

Crossing Race and Nationality

The Racial Formation of Asian Americans, 1852–1965

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The U.S. immigration reform of 1965 produced a tremendous influx of immigrants and refugees from Asia and Latin America that has dramatically altered U.S. race relations. Latinos now outnumber African Americans. It is clearer than ever that race relations in the United States are not limited to the central black/white axis. In fact this has always been true: Indian wars were central to the history of this country since its origins and race relations in the West have always centered on the interactions between whites and natives, Mexicans, and Asians. The “new thinking” about race relations as multipolar is overdue.

However, one cannot simply replace the black/white model with one that merely adds other groups. The reason is that other groups of color have faced discrimination that is quite different both in form and content than that which has characterized black/white relations. The history of many peoples and regions, as well as distinct issues of nationality oppression—U.S. settler colonialism, Indian wars, U.S. foreign relations and foreign policy, immigration, citizenship, the U.S.-Mexico War, language, reservations, treaties, sovereignty issues, etc.—must be analyzed and woven into a considerably more complicated new framework.

In this light, Asian-American history is important because it was precedent-setting in the racialization of nationality and the incorporation of nationality into U.S. race relations. The racial formation of Asian Americans was a key moment in defining the color line among immigrants, extending whiteness to European immigrants, and targeting non-white immigrants for racial oppression. Thus nativism was largely overshadowed by white nativism, and it became an important new form of racism.

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This development resonates powerfully today in the discrimination faced by the millions of immigrants from the global South over the past forty years, while white European immigrants face virtually none. And lately the Bush administration has formed a new link between war, racism, and attacks on immigrants in his “permanent war on terrorism at home and abroad.” While Asian Americans were this country’s first “aliens ineligible to citizenship,” today Arab Americans are its most prominent racialized enemy aliens.¹

Background

By the time the first Asians began to come to these shores in any numbers (the Chinese in 1852), basic patterns of U.S. race relations had been set by more than two centuries of Negro slavery and Indian wars. However, those patterns were under attack, and the soon to be fought Civil War would mark a new departure that would fundamentally affect the plight of Chinese in the United States as the century progressed.

Reduced to its fundamental dynamics, what had emerged was an entrenched system of white supremacy and black oppression centered on, but not limited to, slavery. The African slave trade was a product of European colonialism of African *nationalities*, but within each slave-holding country, different *racial* formations were developed, according to particular conditions.

In recent years it has become a progressive mantra that racial categories are “socially constructed,” but it is often forgotten that they only achieve full structural and systemic power when they are legally defined and enforced by state power.² In what became the United States, the plethora of both European and African nationalities very early on was subsumed by a legally defined and state sanctioned system of racial categories.

In this unprecedented new system, famously hostile European nationalities (e.g., English, Irish, Germans, and French) were united as whites, and the numerous African nationalities, together with all those who seemed to exhibit the slightest perceptible trace of African ancestry, were categorized as Negro, thus with “no rights that the white man is bound to respect.” This hypodescent (or “one drop”) rule, firmly codified in statute by 1705, was meant to provide crystal clarity to the social status of the numerous racially mixed offspring sired by white planters. This was crucial since unlike other slave societies, the Southern planters depended primarily upon slave reproduction (rather than the African slave trade) to fill its slave supply and were also bound and

determined to prevent a substantial free group of mulattos to blur the color line.³

Such a state enforced, polarized system of racial categories and race relations was and is unique to the United States. Also unique to the United States (as compared to other slaveholding countries) was the exclusion of anti-slavery (and slaves) from the independence struggle. Instead slaveholding Founding Fathers like George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison ensured that the new country limited U.S. citizenship to whites only. The system of white supremacy was thus extended to an exclusion of people of color from the nationality and polity. Ripped from Africa and excluded from U.S. citizenship, African Americans were rendered strangers in their own homeland.

The pattern regarding Native Americans was much different. Native Americans were only marginally incorporated into the emerging U.S. society and racial system. Rather, they fought to retain what territorial and political autonomy they could in their own nations/tribes/territories in the face of recurrent Indian wars. While they were defeated in most of those wars, they successfully resisted incorporation into colonial or U.S. society proper. Thus, it was oppressive relations *between nations* (specifically settler colonialism), not racial oppression *within* U.S. society, that predominated: wars, treaties, territorial fights, military/colonial rule, tribal governments, a reservation system, redrawing of boundaries, etc.

