralism, was in reality a reaction to the vulgar materialism which was part of the "exceptionalism" granted to the plunder capitalism of Russia with its elaboration of client economies, states and client Communist Parties. It was also an attempt to underpin the struggles of so called "race," ethnicity," "gender or caste" so far ignored by the dominant Marxism, through the elaboration of the alternative optic of cultural resistance, diversity and Multi-culturalism.

Today we would do well to revisit Post-Modernism, Post-Capitalism and Post-Christian as the interlude of non-ending progress ends and we are faced with the unfinished business of an old "globalization" with a strong resemblance to the new.

In this article I will examine the important part that the suppositions around culture have played in a small country, the twin island state of Trinidad and Tobago of one and a half million inhabitants of which less than 1% is white and the two major groups are Indians and Africans.

Jack Harewood, statistician Trinidad and Tobago's Central Statistical Office, looking at the 1960 Census found that 25% of the European population had the equivalent of University education. Fifty three percent had school certificate or higher, Chinese and Syrians had 2% with University Education and 12% with School Certificate and above.

"Mixed" had 1% with University Education and 10% with school certificate and above. African and Indians had 4% with School Certificate and an insignificant proportion with University education.

The periodical *Tapia* in its 29 August, 1971 edition under the heading *Who Owns Trinidad and Tobago* published the results of a study done in 1970 by Dr Anton Camejo. This study found that 53% of the business elite was white, 24% were what Camejo called "off-white," 10% were mixed, 9% were Indian and 4% were African. Thirty percent of the business elite got there through inheritance. Of these 14% were mixed, 38% were "off white," 41% were white and 7% were Indian. None were African.

Of the 70% who were self-made or who achieved the position through promotion 58% were white, 16% were "off-white," 13% were mixed, 9% were Indian and 3% were African.

In Agriculture 57% of the cultivable land was company owned. Half of the cultivable land was in export crops: nearly seven times what was devoted to producing food for national consumption. Only 15% of land devoted to export crops were held by those farming under ten acres.

This was roughly the position in Trinidad and Tobago at the time of the Students Revolt of 1970. To this should be added employment. Banks employed whites and "off whites" but not Blacks nor Indians. Where Blacks and Indians were employed they were less likely to be in managerial positions than were whites. It is these conditions which caused the 1970 Students Revolt. This was accompanied by the threat of united Trade Union action and by an important Army insurrection. The Government was saved mainly by the action of the Coast Guard. While the Students' movement called for the end of discrimination in Banks, the thrust of the movement was the cultural revolt. Statues at the Catholic Cathedral were painted black getting student leaders arrested for blasphemy under an old slave law. Blacks and many "mixed" changed suits or shirts for dashikis. Women stopped straightening their hair turned to "Natural", and wore African dresses. Those who did not were baptized the "bouge" and enemies No 1. Class was defined neither with reference to production nor with reference to status. It became "style of life." Africanness became the principal "good" and the establishment of a Black power Government dedicated to a spiritual return to Africa, became the goal. This was not surprising. Stokely Carmichael of that section of the Black American movement opposed to Martin Luther King and to Black integration into American Society, was born in Trinidad. It was he who had coined the term "Black Power." He would become a Black Panther and disagree with much of the Panther movement which he saw as too near to integration. It was Eric Williams' refusal to permit Stokely Carmichael to visit Trinidad and Tobago when invited by the University of the West Indies which sparked the disaffection of the students movement with Eric Williams. He became the main incarnation of the "Bouge."

The two most visible achievements of 1970 were an annual Public Holiday to mark the Emancipation of slaves and a Caribbean Historical Society. Emancipation Day is celebrated as a Back to Africa Day with little mention of slavery and Caribbean History has to do less with the facts of history than with race mobilization as Pan Africanism.

Back to Africa inspiration was found in two sources. Melville Herskovits, the American anthropologist, and Marcus Garvey the Jamaican Back to Africa Leader of the 1930's and 1940's.

Melville J Herskovits and his wife Frances Shapiro Herskovits fresh from doing fieldwork among the "Bush Negroes" of what was then Dutch Guiana (today's Suriname), spent several days in Port of Spain waiting for a ship to take them to the USA. While in Port of Spain they read in a local newspaper a letter from

someone annoyed at certain practices of worshippers called Shango, Herskovits decides that these could only derive from the Youraba and must represent what Herskovits called “an important body of direct African cultural retentions.”

