Dialogue: Race in the Capitalist World-System, Review of Hanchard's *The Spectre of Race*

The Spectre of Race: How Discrimination Haunts Western Democracy. **Michael G. Hanchard.** 2017. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press. 272 pages, ISBN 978-0-6911-7713-7. Cloth ($29.95)

Reviewed by William I. Robinson
University of California, Santa Barbara
wirobins@soc.ucsb.edu

Scholarly debate on democracy, inequality, and racial/ethnic oppression may be more urgent than ever in these trying times of unprecedented worldwide inequalities and the resurgence of fascist movements. Michael Hanchard makes an important and brilliantly researched contribution to this debate with his new book, *The Spectre of Race: How Discrimination Haunts Western Democracy*. His essential argument is that democracy and political inequality, especially in the form of racial or ethno-national exclusion, have not only coexisted, but that the latter has been a condition for the former in contemporary history. He wants to show how the reputed practice of democracy produces and is affected by political inequality, which he defines as the exclusion of some groups from political participation.

Applying the lens of comparative politics, Hanchard takes us back to ancient Athens to retrace the modern history of racial and ethno-national exclusion from what he terms democratic polities in the West. This ancient Athenian autochthony excluded from citizenship all women and all men who could not prove that they descended from a mythological original people tied to Athenian soil. "The citizenship regime of Athens after the Persian wars [after 451 BC] was a gendered

ethno-national regime, with a myth of autochthony (male descendants who were, figuratively, of the soil) as the first order criterion for political membership" (Hanchard 2018: 2). This exclusion of slaves, immigrants (metics), and women, he argues, was designed to naturalize and restrict membership in the Athenian polity. It "became a prototypical form of differentiation intended to rationalize limitations [in the modern era] upon citizenship or formal membership in the political community" (3).

The concept of autochthony means native or indigenous and in political science refers to a political system that excludes those who are not alleged to be of aboriginal lineage from a blood-based race or ethnicity attached to a land. From Athens, Hanchard goes on to show, through an examination of several case studies in the Americas and Europe in the contemporary era, how the rise of "democracy" (I will insist on placing this term in quotation marks for reasons I explain below) has been interwoven with the history of colonialism and of racial or ethno-national regimes. As in ancient Greece, the exclusion from political systems in the modern era of indigenous and African-descendant peoples in the Americas and Jews in Europe, among other groups, often expressed ideologically as racial nationalism, constitutes modern, racialized autochthonies modeled after the Athenian prototype.

If "the race concept became the modern equivalent of the Athenian myth of autochthony in many Western and Western-influenced nation-states" (6), Hanchard also observes that this modern equivalent is distinguished from its ancient forefather not by its sedentariness but by its portability. "By the 19th century, race became a marker of portability as well as origins. An Anglo-Saxon could be an Anglo-Saxon whether they resided in Saxony or not," writes Hanchard. "The race concept grew detached from territory to denote populations regardless of their location in the world, with an emphasis on appearance (phenotypical and somatic traits)" (7).

Critique of Comparative Politics

Hanchard's work follows two intersecting tracks: one is an analysis of discrimination, inequality and democracy; the other is the historiography of comparative politics as a subfield in political science. Much of the underlying subtext in the second track is an appeal to his fellow scholars of comparative politics to integrate colonialism, slavery, and racial/ethno-national history into their scholarship. He identifies three moments in the history of the subfield: the late 19th century, the mid-20th century, and the fin de siècle. In all three eras, he observes, comparative politics failed to take up racial nationalism, migration, xenophobia, and the political exclusion of minority groups. "The contemporary iteration of comparative politics as a field within political science is also the most neglectful of the legacies of colonialism, racism, and imperialism within Western nation-states," asserts Hanchard, "and their combined implications for how students of comparative politics might examine racial and ethno-national regimes" (17).