Until the 1840s or so, European immigrants to the United States or what became the United States had an inviting situation, although not without discrimination arising from distinct languages, citizenship, religions, and newcomer status. The Irish and other European immigrants became white the day they landed on these shores, but some were treated as “second class whites” for varying periods of time. The often neglected dialectical opposite of black oppression is white supremacy and white privilege: the obverse of the enslavement of blacks was the monopolization of political power, land, skilled trades, and all other forms of rights, property, and privilege by whites, including immigrants.⁴ Combined with the ready availability of land opened up by the devastating Indian wars, until the end of the nineteenth century the majority of whites avoided proletarianization and instead became bourgeois or petit bourgeois property holders of one kind or another.

Although in the colonial days many European immigrants started out as indentured servants, the vast majority, or at least their offspring, eventually settled into independent farming, independent trades, small

businesses, or better. It was not until the 1840s that an industrial proletariat of any size began to develop. And virtually all of this small proletariat was constituted by European immigrants who, in turn, came to play a key role in the developing trade unions and urban political machines, thus developing certain levers of power to defend and expand their rights. By the time of Chinese immigration in the 1850s, the United States was just beginning to deal with massive immigration from Europe and sharp ethnic/national conflict. Nativism had just been born.

Finally by way of background, the United States grabbed almost half of Mexican territory through the U.S.-Mexico War of 1848 and thereby expanded its own boundaries to the Pacific Ocean. The war highlighted the harsh dynamic of settler colonialism that dominated relations between whites and Mexicans in the Southwest in the nineteenth century. Although the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that ended the war guaranteed “all the rights of citizenship of the United States” to Mexicans who chose to remain in the Southwest, in practice it was routinely violated as white settlers used everything from legal maneuvers to lynching to dispossess Mexicans of land and power throughout the area.⁵

Phase 1: From Racially Coerced Labor Force to Exclusion

It was into the above situation that the early Chinese immigrants unwittingly thrust themselves. The Gold Mountain had a racial cordon and a developing ethnic/nationality one as well. The experience of the Chinese in California in the nineteenth century was to break new ground.

Contrary to the myth that the early Chinese were part of the odious coolie labor trade that flourished between 1847 and 1874, most of the early Chinese immigrants bought their tickets to the United States on credit and were not contract laborers per se. Once they paid off their debts, they were more or less free. And, owing to the rather free-flowing, frontier character of Gold Rush-era California, as well as the crying shortage of labor, racial constraints were not nearly so entrenched or immediate as in the more settled parts of the country.⁶

However, the shortage of labor and the grab for land and gold of this period in California were also prime conditions for the reproduction of racism. The white people of California, although themselves new colonists to the area only recently conquered by war from Mexico and many of them recent immigrants to the United States, immediately

asserted their presumed white right to these and all other resources and/or positions of privilege over and above the Native Americans, Californios, Mexicanos, Chinese, and other Latin Americans who made up the California population at the time. And in this, the full force of existing U.S. racial law and custom not surprisingly backed them.*

The Making of 'Aliens Ineligible to Citizenship'

Although California was an antislavery territory dominated by “free soilers,”⁷ attempts to subordinate the Chinese came forthwith. But determining the precise social status of the Chinese and their place in U.S. society was neither automatic nor unanimous. Whites were divided among themselves between those (mainly capitalists) who desired easy access to cheap Chinese labor and those (mainly labor, that is *white* labor) who wished them excluded from the country. They were stymied by the fact that existing law covered only Negroes, whites, and American Indians, not Asians of any sort, by the unusual combination of foreignness and non-whiteness that the Chinese seemed to present, and by the fact that white California’s racial conditions and concerns did not completely match those of the federal government. These were conditions they had to sort through, by means of political and ideological struggle, with tremendous, though often overlooked, opposition from the Chinese themselves.⁸

It is this process that constitutes what is here referred to as the “racializing,”⁹ “racialization,” or “racial formation”¹⁰ of the Chinese into Asian Americans. This process eventually produced a social category of a new type, one that was neither simply national/ethnic nor strictly racial, but a combination of the two: by the end of the nineteenth century, the Chinese were racialized as “aliens (hence national) ineligible to citizenship (based on race).”