In 1939 – ten years later – the Herskovits return to find the “direct African cultural retention.” They are certain that these would be found in the most remote villages. They choose a village in Toco at the extreme North-East of Trinidad. They are disappointed. There are no more African retentions in Toco than in a rural community of the USA. But the Herskovits do not give up. “If we are to understand these processes and to attain control over them,” Herskovits wrote, “if we are to cope adequately with the day-to-day problems raised by the presence of minority groups of varying cultural backgrounds within majority populations, we must assess and comprehend both the general laws of cultural dynamics and the particular historical forces that brought about change in Toco.”¹ Herskovits finds Africanisms everywhere. The time of breakfast at 10 am, easily explained as eating after working in the cool of the morning, he sees as following Youraba practices. He finds that in Toco wealth and high position is equated with political power and sees this as an African retention. He sees apprenticeship as African the presence of both legal marriage and a keeper or concubine relationship as the reworking of West African family forms, and the prayers at forty days after death as a method of maintaining the double funeral ceremony of some West African Communities

Herskovits was wrong. Most of his “African retentions” needed no other explanation but Toco’s social environment and in any case could have been found in many rural communities in Europe or, as in the case of the maize dish *pémi*, in Amerindian communities throughout Latin America. We now have the ship’s recording of their slave cargo and the place of origin. The Youraba were not the major group to come to Trinidad. One of the most important groups did not come from West Africa – but from the Congo in Central Africa. Melville Herskovits had spent his early years studying “Mendelian Race Crossing.” It is after this, and having done cultural anthropology under Boas, that he takes up the question of culture. But he has not fundamentally changed. All that has happened is that biological genetics has now become the fixed attributes, genetically transmitted by culture. It is not surprising that in his work in a Haitian village he sees Haitian instability, not as the result of American occupation, nor yet of the coordinated blockade of Haiti by Europe and North America nor yet the massive payment Haiti was forced to pay to France for the recognition of her Independence and for the recognition of the freedom of Haitian slaves. Herskovits explains Haitian instability by Haitians having to live two cultural worlds.

In 1975 - only five years after the Trinidad and Tobago Students Revolt – Edward Braithwaite, Caribbean historian wrote an Introduction to Herskovits’ *Life in a Haitian Village*.

¹ Herskovits, Melville J and Herskovits, Frances S (Shapiro) Octagon Books inc 1964 New York. Pg 8.

“What makes the American Black a distinct type, however, was not only anthropometry, but his culture. The racially crossed individual was at the same time, the expression and agent of a distinctive complex of values and responses, based on inheritances and retentions from Europe and Africa,² For Braithwaite Herskovits “was disclosing ... new and profound contours of black experience, complementing and giving substantiation, to the intuitions of Delaney, Garvey, Cesaire ...”³ He refers us to the Haitian negritude periodical “Les Griots.” It was founded by, among others, Francois Duvalier. We read “Since all our efforts since Independence to this day have consisted in the systematic repression of our African heritage in the literary, the political and the social fields, our action should lead us to demand the revaluation of this racial factor.”⁴ The writer was no other than Francois Duvalier, otherwise known as Papa Doc. No one seemed to note the year. It was 1939. Marcus Garvey was also around. In Hyde Park he expressed his dislike and mistrust for Trinidad Trade Union then on strike. At the time, in both sugar and oil, the staff was divided into Senior staff, Junior Staff and Daily Paid. These divisions were not only or even primarily occupational. Only Whites could accede to the Senior Staff, to its living quarters or its clubs. According to Garvey the workers were being misled by Communists. One of the peculiar things is that at the time few analysed Garvey, Duvalier and others by the same standards by which European fascists were analysed. Even after Edward Braithwaite wrote in the 1970’s, Garvey and Papa Doc could still be seen as negritude writers, or simply as Black. And so in spite of Duvalier’s Haitian disaster or Garvey’s motto: Race First. It seemed to occur to very few, that the ideology of “race” nationalism which had gripped Europe in the 1930’s, could have spread to Europe’s Colonial peoples.