He proceeds to take us on a fascinating journey into the history of comparative politics, starting with the oft forgotten, late 19th century father of the subfield, Edward Freeman. Unlike more contemporary scholars of comparative politics, Freeman took a deeply transdisciplinary approach to the field, a self-described endeavor to assess sameness and difference that could uncover universal laws through global and longitudinal studies. Yet there was a fundamental tension in Freeman's work between his search for universal bases of comparison and his deeply biological and essentialist understandings of race. As Hanchard notes, for Freeman, the comparative method would help demonstrate the reputed superiority of a Euro-Aryan "race" and hence of its political institutions. The "nexus of race and polity" established by Freeman "has been a central feature of Western politics in the 20th century" (37).

The second era, marked by decolonization and the advent of the developing world, saw the rise of political development theory in comparative politics, involving a sharp turn to positivism and the supplanting of the race concept by the culture concept in the comparative study of difference. "Freeman's nexus of race and polity," notes Hanchard, "was replaced by the nexus of culture and polity" (60). Curiously, Hanchard does not here discuss Malik (1996), who has written perhaps the master study on this supplanting of race by culture. Political development theory was closely associated with modernization theory, which reached its zenith in the 1950s and 1960s before being dethroned by scholars associated with theories of the world-systems, dependency, underdevelopment, and radical political economy as little more than an ethnocentric justification for global inequality. Finally, the third era, known as the "Perestroika movement" in comparative politics, coincided with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the reconfiguration of global politics. It too, Hanchard charges, fails to incorporate race and the legacy of colonialism and imperialism. In taking us through these three epochs, Hanchard points to an underlying continuity in a dearth of research in comparative politics on the role of racial and ethno-national subordination in the formation of Western polities and practices of citizenship. There is certainly no such dearth more broadly in the critical social sciences (Hanchard references some of the major works, including those from the world-systems perspective). What is it in the methodology and epistemology of comparative politics that explains the continuation into the 21st century of such a conundrum in the subfield? "Given the autoreferential character of most methods discussions within the field, with the focus on mathematical precision ["large N research"] and predictive capacity," suggests Hanchard, "the actual world of politics barely intrudes" (171).

Surely, though, the larger explanation is to be found in the relationship between power and intellectual production, between the practice of domination and its theoretical expressions. We may recall how John Burgess, the founder of the first department of political science in the United States, declared in 1890 that the new discipline "would help the civilized state" to "undertake the

work of state organization for the populations of the colonial and semi-colonial regions who were "in a state of barbarism or semi-barbarism" (as cited in Robinson 1996: 45).

Where are Class and Capital?

Absent from Hanchard's narrative are class analysis and a critique of capitalism (the term "capitalism" appears on only seven of 215 pages).   It has become a convenient mechanism to dismiss class analysis with the red herring of 'class reductionism,' by means of which race becomes free standing, an ontology to itself ('race reductionism') that ends up not only reifying the social construction but also writing off the class relations of capitalism from which racialization historically sprung.[1]   If Hanchard does not dismiss class (but he reduces it to a social condition), neither does he give any systematic treatment to class relations or to the relationship of race to class and capital.

Where does this lacuna lead us? To answer this, we must return to the cultural trope by which political inequality is legitimated by alleged cultural differences. While Hanchard explicitly rejects this trope, I am not entirely convinced that he has moved us fully beyond the culture concept in his claim to ancient Greek origins of modern day racial inequality. "The spectre of difference has hovered over democratic polities ranging from the classical Athens to contemporary nation-states," he argues. It is "the fear, the fright of difference" that produces exclusion (207). Hanchard seems to be saying that this "fear of difference" is causal to political inequality, a quite liberal and culturalist assumption. Is the perception of difference ("perceptual discrimination") really the causal starting point of inequality and exclusion?   If this were so, then the solution would be a celebration of diversity and multiculturalism to overcome this fear. But this quasi-essentialist notion, quite inconsistent with his allusions elsewhere to control over the labor and resources of those excluded, ignores that difference itself is produced, and that the ruling groups create fear over such difference as a strategy to assert their control and reproduce their class rule.

The theme of a Greek and allegedly therefore European origin to modern racism is not new (never mind that 'Europe' did not exist at the time of the ancient Greeks). Cedric Robinson (1983), in his classic, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, a book that enjoys such cult status that criticism is considered blasphemy, claims that Greek slavery was an "uncompromising racial construct" (xxxi) that was reiterated and embellished throughout European history. Yet the argument is fundamentally flawed, as ancient Greek slavery was not race-based, and we have no historical evidence whatsoever of race and racialization prior to the modern era. Moreover, notwithstanding Robinson's claim that there was something peculiarly

---

[1] As an aside, *any* reductionism should be rejected. In a dialectical and holistic approach what should concern us is the internal unity of these distinct social relations.

