

Translating Race and Caste

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Abstract In the late nineteenth century, Indian and African American social reformers began to compare struggles against racial oppression in the United States with movements against caste oppression in India. The majority of these reformers ignored what was lost in translating messy particularities of identity, status and hierarchy into the words “race” and “caste” and then again translating between these words. While exploring the limitations of such a double translation, this article argues that race/caste analogies were often utilized in opposition to white supremacy, caste oppression, and other forms of injustice.

In 1873, Jotirao Phule marshaled the history of race in the United States to attack caste prejudice in India. An eloquent critic of caste oppression, Phule had authored several books and founded an organization, the Satyashodak Samaj, that aimed to represent the “bahujan” or majority of India that Phule argued had been subjugated by a Brahman elite (Omvedt 1976; O’Hanlon 1985). Phule entitled his attack on Brahmanism *Slavery* and dedicated it:

To the good people of the United States as a token of admiration for their sublime disinterested and self sacrificing devotion in the cause of Negro Slavery; and with an earnest desire, that my country men may take their noble example as their guide in the emancipation of their Shudra Brethren from the trammels of Brahmin thralldom (Phule 1873).

In his dedication, as well as the title of his book, Phule wielded elastic notions of freedom and slavery to denounce caste hierarchy. His emphasis on the “self sacrificing devotion” of the “good people of the United States” framed emancipation as the end of a noble story. He disregarded the continued plight of African Americans. Phule did not aim to educate his audience about post-emancipation America, however, but to inspire opposition to caste oppression in India.

The significance of a transnational analogy resides in its local application. In 1849, the influential American business journal, *Hunt’s Merchant’s Magazine*, which often advertised goods produced by American slave labor, declared that the caste system rendered Hindus “the most enslaved portion of the human race” (Anonymous 1849: 481). Phule used a similar comparison, but

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he did so to combat caste oppression rather than, as did *Hunt's Merchant's Magazine*, to dramatize the accomplishments of the British Empire. Although he overestimated the achievement of racial equality in the United States, Phule wielded a transnational analogy between race and caste to oppose the injustices of his own society.

In the late nineteenth century, Indian and African American social reformers began to articulate analogies between the injustices of colonial India and the United States. Inspired by the juxtaposition of emancipation and empire that characterized much of the nineteenth century world, the discourses that linked Indians and African Americans operated within a unique transnational context, dominated by the tension between two at times contradictory pairs of analogies. Some historical actors, such as Phule, compared struggles against racial oppression in the United States with movements against caste oppression in India. In contrast with this race/caste analogy, other thinkers and activists, such as W.E.B. Du Bois, compared American racism and British imperialism, pairing African Americans with all the colonized subjects of the British Raj as fellow "colored" peoples struggling against white supremacy. From their inception, connections between South Asian and African American freedom struggles called into question the meaning of freedom itself and its relationship to equally contested notions of race and caste.

The majority of historical actors who analogized race and caste evinced little or no regard for the internal complexity of race or caste. Concerned with the political impact of race/caste analogies, they ignored what was lost in translating messy particularities of identity, status and hierarchy into the words "race" and "caste" and then again translating between these words. The danger of such a double translation is epitomized by the word "caste" itself. From the Portuguese "*casta*," the word "caste" conflates two distinct social categories: "*varna*" and "*jati*." *Varna* refers to the division of Hindu society into Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Sudras, a roughly hierarchical order that excludes Dalits (so-called "untouchables") and the diverse group of peoples known in India as "Tribals." *Varna* literally means "color," a fact that has played a consistent role in racialized conceptions of caste. *Jati*, which comes from the Sanskrit for "birth," refers to the hundreds of endogamous groups, often associated with a particular occupation, that have come to be the preeminent social identifier for many Indians. While distinctions of *varna* and *jati* exist throughout the subcontinent, their meanings vary dramatically between regions and change in relation to other social divisions such as class and gender. The embedded nature of race and caste, the thickness of their local significance, militates against transnational comparisons. Comparing what

caste has meant in Tamil Nadu and Gujarat or what race has meant in Chicago and New Orleans is challenging enough.