Herskovits as far as I know, is still being taught at the University of the West Indies at least at the St Augustine Campus. His influence can be found in Caribbean sociology, theology, in Feminist Studies and in assumptions of the Caribbean working class family.

By the time that Braithwaite was writing there was not only the Students Revolt of which Black Power was in reality a segment. There was also the emergence of Black Studies. That African American contribution to the history of the United States had been ignored was true. It is also true that Black Studies sometimes gave the space that was needed for subjects which were of particular interest to Blacks and which otherwise may never have been undertaken. It is also true that the area was of particularly uneven standards, that it gave space as well to genetic culturalism and that by drawing on Caribbean academics, a weak Caribbean was intellectually integrated into North American academia and theses. This was not only in academia. It became more worrying in the impact of the Entertainment Industry.

2 Braithwaite, Edward in Herskovits, Melville J *Life in a Haitian Village*. Introduction by Edward Braithwaite Pg Octagon Books New York, 1975.

3 *Ibid* Pg XI.

4 *Les Griots*, Vol2 1939 Pg 153.

The thesis of Herskoits, and its adoption by “Black Power” made it easily used by global consumerism in the form of ethnic fashion, tourist diversions, and the ethnic media. In this article I will look at Carnival.

This is written during the carnival Season. When this season begins or ends gives some indication of the relationship of culture to society. Until three decades or so ago, the Carnival Season in Trinidad and Tobago, began on the 7 January, i.e. the day after the feast of Epiphany or of the Three Kings which marked the end of the Christmas Season. The Carnival Season ended sharply at midnight on Carnival Tuesday making way for Lent.

All things associated with Carnival were halted during Lent except on the 19 March, or the fest of St Joseph. Carnival music, the singing of calypsos were taken off radio and later television. In the same way all signs of Christmas were taken down on the Feast of the Three Kings.

Seasons are no longer sharply demarcated. Freezing, canning and the ease of importations have made most seasonal dishes available throughout the year. Of more importance has been the lengthening of the Carnival Season. This first swallowed up by Advent i.e. the period of about five weeks before Christmas and which was once marked by caroling and “parang” – Spanish Christmas songs still sung in Spanish by the Paranderos. Both still exist but they now share the time with Carnival preparations. It is no longer only Advent. Carnival preparation for this year began after last year’s Easter, upstaging all the other feasts which stretch throughout the year and ending the popular culture associated with these feasts.

The sharp ending of Carnival at midnight on Carnival Tuesday no longer exists. Once upon a time we knew that it was midnight by the sudden silence. No longer.

Rather Ash Wednesday now extends Carnival to beach “cool down limes” (or parties) on beaches, after Carnival dances and after Carnival shows. Lent as part of a national culture cycle, has disappeared. J’Ouvert, the early Monday morning spill on to the street in humourous costumes ranging from devils to political skits, owes its name to the time Carnival began i.e. at 6 am or the break of day. Little by little this opening was pushed back to 2 am in order to satisfy the demand of more time for Carnival on the streets. It has now become 4 am but as a result of the incidence of crime.

These changes have been dictated by the commercialization of Carnival. Once upon a time a costume was designed and made by the person who played X or Y. Only the barest details were furnished by the band leader.

Today Carnival bands are massive commercial ventures in which costumes are mass produced and advertised. The internet now permits this advertisement to be available internationally and registration in a band with accompanying purchase of a costume to be made by e-mail and credit card. Bands are launched months ahead of time, in a paid Carnival “fete.” Where before Bands were only a couple of hundred masqueraders, they may now consist of thousands, divided by the colour of the costumes, into “sections.”

The advent of Carnival millionaires has changed the nature of participation. Advertisements abroad brings in tourists from as far away as Sweden. This has

made Carnival the country's major tourist attraction. It is therefore no longer only a cultural display but of economic interest to hotels, restaurants, bars and Government. Internally the cost of a costume in one of the large bands may now represent one or two months of a worker's salary. But this is also a country of 30% living on less than US\$2.00 a day. At the same time that Blacks are told that Trinidad's Carnival is a retention of African culture, at the same time that this doubtful origin of carnival is sold abroad, the Poor who are in the majority Black are increasingly eliminated from much of the carnival celebrations. Marginalization now includes many of the jobs of seamstresses, wire benders, copper workers once done by the working class..