European to the institution, slavery has been a universal class relation, present in the Chinese to the Aztec, Arab, West African and other civilizations of ancient times.

Hanchard does not fall into Robinson's mythification, at least not wholesale. He does not claim that Greek slavery was color based. Instead, he suggests that the Greek autochthonous system of inclusion and exclusion was the prototype of modern day racism. However, this argument remains unsatisfactory because we know that all the ancient empires as class systems also differentiated groups according to cultural or territorial criteria and involved differentiated relationships to the state. So there must have been something else that arose in Europe to explain why this region became the generator of systems of modern day racial inequality and the colonizer of the world.

That something, of course, is capitalism. We have a vast literature showing how systems of race-based slavery, exclusion, and oppression arose as part and parcel of the rise of capitalism as a world system. If we accept that there is something intrinsic in European culture prior to capitalism that led Europeans to conquer and enslave, then we fall back on the very assumptions of modernization theory and its related branches in political development and political culture theory that Hanchard has already rejected, according to which it was not capitalism but culture ('modern' over 'traditional') that caused the development of some peoples and the backwardness of others. In the logic of this account, the vanquishing of the world's colonized peoples is the result of their cultural deficit.

Hanchard wants to foreground the legacy of colonialism and imperialism on political inequality. "Although new technologies in the 19th and 20th centuries transformed how colonialism and imperialism were conducted, the imperatives and objectives of 20th century powers bore a striking resemblance to the objectives and imperatives of older, earlier empires, whether city-states or nation-states: to extract human and material resources from one part of the world at the expense of peoples in other parts of the world" (64). But he cannot have it both ways. If the legacies of slavery, colonialism, and imperialism are central to the racial inequality then the critique of capitalism as the system that produced these legacies must be placed at the center of the analysis. This brings us to the relationship between the political and the socioeconomic.

The Unity of the Political and the Socioeconomic

The underlying focus of Hanchard work – its substratum – is the relationship between democracy and political inequality. Yet I find this focus too limiting if the objective is to explain political inequality. If we are to answer the question, why are some groups excluded from the polity, we must inevitably tackle head on the relationship of the political to the socioeconomic. On this matter, Hanchard does not commit to a clear explanation as to why certain groups are excluded. At times he puts forth an ideational explanation, attributing it to the "preference" of states or to

"beliefs" and "perceptions." (see, for example, 207-209), and goes so far as to assert that "the first form of inequality is perceptual discrimination, which precedes discriminations articulated in law and policy (pp. 209, my emphasis). At other times he identifies the legacies of slavery and colonialism. He is critically aware that there are connections between social and political inequality and discusses the contribution of the Atlantic slave trade to the development of capitalism. But he does not specify the nature of these connections.

Hanchard wants to focus attention on the "nexus of racial formation and state power" (119). For Hanchard, states' "preferences" and "intentional decisions" are the causal origin of exclusion. In shifting our focus away the mutual constitution of race and class in the development of capitalism and towards the political (the state), Hanchard moves into the ontological terrain of racial formation theory put forth by Omi and Winant (1994), who locate race in an enclosed system of states and racial regimes. In the words of their trenchant critics Darder and Torres, they "fail to take into account the social relations of production and the racialization process [produced by those relations]" (2004: 42). For Hanchard, "political and social inequality are often dynamically related, insofar as exclusionary and inclusionary criteria for citizenship formation and participation invariably emanate from the same source: state power" (6). But if the state creates exclusion and inclusion – and as a matter of course it does do this – why does it do so and for whom? Why would Hanchard not simply affirm that the state has institutionalized political exclusion in the interests of the slave owning aristocracies and capitalist classes of the modern era of world capitalism that he references?