The loss that accompanies translation must not overshadow the rich history of translation between race and caste. As scholar Brent Hayes Edwards argues in regards to the “practice of diaspora,” the messiness of translation should not lead scholars to seek safer ground, but rather “to consider discourses of cultural and political linkage only through and across difference” (Edwards 2001: 64). Translating across the differences between race and caste has proved a rich, varied, and consequential pursuit. A variety of activists have used race/caste comparisons in order to attack inequalities based on race and caste. Transnational comparisons between race and caste were not, however, always transgressive. Indeed, many prominent figures wielded race/caste comparisons defensively in order to shield the local or national status quo from the pressure of international opinion. In response to Katherine Mayo’s scathing portrayal of caste in her infamous bestseller *Mother India*, a range of Indian writers loudly castigated American racism. When questioned about American racism during the Cold War, many Americans, including several politically conservative Black Americans, denounced caste oppression. In both cases, a desire to protect the national image prevented transnational analogies from confronting injustices at home. At their best, however, race/caste analogies contributed to the development of a colored cosmopolitanism that aimed to liberate the world’s oppressed “colored” peoples, not only from white supremacy but also from other forms of injustice, whether based on gender, class, or caste (Slate 2009b).

Mother India and the Race/Caste Shield

In August 1910, renowned poet and educator, Rabindranath Tagore, wrote an American lawyer, “It has never been India’s lot to accept alien races as factors in her civilization. You know very well how the caste that proceeds from colour takes elsewhere a most virulent form.” Tagore elaborated on the word “elsewhere” by saying, “I need not cite modern instances of the animosity which divides white men from negroes in your country, and excludes Asiatics from European colonies.” Tagore contrasted the racism of America and Europe with the inclusiveness of India, an inclusiveness that he linked historically with the advent of caste via the two-race theory of Indian civilization, in which an “Aryan” people invaded India from the Northwest, conquering the original inhabitants (Trautmann 1997). Tagore declared,

When, however, the white-skinned Aryans on encountering the dark aboriginal races of India found themselves face to face with the same problem, the solution of which was either extermination, as has happened in America and Australia, or a modification without the possibility of either friction or fusion, they chose the latter.

For Tagore, caste was a “frictionless” alternative to racism and genocide. After stating that he “need not dwell at length on the evils of the resulting caste system,” Tagore instead defended its necessity by arguing that caste enabled “races with widely different culture and even antagonistic social and religious usages and ideals to settle down peaceably side by side.” For the Tagore of 1910, caste harmonized different “races” and allowed India to avoid the divisiveness of Western racism (Dutta and Robinson 1997: 74–77). As Tagore’s letter makes evident, comparisons between caste and race, while potentially helping uncover caste oppression in India, could also be used to minimize or at times directly defend the practice of caste in India. Such defensive politics marked the controversy surrounding Katherine Mayo’s *Mother India*.

Published in 1927, *Mother India* offered a strident critique of Indian society. As she had in an earlier work on American imperialism in the Philippines, Mayo argued that colonization was a force for moral improvement (Sinha 2006). The majority of Indian responses to *Mother India* combined refutations of Mayo’s claims with counterattacks focused on the faults of the West and especially of the United States. In Bombay, K.A. Natarajan (1927: 55) published a “rejoinder” to *Mother India* that branded Mayo a “fanatic apostle (professed) of White domination.” C.S. Ranga Iyer’s *Father India: A Reply to Mother India* (1927: 90) asserted that the “Aryan” invaders of India were “better than the white Brahmins of the twentieth century” who claimed “divine right at home and abroad.” Dhan Gopal Mukerji, in his *A Son of Mother India Answers*, published in New York (1928: 62), declared that Mayo’s worst inaccuracies were “as fantastic as saying that Miss Jane Addams believes in Negro lynching.” In his revealingly entitled *Uncle Sham: Being the Strange Tale of a Civilisation Run Amok*, published in Lahore in 1929, Kanhaya Lal Gauba proclaimed that the initials “K.K.K.” were “well known throughout the world as symbols of terrorism, barbarity and murder.” Lal Gauba included two chapters on racial oppression, which he called “the largest blot on the institutions of the American democracy (Gauba 1929: 36–41).