At key junctures the U.S. state has defined racial groups and dictated the race relations of which they are part. But it has done so not in a vacuum, but in accordance with racialized socio-economic and political struggles. The culmination of the process of developing the racial category appropriate to the Chinese, not surprisingly, paralleled and eventually settled the fight over whether or not to exclude Chinese from entering the country and/or attaining U.S. citizenship.

As the vast majority of the early Chinese headed for the gold mines, California’s first assertion of white supremacy against the Chinese

*The history and racial formation of Asians in Hawaii had certain similarities to that in the mainland, but is overall quite distinct. This essay refers only to the mainland history.

focused on control of the mines. In 1850, California passed the Foreign Miners Tax. The letter of this tax was nativist and applied to all foreigners. In practice it was mainly collected from the Chinese in an attempt to drive them from the mines. This contradiction undermined its usefulness as social policy or law. Still, once the *Hall* case (more on this below) and common practice made clear that the Chinese had no protection of any sort, they were regularly victimized by white miners and extorted by tax collectors.

Another attempt to define the legal status of Chinese took racial, not nativist, form. In late 1853, a “free white citizen” named George Hall was convicted of murdering a Chinese man, but the next year the California Supreme Court reversed the conviction on the grounds that Hall had been “convicted upon the testimony of a Chinese person.”

The chief justice ruled that Indians had originated from Asia before crossing the Bering Strait and that therefore the laws barring testimony by Indians applied to the “whole of the Mongolian race,” that Chinese were covered by the generic term “Black” and that the court should not turn “loose upon the community” the Chinese “whose mendacity is proverbial; a race of people whom nature has marked as inferior, and who are incapable of progress or intellectual development...” (*People v. Hall*). Here was convoluted American racial logic attempting to grapple with the “racing” of a set of people seen as entirely foreign. No concern whatsoever was evinced for the Chinese murder victim. Again, the Chinese were stripped of crucial constitutional rights, but the means for doing so were inadequate and inconsistent.

Soon the revolutionary Reconstruction Congress passed the Fourteenth Amendment followed by the Civil Rights Act of 1870. The act expressly gave Chinese the right to testify in court and forbade the imposition upon them of discriminatory “penalties, taxes, licenses and exactions of every kind.”¹¹ In addition, the Burlingame Treaty of 1868 between the United States and China guaranteed the right of emigration between the two countries. Together, these hindered white California’s ability to institutionalize racially the social position of the Chinese.

The original U.S. Constitution defined naturalization as available only to “free, white persons,” but the Civil Rights Act of 1870 finally extended the right of naturalization to “persons of African nativity or descent.” Congress debated Chinese naturalization in the course of the Reconstruction era civil rights debates, but that august body of white men declined to extend citizenship rights to Asians. Asians were defined as “aliens ineligible to citizenship,” which became the new

racial-national legal category to exclude Asians from entering the United States, owning land, etc.

By 1880, Reconstruction was defeated and the federal government joined the anti-Chinese movement. It legalized Jim Crow, reversed the Civil Rights Act, and negotiated a new treaty with China that paved the way for the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.

In the Chinese Exclusion Act and the Alien Land Laws of the 1910s (which deprived Asians of the right to own land), the U.S. racial system also settled on its basic racial categorization of Chinese and other Asians: that of being “aliens ineligible to U.S. citizenship.” This definition applied only to Asians and became the perfect legal grounds systematically to identify and discriminate against them, a racial category of a distinctive type. This category was new in that it incorporated a non-indigenous, non-white, non-black group into the U.S. racial system. It was also new in that the terms “aliens” and “naturalization rights” explicitly incorporated nationality as well as “race” into it.

Racially Coerced Labor and Class Struggles

This racialization process was crucial to what I see as the first phase of the Asian-American experience, that of a racially coerced labor force. Asian Americans were systematically stripped of their political, economic, cultural, and citizenship rights and thereby condemned to be a vulnerable labor force that was made available to white capital at a price much cheaper than white labor.