Perhaps the answer lies in the polyarchic conception of democracy that informs his study. This conception is predicated precisely on the separation of the political from the socioeconomic. Essentially contested concepts such as 'democracy' or 'freedom' are politically and ideologically charged. Such concepts come to have multiple and internally contradictory meanings which are given to them by specific class and group interests with a stake in their definition. The polyarchic conception of democracy put forward by Dahl (1972) is merely the intellectual and ideological culmination of a long history of efforts by capitalist ruling groups and their organic intellectuals to produce a theory of democracy that would make invisible the evident contradiction between political democracy and socioeconomic dictatorship, between formal political-juridical equality and deep, socioeconomic inequality that is produced and reproduced by the very nature of the capitalist social order.

I have discussed this matter at length in my 1996 study, *Promoting Polyarchy*, which Hanchard references without engaging its content, much of which stands in sharp contrast to his conception. This separation of the socioeconomic from the political has a political-ideological function, insofar as 'democracy' in the polyarchic conception is strictly procedural and only procedural, explicitly not substantive; procedurally free and "competitive" elections, so that people

may chose those who are to rule them. In this conception, 'democracy' is entirely compatible with social inequality, class exploitation, and domination (and indeed, with structural racism).

Hanchard's study is riddled with this tension. He discusses the limitations of the polyarchic conception but having defined democracy simply as political participation, he must embrace it to analyze race and political inequality, so that democracy and political exclusion, far from being oxymoronic, exist alongside and reproduce one another. Yet formal political-juridical equality alongside the persistence and growth of racial (and more generally, social) inequality is a paradox that cannot be explained outside of a critique of the larger social order of global capitalism, that is, outside of the unity of the political and the socioeconomic.

It is this critique of capitalism that draws out the dialectic unity of the political and the socioeconomic and exposes the internal relation of racial oppression to class exploitation. From this perspective, what are causal to inequality are control by small groups of the social labor process and the private appropriation by these groups of the wealth that this labor produces. The more intensive and repressive control over racialized labor and the more complete appropriation of the wealth that labor has produced in the history of the world capitalist system go a long way in explaining the imperative for the ruling groups to exclude these groups from political participation. The capitalist polity has always involved this mix of consensual and coercive domination, of hegemonic incorporation and repressive exclusion. The processes by which social inequality and domination are reproduced through political systems vary across time and space. Hanchard's contribution is to highlight how this political reproduction of social domination in the modern era has taken the form of racial and ethno-national (and gendered) regimes. But he leaves us with the pluralist assumption that a democratic polity would work if just purged of its exclusionary (discriminatory) dimensions. Indeed, the very subtitle, "How Discrimination Haunts Western Democracy," leaves us with this restrictive focus on discrimination.

Yet completely eliminating discrimination in political participation would still render a deeply unequal society, as such inequality is grounded in the larger, and analytically prior, structures of social inequality, of the social relations of production and reproduction. We could imagine, e.g., a United States that achieves complete and non-discriminatory political equality but continues to be marked by profound racial inequality. Indeed, this is close to where we are today! As Obama's presidency made clear, a black man can undertake the management of global capitalism and all the modalities of social inequality and repressive class exploitation it involves just as effectively as a white man. These modalities remain deeply racialized despite the triumph of formal political-juridical equality. Political-juridical equality alongside (racialized) social inequality remains by virtue of Hanchard's epistemology a paradox without explanation.

Notwithstanding these concerns, *The Spectre of Race* makes an important contribution to the study of democracy and inequality as well to the historiography and epistemology of comparative

politics. Ultimately, if we are to get at the roots of inequality we need a theory of differentiation, of how capitalism, and before it other class formations, differentiate the subordinate groups in function of (differential) exploitation and control. Hanchard's study offers valuable insight in the task of developing such a theory.

References

Dahl, Robert, A. 1972. *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Darder, Antonio and Rodolfo D. Torres. 2004. *After Race: Racism After Multiculturalism*. New York, NY: New York University Press.

Malik, Kenan. 1996. *The Meaning of Race: Race, History and Culture in Western Society*. New York, NY: New York University Press.

Michael Omi and Howard Winant. 1994. *Racial Formation in the United States*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Robinson, Cedric, J. 1983. *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

Robinson, William, I. 1996. *Promoting Polyarchy: Globalization, U.S. Intervention, and Hegemony*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.