Responses to *Mother India* often compared race in America with caste in India. In 1930, the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society in Stockton, California, published Dilip Singh Saund’s *My Mother India*. Saund would later become the first United States Congressman of Indian descent. “With typical complacency,” he wrote, “the Americans declare that there is no caste in the United

States. Yet the American negro, although he has a right to vote and to hold office, has absolutely no opportunity to make use of these privileges." Saund referenced laws that prohibited marriage between "whites and negroes," decried the brutality of lynching, and criticized the segregation of schools, churches, hotels, and public transportation. Importantly, Saund told his readers that American racism did not "justify the injustice of caste in India or anywhere else in the world." Like Tagore, however, Saund presented caste in India as better than the near genocide of American Indians or the enslavement of Africans. He wrote, "The Aryan forefathers of India, by giving to the original population of the country a distinct place in its social life, however low, have preserved them on the one hand from extermination and on the other from slavery of person." Like Tagore, Saund used a comparison with the United States to defend caste in India, even while decrying caste oppression.

Subhas Chandra Bose, the renowned Bengali anticolonial activist, twice elected President of the Indian National Congress and future leader of the Indian National Army, similarly criticized caste while defending its merits in contrast to Western racism. Bose, however, framed his critique of caste in much stronger terms. In May 1928, Bose declared, "It is in harmonising different angles of view of synthesising different cultures that the special mission of India lies." He continued, "Europe had tried to solve it, but how? What is the record of England and other countries in Africa and Asia and where are the aborigines who had come under the civilizing influence of Europe? How is America solving her Negro problem?" Bose used American racism as an example of the broader failure of the West to deal with the question of difference. India, on the other hand, "had avoided that path and had attempted to solve it according to her lights." The importance of the word "attempted" became clear when Bose proclaimed, "Harmonising of different ethnic groups was sought to be achieved through Varnashrama Dharma. But conditions have changed today and we need a higher and more scientific synthesis" (Bose 1985). Like Tagore and Saund, Bose presented caste as the result of an ancient effort to harmonize "different ethnic groups." Bose, however, claimed only that harmony "was sought to be achieved" through caste, not that it actually was.

Within a year of Bose's speech, an American woman asked Mahatma Gandhi a pointed question: "Is the plight of the untouchable as hard as that of the Negro in America?" Gandhi's response (1929) echoed the argument that Tagore, Saund, and Bose had made earlier – that caste, despite its problems, was still preferable to American racism. Gandhi began, however, by seeming to avoid

the question. He stated, "There can be no true comparison between the two. They are dissimilar." His real answer became apparent when he offered four reasons why the "plight of the untouchable" was in fact not as severe as the treatment of "the Negro in America." First, he claimed that, in contrast to Jim Crow segregation, no legal discrimination operated against Dalits. Second, he argued that although African Americans were regularly lynched, the "tradition of non-violence" in India had made such savage violence against Dalits "impossible." Third, he noted that individual Dalits had become "saints." He wondered if the United States had "any Negro saints." Fourth, he stated that while the prejudice against untouchability was "fast wearing out," he could only wish that "the tide of colour prejudice had spent itself in America."

Gandhi's four comparisons between race and caste grossly understated the brutality of caste oppression in India. His emphasis on the absence of laws enforcing untouchability, for example, obscured the fact that caste often operated with the sanction of government authorities and was enforced as regularly and brutally as Jim Crow. Gandhi's optimism regarding the end of untouchability would prove unwarranted, as would his belief that "the tradition of nonviolence" had rendered "impossible" the lynching of Dalits (Bayly 1999). Like Tagore and Saund, Gandhi minimized the iniquity of untouchability in an effort to defend India's reputation abroad. Neither Subhas Chandra Bose nor Gandhi directly framed their references to American racism as a response to Mayo's work. Their use of American racism to defend India and caste, however, coupled with the timing of their statements, indicates a connection to Mayo's infamous accusations.