Costumes, are now likely to be made in China or in India leaving only the adjustments to be made by local labour. Food and drinks are increasingly provided in "all-inclusives" wiping out the small street vendor or small scale caterer – and increasing the profits of band leaders. Security personnel may be employed to ensure that only those who have paid for a costume are with the band ending the practice of stragglers trotting along to the band's music. These measures serve to further marginalize the Black Poor and often to increase the influence and profits of the band leaders. This is happening even as the Entertainment Industry bills Carnival in Trinidad as an important manifestation of Black Culture and even as the ethnic media e.g. BET Jazz, descends on Trinidad for the festival.

Carnival is not only the two day "jump up." It is also the calypso, and the steelband.

From the end of the nineteenth century, calypso has marked the pre-Carnival Season. Calypsoes include humour, some pornography and social commentary. It is this last which made calypso one of the most effective vehicles for the contestation of colonial rule and after colonial rule, of potentially draconian Government regulations. The popular saying that "it is better to have a bad epitaph than a calypso sung against you" was perfectly true. The political pulse of the country was taken in the years calypsos, from the anti-colonial "Sans Humanité" or the pro-socialist "we have a Labour Government" to the anti-American bases "Uncle Sam we want back we land" or the post-Independence "Ah 'fraid Karl," gave a good indication of popular political fears.

The popularity of Jamaican reggae, sponsored by American, often white entertainment Czars, and the reggae derivatives of dance hall and hip hop, have undermined this.

Today the political commentary is practically marginalized by the openly pornographic while it is the entry into violent lyrics which is likely to make the North American stages.

More important, celebrity culture, has built up, the "divas" of North America. This year, Carnival will be followed by the visit of Beyonce on Ash Wednesday. Tickets are at 200 Euros.. The Local Entertainment Industry has during the Carnival Season, brought down the Jamaican Dance Hall singers: Beenie Man known for his anti-gay lyrics, and Jah Cure released on parole, two years ago, having served seven years of his jail sentence for rape, guns and breaking in. It is

these Hip Hop artistes who are no the “real” Blacks, who peddle the “real” Black culture, the real resistance as “conscious music” coming out of the real ghetto experience of Jamaica’s violent, drug-gang and desperate West Kingston.

It is these that the Blacks increasingly marginalized, aspire to be. In this article I have looked at the general arena within which culture emerged largely de-linked from the history of European and American social reform. It is within this arena that culture becomes identity culture and “race” culture in fact genetically transmitted. I have developed this with reference to Trinidadians of African descent. However I could have as usefully written of the same phenomenon among Trinidad’s Indian population. Indeed Hindu organizations are largely members of India’s RSS and VHP. Those fringe right wing movements in India, becomes dominant in Trinidad. Much of this can be traced to the 1970 students revolt.

I have chosen the evolution of African Trinidadian culture since students revolt of 1970 because it lends itself to further comparative research with trends in a number of European countries. The present decline in literacy can be found in some countries of Western Europe as can be the continuing lack of social mobility for a wide section of the working class including the “native” working class. The impact of reggae, hip hop and Dance Hall music is there in France’s suburbs as in London’s immigrant areas. The violence of “conscious music,” its links with a new macho and drug-gang culture is there in Dublin or Limerick, Birmingham, Toronto or Bedford Stuyvesant. It has already spread to Mozambique and parts of North Africa. The “Post-Christian” Culture articulates with this in its exhalation of the non-rational and with its entry into mass religious commerce through the tele-evangelist and the use of Christian as a brand name outside of its historical context. This Post Christian culture, is transmitted through Pentecostalism, Evangelicals and through the influence of Charismatics in mainstream Christianity. It is there in the ideology of the Far Right of the United States and is increasingly penetrating the supposedly de Christianised Europe.

The supposedly “African family” of Herskovits’ Toco, is there in the unmarried “Partners” in much of Europe.

The actual Universalisation is curiously matched by the attempt to glorify or to retreat to, separation in the form of a quasi-genetic “identify.”