Although the lower wages and substandard living conditions the Chinese were forced to accept certainly increased the profits of white capitalists, there was much more significance to the racially coerced labor force than short-term “superprofits.” In fact, turning the Chinese into a racially coerced labor force was a fundamental condition for the development of capitalism in California. At that time, labor was so scarce and land so plentiful that free people had better alternatives than to become wage slaves. As with slavery and sharecropping in the U.S. South, coercing people of color into serving as labor was central to the primitive accumulation and the early accumulation of capital in California; they were barred from owning land and forced to become the labor counterpart to (white) capital in mining, railroads, agriculture, and factories, which propelled California’s booming economy and helped forge the first continent-wide national economy.

But it wasn’t only the white capitalists who benefited. The racial cor-doning of Asians also enabled non-capitalist whites to monopolize small

businesses, independent trades and farms, and privileged positions within the workforce, not to speak of land, education, and political power. This is what Harry Chang called the racially differentiated process of proletarianization.

Unfortunately, even this was not good enough for white labor. Through their trade unions and political organizations, they were actually the loudest and most organized voices demanding the complete expulsion and exclusion of the Chinese from the United States. However, a careful look at the “white workers” who led the anti-Chinese movement reveals that the most organized and vocal section were actually independent craftsmen or highly paid skilled workers, not regular wage workers, who in the nineteenth and early twentieth century commonly joined the same skilled craft unions and indeed dominated the U.S. trade union movement until the 1930s.

These white independent producers and craftsmen did not compete with the Chinese for factory or field jobs. What they feared was that factory based capitalist industry or agribusiness, basing itself on semi-free Chinese labor, would successfully displace their small businesses or farms, independent trades, or highly paid skilled labor jobs: in short, that their small-scale petit bourgeois production and trades would be undermined by capitalist enterprises and they themselves might be proletarianized. Thus the status of Chinese labor became a significant issue in the class struggle between small, independent producers (miners, artisans, and farmers) and large-scale capitalist enterprises.¹²

At the same time most unskilled white workers also joined the crusade to exclude the Chinese in order to increase their own employment opportunities and to fulfill their own concepts of white supremacy.¹³ The widespread participation, indeed leadership, of white workers in the movement to exclude the Chinese points to the folly of theories that would constrict racism to the oppression of workers of color by white capitalists. It shows that, to the contrary, white labor is often not just a simple description of the color of some workers, but a social category reflecting the fact that white workers and their unions have all too often expressly fought for the interests of white workers as against both white capitalists (some of whom may have preferred having cheap, exploitable Chinese labor ready-to-hand) and against workers of color.

Rather than fight white capital for equality and build solidarity among all workers, white labor demanded the exclusion of Chinese labor from the country to advance the condition of white workers at their expense. Here we had a classical racist trade union tradition:

white workers (skilled and unskilled) banding together in unions and political organizations in the name of “Americanism” and “free (white) labor” to defend their privileges over non-white workers.

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was a culmination of the attempt to create a cross-class, nationwide white consensus to define legally the Chinese place in U.S. life, thereby forcing the country to come to grips with how to handle the intersection of race and nationality. For the first time in U.S. history, a group was excluded from immigrating by (white) immigrants and former immigrants themselves. On one hand, the act was clearly based on nationality, as it excluded a group from immigrating to this country. On the other hand, it was clearly racial: it excluded the Chinese specifically because they were not white. Once verging on 20 percent of California’s population, the ensuing anti-Chinese riots and Exclusion Act drove most Chinese laborers out of the country and prevented their reentry.

In the fifty years to follow, the U.S. forced every Asian nationality to follow virtually the same pattern as the Chinese, albeit in truncated form. At first, a significant wave would be allowed entry to serve as racially coerced, cheap labor, especially for California agriculture, then the group would be excluded. The 1917 Immigration Act denied Asian Indians entry. Despite the rising power of the Japanese in the Pacific, Japanese nationals were excluded from the United States by the Immigration Act of 1924 which barred the entry of “aliens ineligible to citizenship.” By extension, this act also served to exclude Koreans, as the Japanese colonial administration in Korea applied it to them.