A more direct response came from anticolonial activist, Lala Lajpat Rai. Known affectionately as the Lion of the Punjab, Lajpat Rai was one of India's most renowned critics of British imperialism. A leading figure in the Arya Samaj, Lajpat Rai championed the Samaj's efforts to oppose the wrongs of colonialism, while reforming Indian society from within. The Samaj had long challenged caste-based oppression, and Lajpat Rai himself spoke out against caste as an aberration unbecoming the unity of the original Aryas. He contributed to the Samaj's development of an ethnically and religiously based nationalism that aggressively courted Dalits and other low-castes while uniting Hindus in opposition to Muslim and Christian missionaries. His evolving views on caste, religion, and nation influenced his perspectives on the struggles of African Americans and were in turn mirrored in his writings on race in America.

Lajpat Rai had twice visited the United States, staying for more than five years during his second journey. He made a point of

meeting a range of African American leaders, including the President of Morehouse College, John Hope, and the renowned scientist, George Washington Carver. Booker T. Washington accompanied Lajpat Rai on a trip to Black communities in the South. W.E.B. Du Bois and Lajpat Rai corresponded, exchanged books, joined the same Civic Club, and met at both Du Bois's office and his home. On October 6, 1927, Lajpat Rai wrote W.E.B. Du Bois from Lahore to ask for information about "the treatment of the negroes in the United States and also about the activities of the Ku Klux Klan." He explained that he was writing a response to *Mother India*, and was already planning to use a few old copies of *The Crisis*. He hoped that Du Bois could send articles and photos documenting more recent atrocities. Du Bois replied on November 9, sending six numbers of *The Crisis*, as well as a photo of a lynching (Dhanki, ed. 1998: 409–410; Slate 2009a).

Published in 1928, Lajpat Rai's *Unhappy India* used the argument made by Saund, Tagore, Bose, and Gandhi – that American racism was worse than caste prejudice – to attack Katherine Mayo and her book. In a two-part chapter entitled "Less than the Pariah," Lajpat Rai spent almost fifty pages carefully detailing his central claim: "The Negro in the United States is worse than a pariah." Lajpat Rai used the articles Du Bois had sent to give graphic depictions of recent mob violence that he linked to the violence Mayo's work had done to India. Directly after describing a mass lynching in East St. Louis, he wrote, "The extreme mechanization of life in America creates an abnormal craving for crazes, stunts, sensation-mongering and produces yellow journals, and shilling-shockers like *Mother India*" (Rai 1928: 113 and 124). By connecting *Mother India* and lynch mobs to "extreme mechanization," Lajpat Rai made a virtue of India's lack of industrialization while associating Mayo with the degradation of American society.

Even more strongly than Saund, Tagore, Bose, and Gandhi, Lajpat Rai asserted that he was not defending caste. He wrote, "Personally I do not believe in caste. I am in favour of its complete abolition." He condemned untouchability "in the strongest terms possible as an absolutely indefensible, inhuman and barbarous institution, unworthy of Hinduism and the Hindus." A few of Lajpat Rai's comparisons between racism and caste prejudice could be used to critique both, as when he lamented "the treatment the Negro 'citizens' of the United States get from their white 'Brahmins'" (Rai 1928: 87 and 140). In a chapter of his earlier book, *The United States of America*, entitled "Caste in America," Lajpat Rai had proclaimed, "It is again remarkable that, as in India, so in America, the discrimination against people of different color (between the Varnas of the Hindus) should be manifested in almost

identical ways" (Rai 1916: 390). Comparing *The United States of America* and *Unhappy India* demonstrates the persistence of Lajpat Rai's opposition to both racial and caste-based oppression. Contrasting the two works reveals, however, a distinct shift in Lajpat Rai's emphasis, a shift directly attributable to his need to criticize *Mother India*. In his earlier work, Lajpat Rai had proclaimed, "The Negro is the PARIAH of America." In *Unhappy India*, he argued, "The Negro in the United States is worse than a pariah." Shifting from equating wrongs to ranking them, Lajpat Rai transformed a transnational analogy with which he had attacked injustice in the United States and India into a reactionary shield, defending domestic inequality in the face of foreign criticism. Lajpat Rai's central argument in *Unhappy India* left him open to attack by opponents of untouchability. By arguing that racism was worse than untouchability was Lajpat Rai, if not defending caste, at least hindering attempts to abolish it?

