

Introduction

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In the last decades of the twentieth century there were many attempts in the Americas to establish new “national agreements,” enshrined in reformed constitutions to include the principles of recognition of difference and respect for traditions and customs specific to certain sectors of the population. Multiculturalism entered into the discursive practices and the laws and regulations of various countries. For indigenous groups organized since the 1970s, this period definitively marked a break to the extent that it legitimized their struggles and demands for special treatment as autochthonous people and made them interlocutors with states and governments, now obliged to negotiate with them the sharing of certain resources and some reforms (Sieder 2002). Be it as “peoples,” “nations,” or “ethnic groups,” indigenous people gained bargaining power in their respective countries and in international arenas, but they did not necessarily achieve material benefits or definitive policies (for an analysis of empirical cases in a comparative perspective between Mexico and Colombia, see Hoffmann and Rodríguez 2007). The different “regimes of multicultural citizenship” included, with specific social logic, Afro-descendants in different degrees or forms, especially after the international conference in Durban in 2001.

Indeed, in the same period and in articulation with the indigenous sector, the black movement began to emerge as a visible force in Latin America. However, unlike the earlier indig-

enous movements, it did not enjoy a legitimizing discourse in the international arena as an “autochthonous” or “indigenous” group. It began to grow, then, in a very disperse form around localized demonstrations based as appropriate on the fight against discrimination and racism, cultural claims, demands for land or access to health and education, among others. The diversity of action largely reflects the wide range of situations in the places inhabited by African descendants in America, which Juliet Hooker (2010, 46-47) organized into four main “types”: the “afro-mestizos,” descendants of colonial slaves and mixed in the societies for several centuries, and who have not developed specific collective identities; those who are also descendants of colonial slaves, but who have developed racialized identities, as in Brazil; the descendants or members of communities of escaped slaves, like the Garifuna; and finally the West Indians of African descent who arrived in Central America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, mostly as migrant workers in plantations or on the railroad.

We do not wish to delve into this typology and its relevance, but rather to stress that this variety shows that it is neither possible nor desirable to seek a unique pattern relative to black populations, not even that which is based on diversity, hybridity, fluidity, and mobility united around the concept of “Diaspora” in the works of Appadurai (1996), Gilroy (1993) or Chivallon (2004), particularly in the case of Latin America (Cunin 2009).

As for public policies of difference related to populations of African descent, we also recognize several lines developed from the 1990s. Two countries have been the subjects of multiple investigations because of the magnitude of the changes introduced: Colombia and Brazil. In Colombia the “multicultural revolution” of the 1990s has been studied, based on a definition of multiculturalism that is pragmatic but accepted, concrete, regulated and effective, even if partially, and that recognizes territorial, political, and social rights of Afro-descendants, considered as an “ethnic group.” In Brazil, studies have shown that, on the one hand, there is recognition of the territorial claims of the Quilombolas, yet on the other hand a model of quotas is adopted to regulate differential access to educational, health, and other

resources on a phenotypic and explicitly racialized basis. More recently, other Latin American countries have begun to develop their own measures, using these two models (Ecuador), introducing more radical changes (Bolivia), or simply acknowledging cultural rights or promoting research (Argentina).

How are Mexico and Central America located in this range of positions and orientations? In Mexico the interpretive models, developed since the 1950s and especially in the 1980s around the idea of a “third root,” described the populations of African descent as a “historical fact,” a group that was the carrier of certain “cultural traits,” but that until a few years ago had no political presence (Hoffmann in this volume). Indeed, they were denied any sociological relevance, which led the African militants to consider themselves the “missing link” of America in the great concert of Afro-Latinos, a population that would suffer from a lack of identity or, worse, that would deny its origins and identities. In Central America the story is different, not only because of the demographic importance of Afro-descendants that came with colonization and trade (the so-called “black colonials”) but also because of the presence of the Garifuna, and French and British West Indians (Barrow and Priestley 2003, Euraque 2004, Hooker 2005, Amaya 2007, Anderson 2007). However, there are few countries that have implemented specific measures, despite legislative initiatives in this direction in Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Honduras in the 1980s and 1990s. This region allows us to deepen the relationship between nation and the role of peoples of African descent, as it is marked by the complex dynamics of nation building intersecting with regional divisions (the “enclave” of the Atlantic coast) and transnational forces (political movements, plantation economy, and social movements).