At first, the Filipinos could not be excluded due to the fact that the Philippines was a U.S. “territory” (read colony) and its people were thereby “wards,” sometimes called “nationals” of the United States. Consequently, they were legally neither “citizens” nor “aliens.” Ironically, this was resolved by the Tydings-McDuffie Act of 1935, which simultaneously granted “Commonwealth” status with promises of eventual independence in 1946 to the Philippines and immediately cut Filipino immigration to the United States to fifty persons per year.

Thus the Chinese experience in the nineteenth century produced a new racial category—“aliens ineligible to citizenship”—and a new form of racism—exclusion—which would be applied to virtually all of the Asian nationalities that were to immigrate to the United States until after the Second World War. It fundamentally structured the social and political rights of peoples of Asian descent once here until the 1960s. It was this common history of being considered racially inferior and not

assimilable that forged the distinct (and often mutually hostile) Asian nationalities into a new panethnic racial group: Asian Americans.

Phase 2: Exclusion and the Racial/Ethnic Enclaves

However, exclusion was not only an immigration restriction. It became a unique form of racism that also socially defined the situation of the remaining Asians inside the country, as well as those who managed to slip through after exclusion until 1965. Unlike blacks who were economically integrated into the center of the U.S. economy (albeit in extremely oppressive ways) and the Native Americans who mainly remained outside U.S. society as a whole, the Chinese, and then the other Asian groups in somewhat different degrees, were excluded from the mainstreams of U.S. society and instead confined to ethnic enclaves. The Asian ethnic enclaves thus were also products of both racial and nationality discrimination.

The Structure of Dual Domination

One of the prime results of Asian exclusion was the development of what L. Ling-chi Wang calls “the structure of dual domination.” What this extremely useful concept refers to is that the ruling circles of not only the United States but also of China, Japan, Korea, and the Philippines developed fairly elaborate political, economic, and social institutions to dominate and control their respective emigrants in the United States; Asians in the United States were oppressed both by U.S. and homeland elites.

To varying degrees, the home countries of many European immigrants to the United States also tried to influence their emigrants. But the special conditions of exclusion facing Asians produced a unique racist isolation within the U.S. structure and simultaneously rendered these isolated communities subject to customs, laws, organizations, and institutions from the home countries.

In fact, the two structures were mutually reinforcing. The home countries’ main aim was to retain the political, economic, and cultural loyalty of their overseas communities, while the principal interest of the United States was to retain its racially oppressive, especially exclusionary, policies and occasional access to cheap Asian labor, predominately in agriculture. Thus, the United States was usually happy to stay out of the internal workings of the Asian communities so long as they stayed within bounds of its broader dictates.

Home-country elites also took advantage of the racist isolation of

Asians in America to extend their influence and control over these communities. For example, excluded from participation in almost all American institutions, traditions, and organizations, the Chinese community was rife with district, family, and clan associations, as well as secret societies, schools, public festivals and rituals, and China-based political organizations. At the apex of this pyramid, the Chinese Benevolent Association (in some places known as the Six Companies) ruled over the Chinese-American communities. The Six Companies, in turn, was an instrument of the Kuomintang (China's Nationalist Party) which, as an ally of the United States against the Chinese Communists, was given almost free reign over the overseas Chinese up to and including regular violations of the Constitutional rights of those who it perceived opposed them.¹⁴

To one degree or another, all the Asian communities in the United States were faced with a "dual structure of domination" in which a homeland government or political party was allowed by the United States to be its junior partner and overseer with a great range of powers to develop and enforce the interests both of U.S. racism and overseas loyalty. These dual structures were especially strong during the exclusion/enclave period, and only in the current phase of Asian-American history are they being broken down. Dual domination, like exclusion, is a unique combination of racial and national oppression.

Exclusion, Enclaves, and the Class Composition of Asians

Exclusion also had a major impact on the gender and class compositions of the Asian communities, which continues to resonate today.

First of all, since the vast majority of the first immigrants of each of the Asian nationalities were male laborers who left their families behind, exclusion tended to freeze in place the overwhelming male composition of these communities and stunted the growth of a U.S.-born Asian population.