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, renowned Dalit scholar, lawyer, and activist, took exactly that stance in a tightly argued pamphlet entitled "Which is Worse? Slavery or Untouchability?" Ambedkar lamented the fact that "so great a social reformer and so great a friend of the untouchables as Lala Lajpat Rai in replying to the indictment of the Hindu Society by Miss Mayo insisted that untouchability as an evil was nothing as compared with slavery." After noting that Lajpat Rai "fortified his conclusion" by comparing "the Negro in America with the untouchables in India," Ambedkar stated simply, "Coming as it does from Lala Lajpat Rai the matter needs to be more closely examined." With lengthy block quotes from Reginald Haynes Barrow's *Slavery in the Roman Empire* and Charles Johnson's *The Negro in American Civilization*, Ambedkar argued that slaves were treated better than their legal status would indicate. He presented a relatively rosy account of slavery that he contrasted with the treatment of Dalits in India and concluded, "There can therefore be no doubt that untouchables have been worse off than slaves" (Ambedkar 1989).

Just as Lajpat Rai risked underestimating the evils of untouchability, Ambedkar's argument led him to overlook the brutality of slavery. In his conclusion, he defined slavery as "an exchange of semi-barbarism for civilization," and proclaimed, "To enslave a person and to train him is certainly better than a state of barbarity accompanied by freedom." By equating white America with civilization, Ambedkar argued that slavery was ultimately a good thing for African Americans. His pamphlet never mentioned the prejudice Blacks faced in twentieth century America. By focusing on the brutality of untouchability, Ambedkar overlooked contemporary American racism.

Despite their contrasting conclusions, Lajpat Rai and Ambedkar both used the Negro/Untouchable parallel to rank injustices rather than to suggest new solidarities. Like Katherine Mayo and many of her critics, they utilized transnational comparisons defensively, rather than aiming to inspire meaningful collaboration across borders. Epitomizing the potential blindness of such defensive analogies, Mayo herself later wrote that untouchability was “a type of bondage compared to which our worst Negro slavery was freedom” (Mayo 1930: 250). At its best, such a comparison might motivate protest by dramatizing the brutality of caste oppression. Too often, however, ranking injustice shifted the moral focus toward distant wrongs and away from injustices closer to home. By contrast, Ambedkar utilized the Slave/Untouchable parallel to further his lifelong commitment to ending caste oppression. Despite his understatement of the brutality of slavery and of later forms of American racism, Ambedkar used the Negro/Untouchable parallel to imagine an India where differences were respected and not punished, an India worthy of the world’s respect and emulation.

Race, Caste, and the Cold War Nation

Unlike Ambedkar, the majority of Indian authors who responded to the criticisms of caste in *Mother India* attacked American racism in order to defend India against the assessment of outsiders like Katherine Mayo. During the Cold War, Americans similarly employed critiques of caste for defensive nationalist purposes. In 1948, the American Consul in Madras wrote the Secretary of State that “an oft-repeated answer by the recent Consul General at this post to questions about the ‘color problem’ in the United States was ‘Yes, it’s almost as bad as it is in India.’ This often caused such embarrassed confusion that the subject was immediately dropped” (Dudziak 2000: 34). Thus, the race/caste analogy once again came to serve nationalist ends. Americans responded to Indian opposition to American racism by referencing caste oppression in India. Black Americans who strove to defend the United States without defending American racism found caste especially useful, as it offered a means to respond to Indian challenges without directly defending American racism. Black visitors in India often asserted that American racial oppression was less severe, or at least no more severe, than caste oppression in India.