This book argues that people of African descent in Mexico and Central America do not suffer from “identity deficit” but rather they do not fit into the “classical” interpretations and are therefore not easily categorized in known analytical schemes. By the same token they have much to teach us, and their analysis has to be located at the intersection of ethnic and political perspectives, *mestizaje* ideology, and cultural viewpoints. Mexican

and Central American configurations, because of their originality, force us to adopt plural visions, and not always from the binomial dominant-dominated, but also toward the margins, the edges, the borders, with particular emphasis on situations of mixtures and ambiguous categories (Afro-indigenous, creoles, mestizos), multiple belongings (national and transnational), or seemingly contradictory practices (black music and religion without black people, mobilization without ethnic claims). We will rely on the collective work of D. Euraque, J. L. Gould, and C. Hale (2004) on Central America, returning to their idea of continuity between *mestizaje* and multiculturalism, as ideologies of government for the management of differences. This concept leads us to propose that, beyond the ideal of a homogenized citizenship produced by *mestizaje*, there are complex dynamics of claims based on difference and indifference, stigmatization and fascination (Lhamon 1998), homogenization and othering. In this regard, we believe that *mestizaje* is not only a “myth” and multiculturalism a “challenge” to it, and that we have to further investigate the different processes of racialization, ethnicization, and negotiation of the belongings that characterize *mestizaje* as multiculturalism.

This begins to depict what might be some specificities of the political projects for African groups and collectives in Central America and Mexico: their necessary renouncement to unambiguous explanations. Using the debates on the respective weights of agency and structure, political actors and institutions, transnational networks and initiatives rooted in local areas, the state and grassroots organizations, the essays in this book go beyond simple proposals and hope to assert and prove the political dimension of the negotiations of rural and urban communities and collectives of Afro-descendants with their respective environments.



The scenes of everyday life are analyzed by Miguel Gonzalez, who studies the interactions and tensions between ethnic groups of the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua, within the framework of the regional autonomy system (RAAN and

RAAS, Autonomous Regions of the North and South Atlantic) granted by the Sandinista government after violent conflicts. In a context of the recognition of limited multicultural citizenship, the struggle for the legitimacy of their rights brought forward groups and collectives who all demand more democracy and greater autonomy, but who do not always converge in their methods and resources. This leads the author to discuss the alleged positive correlation between democracy and autonomy in the autonomous regime. For blacks and indigenous peoples of the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua, according to Gonzalez, the regional autonomy regime is in fact a “restricted inclusion” to national citizenship, which certainly creates new opportunities for participation but, at the same time, fails to resolve tensions between sectors. One could follow this line and ask what happens to the mestizos that reside in the same regions of the Atlantic but are not part of the multicultural scheme proposed by the autonomy regimes. Might one introduce the notion of “imposed inclusion” to account for this regime that seeks to include on the basis of a partition into groups, and therefore excludes those who do not belong to them? Another key aspect of the political struggle has to do with the negotiation of the specific spaces in which it develops, that is, the issue of the districts where the autonomy regime is applied, which are at the same time the spaces where the debates, the contradictions, the tensions and the conflicts of everyday life are constructed. Far from being a technical or administrative issue, the delimitation of community, political and electoral entities or units refers to certain concepts about the group, its cohesion and diversity: Who should be a neighbor of whom? Who decides where the line should go?

Elisabeth Cunin shows how, in the case of Belize, ethnic identity is at once both denied and used by political actors in the early years of independence in the 1980s. From a “multicultural” model—before its time—associated with British colonialism, succeeds an effort to build a “creole nation” that will lead to a kind of “ethnic war,” also not named or declared, which seems to lead to an accelerated process of ethnicization of all the socio-cultural components of the country, starting with the Creoles. Without articulating it and thus escaping the models

implemented in other countries, Belize constructs its recent national history in the midst of contradictions and of very original theoretical and political innovations.