Second, anti-Asian hostility and riots, combined with exclusion, forced the Asian peoples to band together into Japantowns, Chinatowns, and Manilatowns where the prevailing conditions promoted a large class of small entrepreneurs (merchants, farmers, labor contractors, restaurateurs, etc.) and the political and social power of that class over the workers. As regards the Chinese, for example, prior to exclusion the majority lived in agricultural areas where, by Sucheng Chan's calculations, the business and labor-contracting elite seldom exceeded 15 percent of the community. Exclusion virtually eliminated

Chinese laborers in small western towns and left only a smattering of Chinese restaurant or laundry owners. And it drove the majority together into Chinese enclaves within the cities where entrepreneurs and professionals constituted some 40 percent.¹⁵

Third, the exclusion acts banned Asian laborers, but allowed merchants, students, and their wives or families to enter the United States, thus further distorting the class composition of the communities.

Thus, the Chinatowns, Manilatowns, and Japantowns that emerged were not so much the products of “natural” social forces as the distorted outgrowth of immigration and naturalization policies that discriminated against Chinese as a people in general and against specific classes among them in particular.

For reasons that no one has satisfactorily explained, Filipinos were neither enclaved nor did they develop an entrepreneurial class on the scale of the Chinese or Japanese. Instead, many Filipinos remained migrant farm workers for agribusiness on the West Coast. Their enclaves tended to be in agricultural areas and their urban communities tended to be adjuncts to or merged with Chinatowns. The situation of the Filipinos thus remained that of the first phase: racially coerced labor for agricultural capital.

The Japanese also remained a disproportionately agricultural folk until their racist internment during the Second World War, but they were only briefly forced into the role of cheap labor. Japanese in California were soon able to carve out niches as farmers and shopkeepers. The Japanese also formed sizable urban Japantowns in Los Angeles and San Francisco with class characteristics similar to the Chinatowns.

While this Japanese economic advance is often attributed to the strategy of ethnic enterprise and ethnic solidarity,¹⁶ the Japanese were also the lucky recipients of a major piece of historical happenstance.

Just as the Japanese were arriving in the United States, the development of irrigation in California opened the way for intensive agriculture and a shift from grain to fruit and vegetable production. Between 1879 and 1909, the value of crops from intensive agriculture skyrocketed from just 4 percent to 50 percent of all crops grown in California. This transformation occurred under a market stimulus created by two key technological achievements of the period—the completion of the national railroad lines and the invention of the refrigerated car. Consequently, for the first time perishable fruit and vegetables from California could be sold almost anywhere in the United States.¹⁷

Japanese farmers were able to capitalize on these developments. As

early as 1910 they produced 70 percent of California's strawberries, and by 1940 they grew 95 percent of fresh snap beans, 67 percent of fresh tomatoes, and 95 percent of the celery. In 1900, California's Japanese farmers owned or leased twenty-nine farms totaling 4,698 acres; five years later the acreage jumped to 61,858; and by 1910 it reached 194,742 acres. Even the California Alien Land Law of 1913, which prohibited "aliens ineligible to citizenship" from owning land or leasing it for more than three years failed to stem this trend. By 1920 Japanese farmers owned or leased 458,056 acres.¹⁸ Despite protests from Japan, a U.S. ally in the First World War, a California initiative passed in 1920 closed the loopholes in the 1913 act, and Japanese landholdings dropped dramatically.¹⁹

Small entrepreneurs (and later, their often college-educated children) were only one side of the coin. On the other side were the majority of Asians who were workers, but workers in extremely oppressive conditions. They were largely excluded from jobs with mainstream white employers and the government by racist laws and practices, and by the lack of English-speaking skills. Thus, they had little choice but to work for Asian employers as menial laborers in restaurants, garment factories and other sweatshops, laundries, farms, and grocery and dry goods stores. These employers were not only non-union, they paid extremely poor wages and provided awful working conditions based not on the standard of American business, but on a standard unique to their captive ethnic labor force.

In short, the period of exclusion which lasted until the change in immigration laws in 1965 produced ethnic Asian enclaves. These were stratified between an unusually large merchant/business class tied to conservative or reactionary home governments and backed by the "dual structure of domination" and workers who were isolated in these enclaves or agricultural areas, stripped of their rights by the combined power of U.S. racism and home-country dictatorships. The latter were forced to work almost exclusively for compatriot businessmen under working and pay conditions that bore no resemblance to that of the mainstream of the U.S. working class.