Often, comparisons between race and caste became little more than defensive maneuvers in the Cold War. Consider, for example, what inspired African American lawyer Edith Sampson to declare in Delhi, “I would rather be the lowliest, most downtrodden Negro in the United States than one of your Untouchables” (Laville and

Lucas 1996: 572). The context of Sampson's statement, as a response to questions about racism in the United States, makes evident that her reference to caste was employed in defense of the nation. Similarly, Carl Rowan, an African American reporter who later headed the United States Information Agency, repeatedly referenced caste during his visit to India. Although Rowan claimed that he did not employ caste "as an excuse for, or mitigating factor in regard to, American racial discrimination," his many references to caste operated primarily to parry Indian questions regarding race in America (Rowan 1956: 33, 76–77, 79, 82, and 154–56).

Like Carl Rowan, George Schuyler, a conservative columnist for the African American newspaper, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, used caste to shield American racism from foreign criticism. In an article in which he argued that "each nation has its own prejudices and discriminations," and thus that American racism did not deserve the world's condemnation, Schuyler (1950a) offered as evidence that "India's castes are notorious." A month later, Schuyler defended Edith Sampson against critics who had denounced Sampson for whitewashing American racism while in India. Schuyler asserted that when African Americans were chosen to go abroad they should "speak as an American," not as a Black American. Schuyler equated being American with defending America against charges of racism. As an example of a minority leader who pursued justice within the nation rather than appeal to international opinion, he offered Dr. Ambedkar, who Schuyler called "the brilliant leader of India's outcasts and untouchables." Schuyler asserted (1950b) that if Ambedkar was chosen as an Ambassador from India to the United Nations "it is highly unlikely that he will so far forget his position as to wash his country's dirty linen (the treatment of his people) before the world audience."

It is difficult to imagine Ambedkar, who dedicated much of his life to the cause of his fellow Dalits, remaining silent on issues of caste before the United Nations. Since 1928, when Ambedkar inverted Lala Lajpat Rai's suggestion that American racism was worse than caste oppression, Ambedkar had moved from ranking wrongs to recognizing historical lessons in the Black struggle. In 1943, he denounced the denial of equal rights "to Negroes in America, to the Jews in Germany, and to the Untouchables in India" (Ambedkar 1943). In 1945, in his fierce polemic, *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables*, Ambedkar repeatedly employed African American history to strengthen his critique of Gandhi. He compared Lincoln and Gandhi as leaders more focused on national unity than the freedom of oppressed minorities (Ambedkar 1945: 176, 185, and 270–71). In 1946, he wrote W.E.B. Du Bois, "There is so much similarity between the position of the Untouchables and

the position of the Negroes of America that the study of the latter is not only natural but necessary" (Ambedkar 1946). Although Du Bois responded that he had "every sympathy with the Untouchables of India," his ties to Indian nationalists and his belief that an independent India might serve as a bulwark for the rising colored world overshadowed his much more limited knowledge of caste inequality. Like many Black anticolonial activists, Du Bois failed to recognize the severity of caste oppression in India and largely overlooked potential solidarities between Blacks and Dalits (Slate 2009).

Like a double-edged sword, comparisons between racism and caste oppression could be employed to criticize both. In November 1951, the American Ambassador to India, Chester Bowles, a liberal champion of racial equality in the United States and abroad, explained that he often answered Indian questions "on racial intolerance in the United States" by saying, "You have your own deep prejudices here in India for which you have suffered profoundly. We have an equally serious problem in America, and we have suffered also" (Bowles 1951). Unlike the American Consul General in Madras who used the race/caste analogy to produce "such embarrassed confusion that the subject was immediately dropped," Bowles neither claimed that caste was worse than racism nor attempted to silence discussion of both "deep prejudices." Similarly, the Bombay journal *United Asia* compared the violent response to the attempted integration of Little Rock High School to the burning of several Dalit villages in Ramanthapuram, Tamil Nadu. *United Asia* made clear that both atrocities deserved condemnation (Anonymous 1957). In 1945, Gandhian activist Bharatan Kumarappa labeled "the negro problem . . . one of the most serious problems in the national life of the United States." Kumarappa connected American racism to caste injustices in India. He concluded, "America has a long way to go before it can come anywhere near the tyranny we have practised in regard to the Harijans." He asked his readers, "Shall we now complain if other nations treat us as untouchables, brahmins of the purest blood though we may be?" Kumarappa's concern for the inequalities of caste did not prevent him from criticizing British imperialism. On the contrary, he again used an analogy with African Americans to defend the right of all Indians to govern themselves. Kumarappa declared, "Britain treats us in much the same way as America treats its Negroes." By using the race/caste and race/colony parallels to encourage his readers to combat caste oppression, imperialism, and racism, Kumarappa demonstrated that transnational solidarities could oppose multiple injustices (Kumarappa 1945: Preface and 78–81).