Carlos Agudelo is interested in the complex web of organizations, groups, and sectors of the black movement in Central America. This allows him to highlight the role of international bodies and to show how militant networks are established with a certain hierarchy and based on the control of resources, both material (trips, allowances) and intangible (knowledge, discourses, prestige). In these networks, which are rarely horizontal, a clientelistic logic is articulated with vicissitudes and contingencies, personal affinities and opportunities that enable or hinder cooperation between groups. In the precarious conditions of daily life of the militants, the priorities are negotiated on a permanent basis and the construction of common ideological discourses becomes difficult if not impossible and undesirable.

Starting the series of works on Mexico, Odile Hoffmann proposes a review of viewpoints and approaches that have historically dealt with the issue. She gives a critical account of “Afro-Mexican” studies (antecedents, currents) and proposes an analytical framework for understanding the specificities of the Mexican case. Through the study of certain cultural institutions and certain actors (activists, intellectuals) she analyses the ambiguities of the ethnicization of the black population, which, although located in part in the regional context of affirmation of multiculturalism, refers mostly to the specific dynamics of the construction of the colony and later of the Mexican nation. Going beyond the reference to the “third root,” the article is a call to investigate the flexibility and permeability of group boundaries, the unstable and unfinished processes of identification.

Gloria Lara examines the emergence of the ethno-political reference in Mexico, more precisely in the Costa Chica of Oaxaca and Guerrero. Based on long and intense fieldwork, she describes how a “black current” is being constructed since the 1990s; she reconstructs their genealogy and their internal diversity. This allows her to escape from two hazards: one that tends to undervalue the black mobilization in Mexico, citing its

“inauthenticity” because of its very recent nature and weak local acceptance, and another that on the contrary overestimates the role and impact of Afro-descendant organizations, groups that only bring together a few dozen individuals, sometimes much less. Whatever its importance, the existence and dynamics of this movement can no longer be denied and thus deserves analytical attention.

Christian Rinaudo deconstructs the association “Veracruz-black” and shows that it is a result of historical and touristic discourses and public policies. He presents a critical approach to the analyses in terms of “ethnic groups,” which emphasizes the processes of categorization and social uses of the categories, rather than the “groups” or “populations,” and thus opens novel approaches based on notions such as “ethnicity without ethnic groups” (Brubaker 2002) or “blackness without ethnicity.” (Sansone 2003) According to Rinaudo, the several instances of *mestizaje*, not just ideological but “real,” force us to abandon the study of “black people” in favor of an approach in terms of social processes of distinction between “black” and “not black.” He presents within this logic an ethnography of Veracruz, which emphasizes “the contexts or the moments” more than the groups, and he explores various avenues of research, which tend to set a true work program.

Finally Nahayeilli Juárez shows an interest in *santería*, addressed in an original way: not as an “African religion” which would lead one to study the elements of survival, but as a part of contemporary processes of transnationalization, between Cuba and Mexico mainly, with ramifications in the US and Africa. Juárez discusses *santería* as a symbol of African-American culture that travels around, and its relocation in Mexico City in the years 1940-50, linked to the music, film and entertainment industries. *Santería* in Mexico is associated with both blacks and non-blacks; it is confused with other practices not ethnically or racially marked (Catholicism, popular cultures). Thus appear “Afro signs” that circulate among various territories and that do not mechanically produce “an African identity.”

Notes

1. Hoffmann, Odile coord. 2010. *Política e identidad. Afrodescendientes en México y América Central*. México: INAH-UNAM-CEMCA-IRD; Cunin, Elisabeth coord. 2010. *Mestizaje, diferencia y nación. "Lo negro" en América Central y el Caribe*. México: INAH-UNAM-CEMCA-IRD; de la Serna, Juan Manuel, coord. 2010. *De la libertad y la abolición: Africanos y afrodescendientes en Iberoamérica*. México: INAH-UNAM-CEMCA-IRD; Velázquez, María Elisa coord. 2011. *Debates históricos contemporáneos: africanos y afrodescendientes de México y Centroamérica*. México: INAH-UNAM-CEMCA-IRD.
2. Editorial norms in relation to proper names are always subject to debate. In this case, and following the preferences of Garifuna authors, we chose to use "Garifuna" invariably, without a plural form.

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