The Consciousness of Asian Americans

From their first days on these shores, Asian Americans fought against the discrimination they faced. Strikes, slowdowns, and legal actions were common. It is little known, for example, that Filipino farm workers actually initiated the famous grape boycott of the 1960s, which was

then joined by Mexican workers and tremendously amplified under the leadership of Cesar Chavez. Most of these struggles were fought on a nationality or class basis.

It was not until the late 1960s that a common racial/panethnic identity took hold among Asian Americans. Several facts contributed to this delay: different Asian nationalities immigrated in different historical periods, they rarely lived or worked in the same geographical areas, most were immigrants until the 1960s, and their native languages were unintelligible to each other. Thus there was no amalgamation of the Asian nationalities as there had been, say, among the different African ethnicities under slavery (and that took many generations). Although Asians in the United States fell victim to the same racial laws and customs and followed the same racialized patterns, the predominant consciousness remained ethnic/national, not panethnic or racial.

The development of Asian-American consciousness took place in the 1960s when, for the first time, the majority of Asians in this country were U.S. born. It was an explicitly political consciousness influenced by the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of that era. And it was cemented for many by the murderous racist dehumanization of Asians exhibited by the U.S. government, press, and armed forces during the Vietnam War. To be Asian American was not a simple recognition that one had roots in Asia; it meant to reject the passive racist stereotype embodied in the white-imposed term "Oriental" and to embrace an active stance against war and racism. The people of color movements of the 1960s led to the rejection of the term "Negro" in favor of "Black" or "Afro-American"; it produced the new concepts of "La Raza" and "Chicano"; and it gave rise to "Asian American."

Unbeknownst to many people, including many movement people, the Asian-American movement of the late 1960s and 1970s was of mass proportions and dramatically transformed the political (and personal) consciousness and institutional infrastructure of the different Asian-American communities. In addition, influenced by the powerful Vietnamese, Chinese, and Korean communist parties of the time, many Asian-American activists turned to Marxism and became a major presence in the U.S. communist and socialist movements of the period.²⁰

However, neither racism nor racial consciousness among Asians has ever supplanted either the consciousness or the reality of nationality. Indeed, the tremendous increase in immigration since 1965 has reproduced an overriding foreign-born majority among Asians residing in the United States and has further strengthened national/ethnic conscious-

ness. Still, Asian-American consciousness is far from extinguished; it retains both ideological power and institutional expression in the many Asian-American progressive organizations that thrive today and will undoubtedly increase and find new expressions as the nativity of Asian Americans changes in the decades to come. The intersection of race and nationality among Asians is an ongoing formation, subjectively and objectively.

Afterword

The racialization of nationality was a critical event in U.S. history that has shaped today's social formation and even impacted its foreign policy. It was extended, with different particularities, to millions of Latino and Caribbean immigrants, and now Arabs, South Asians, and Africans, in addition to East Asians—all of whom are in its throes. And as the United States acceded to superpower status in the course of the twentieth century, this racialization also took on a potent international dimension in the innumerable racist U.S. interventions in the third world. Today's "war on terrorism" is, among other things, also a war on racialized immigrants as the Patriot Act and other new laws treat them as suspected enemy combatants simply because of their race and nationality.

Of course the intersection of race and nationality is not static. The racial formation of Asian Americans (not to speak of many others) since the Immigration Reform of 1965 has been very different than the pre-1965 period. The civil rights achievements of the 1960s and 1970s, the structural change of U.S. capitalism to what is sometimes called "post-industrial society," the immigration reform of 1965, and globalization have reshaped the Asian-American communities and their status in U.S. society. Just as the system of legalized discrimination, disenfranchisement, and segregation of blacks has been overthrown, so the categories of "aliens ineligible to citizenship" and "exclusion" have been cast aside. Because of their educational level, Asian Americans, along with white women, were probably the main beneficiaries of affirmative action.

Immigration reform has enabled the Asian-American population to explode from only about one million in 1965—mostly Chinese, Japanese, and Filipinos—to something like 13 million, emanating from numerous Asian countries today. Consequently, the majority of Asian Americans today have no family connection to Asian-American history prior to 1980.