Colored Cosmopolitanism and Scholarship on Race and Caste

The long history of race/caste comparison calls for scholarship that is both aware of the complexities of race and caste and alive to the politics of race/caste comparison – a politics that scholars themselves have long helped produce. Examining the roles that race/caste comparisons have played in the long history of relationships between South Asians and African Americans helps to historicize scholarly debates on race and caste. The history of scholarly comparisons between race and caste makes evident the futility of drawing sharp lines between political uses of race/caste analogies and more “objective” scholarship (Haskell 1998). This is not the place to offer an extensive review of scholarly attempts to compare race and caste. Rather, the following brief sketch probes only a few signal moments in the history of race/caste comparison in the hopes of offering guidance for future scholarship (Bayly 1999; Immerwahr 2007).

Over the course of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, a diverse group of ethnologists and other “race experts” juxtaposed race and caste as timeless, natural, and often beneficial social institutions. In 1910, for example, British author B.L. Putnam Weale, in his *The Conflict of Colour*, declared “It is a fact certainly well worth always remembering that *castes* in Sanskrit are called *colours*, thus proving that race-prejudice is absolutely ingrained in human beings, no matter in what part of the world they may live” (Weale 1910: 229). Such an argument employed a specious conception of caste to defend an equally misguided conception of race (Washbrook 1982; Slate 2009a). By comparing race and caste, commentators such as Weale legitimized both. They also justified other prevailing hierarchies, including most notably, white or “Anglo-Saxon” supremacy. If a racial caste system had long prevailed worldwide, what could be more natural than white men holding power in both India and the United States? Not all scholars supported this racist project. Although Max Weber stated that it was “beyond doubt” that “ethnic factors alongside status and economic factors were important for the formation of castes,” he cautioned against any attempt “to simply equate caste stratification with racial differences.” In particular, Weber opposed an older rhetoric in which caste was “explained as a product of ‘race psychology’ – by mysterious tendencies inherent in the ‘blood’ or the ‘Indian soul’ ” (Weber 1958: 123).

Even those scholars who opposed racism and caste oppression often saw one or both as so deeply entrenched as to be nearly impossible to change. In the United States, a poor understanding of caste limited even the most extended comparison between race and

caste. In 1936, Lloyd Warner published an article in the *American Journal of Sociology* arguing that the Jim Crow South could best be understood in terms of caste. The following year, John Dollard published *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*. Both works quickly became influential contributions to what came to be known as the “caste school” of American sociology (Warner 1936; Dollard 1937; Immerwahr 2007). In his monumental study, *Caste, Class, and Race*, African American sociologist Oliver Cox aimed to refute the caste school of American sociology on race, and especially its most renowned figure, Robert Park. Cox criticized the “definite ring of fatality and mysticism in Park’s discussion of the stability of race relations in the South,” linking that fatality to “the false outlook derived from the caste belief.” Rather than reveal that the “caste school” was as wrong about caste as it was about race, however, Cox largely accepted a reading of caste in India as unchanging and eternal, using it as a foil to present race as dynamic and contested. “No one ever discusses, far less questions, the caste system,” Cox wrote, overlooking the concerted efforts of Ambedkar and others to challenge caste in India. By presenting Indian society as static, Cox aimed to highlight the dynamism of race in America. While “Brahmanic India,” was “at peace with its system,” Cox wrote, “Negroes, in America at least, are working toward the end that Negroes as a social symbol would become non-existent” (Cox 1948: ix, 21, 83, 426, 453, 468, and 502).