Still, the provisions of the 1965 immigration act and subsequent legislation have reinforced the class trends set in motion by exclusion. These laws allow Asian immigrants to enter this country primarily based on their family connections to the disproportionately merchant/professional population already here (family reunification) or based on their unique technical or professional skills. Consequently the highly educated and middle-class section of the Asian-American population has been reproduced on a bigger scale. At the same time, many of those entering based on family reunification are workers with few resources and limited English-speaking skills, so the numbers of isolated sweatshop workers in Asian enclaves have also grown.

The working-class section of Asian Americans has been expanded by Southeast Asians who entered the United States not under immigration law, but under refugee law after the failed U.S. wars of aggression in Indochina. Although some of these refugees were from the defeated elites, most of them were poor. The socio-economic profiles of Vietnamese, Cambodians, Laotians, and Hmong in the United States are very similar to those of Native Americans, blacks, and Latinos.

Thus Asian Americans today have the highest median education and household income levels but at the same time unusually high percentages of Asians live in poverty and have minimal education. The irony is that those Asian Americans who are said to make up the so-called "model minority" achieved this status primarily due to the class impacts of racist immigration laws and the civil rights victories, not simply by "pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps." Asian Americans have worked hard, but who hasn't? What is more important is that immigration law and other forms of racism have had the ironic effect of creating a community with an unusual number of middle-class people.

Among the hard working are the millions of extremely poor Asian-American workers who are often rendered invisible in the mythical Asian success story. The many vibrant left and progressive Asian-American organizations today tend to concentrate their organizing efforts precisely among these immigrant workers, many of whom are women. Class looms large in Asian-American politics.

After more than 400 years of racism sanctioned and enforced by the state, the victories of the Civil Rights movement erased racial categories from the official law of the land. This was a tremendous victory. But many of the oppressive patterns and disparities set in place by those centuries of official racism continue as major forces in U.S. life, repro-

duced by enduring racialized cultural and economic structures unless actively interrupted. Overtly racist laws have been replaced by a plethora of covertly racial laws and legislation, from the Patriot Act to mandatory sentencing to the strict limits on desegregation and affirmative action, and discriminatory immigration and refugee law. We have come a long way, but there is a harsh road ahead. Unraveling the distinct dynamics of race, nationality, class, and gender, as well as their complicated intersections, will be critical to advancing racial justice in the decades to come.

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MONTHLY REVIEW *Fifty Years Ago*

In 1932 and 1933, when Hitler had just gained power, seceded from the League of Nations, and started his treaty-breaking rearmament, but was still loose in the saddle and sitting on a restive German people, the French and the Poles wanted to deal with him at once. They urged the Baldwin government to join with them in haling him before the Council of the League of Nations, which under Chapter V of the Versailles Treaty had the right to decree, by a majority vote, what coercive measures should be taken to stop Germany rearming. The Poles said they had seven divisions on the border ready to march in and occupy Berlin. The French wanted an Anglo-French boycott and blockade of Germany. They wanted to keep it up until the German people, led by the organizations and parties which had opposed him to the last, threw out the Nazi Chancellor and put in a government prepared to return to the League of Nations, stop rearming, and resume its place in the disarmament conference.

In a speech on September 22, 1933, and again in the House of Commons in November, 1934, Lloyd George voiced the alarm of Conservative and Liberal politicians at these proposals and gave the Baldwin Government's reason for rejecting them: "If the Powers succeeded in overthrowing Nazism in Germany what would follow? Not a conservative, socialist, or liberal regime, but extreme Communism. Surely that could not be their objective."

A month later—October 23, 1933—a big businessman, Sir Arthur Balfour, Chairman and Managing Director of the Capital Steel Works, Sheffield, drew a conclusion from these views, and supported it by arguments that sound all too familiar today:

Will the Germans go to war again? I don't think there is any doubt about it, and the curious thing about it is that I am almost persuaded that some day we shall have to let the Germans arm or we shall have to arm them. With the Russians armed to the teeth and the tremendous menace in the East, Germany, unarmed in the middle, is always going to be a plum waiting for the Russians to take, and which we should have to defend if the Germans could not defend themselves. One of the greatest menaces to peace today is the totally unarmed condition of Germany.

—Konni Zilliacus, "After Geneva—What?," *Monthly Review*, December 1955

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