As the contrast between Cox’s views of race and caste makes evident, the intertwined histories of race and caste demonstrate the mutable, contested nature of two categories too often seen as natural and unchanging. Returning race and caste to history requires not only recognizing that these identifications have changed, but analyzing when, how, and for whom they have changed (Beteille 1991; Cooper 2005). Some scholars have applied the word “racism” only to situations in which prejudice and power intersect, thus distinguishing between racist abuses of power and racialist oppositions to such abuse. Distinctions between racist speech and “institutional racism” have become increasingly important and contested (Appiah 1990; Fredrickson 2002). A similar tension exists between textual, interpersonal, and structural understandings of caste. As with critical studies of “racism,” analyses of caste have revealed the centrality of power. Writing of the pre-colonial period, Nicholas Dirks (1992: 59) has argued that caste was “shaped by political struggles and processes.” Dipankar Gupta (2000: 136) makes a similar point when he states that “secular power is the final arbiter of caste.” In language that could apply equally well to caste, Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1994: 55) have defined race as “an unstable and ‘decentered’ complex

of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle." Comparative approaches to race and caste should aim to engage and contribute to the growing body of literature on the dynamic and politically contested nature of both race and caste.

In 1970, Louis Dumont (1970) compared race and caste in his widely influential and hotly contested *Homo Hierarchicus*. Dumont's bold distinctions between Indian and Western societies and his overreliance on textual sources have rightly garnered a host of critics (Khare 2006). Nevertheless, one of Dumont's central claims remains an important component of many race/caste comparisons. Dumont argued that the religious nature of caste distinguished it from race. Making a similar point, Marc Juergensmeyer (1982: 15) has written, "The particularly religious sanctions which undergird that form of social segregation known as the caste system are peculiar to the Hindu tradition." Unlike Dumont, Juergensmeyer's analysis of the Ad-Dharm movement in the Punjab, while focusing on the religious nature of caste and caste protest, highlighted the importance of economic and political struggle in determining the contested meanings of caste. Still, it is important to note that the idea of race is not without religious foundations. Racial hierarchies have, for example, long been supported and contested by contrasting readings of Christian theology. More generally, the history of transnational relationships between race and caste makes evident what historian Sekhar Bandyopadhyay (2004: 36) has called "the conjunctural nature of social identities." A transnational perspective reveals that race and caste have been historically intertwined with each other and with other forms of human identification, such as gender, class, nation, and religion. Moreover, these conjunctural identities have been defined and redefined within particular political and intellectual projects, often in resistance to hierarchies of race and caste that were themselves defined in dynamic interrelation. In 1946, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya attacked racism, imperialism, and caste oppression by envisioning a world in which "the dark ones will cease to be the 'untouchables' of the world" (Chattopadhyaya 1946: 209). The promise of a colored cosmopolitanism, a response to injustice that allows room for multiple forms of belonging and resistance, becomes most evident in opposing the intersection of multiple oppressions.

As scholars continue to grapple with race/caste comparisons, transnational analogies will continue to link the politics of race and caste. In 2001, Dalit activists traveled to Durban, South Africa to publicize their struggle against caste oppression at the United Nations World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance. Their protests garnered

attention, but little in the way of official recognition, given the Indian government's resolute refusal to treat caste oppression as akin to racism (Reddy 2005; Natrajan and Greenough 2009). During the Cold War, African Americans successfully leveraged Indian opposition to American racism to convince American politicians that racism was a foreign policy liability. It remains to be seen whether Dalits will have similar success at utilizing world opinion in the fight against caste oppression. Only a few years ago, in Aurangabad, Maharashtra, in a museum dedicated to Ambedkar, the journalist Edward Luce found that "half the books in the museum's library" focused on the Black Panthers. The museum curator told Luce, "We feel a lot of kinship with what blacks suffered in America before the civil rights movement and what blacks suffered in South Africa under apartheid" (Luce 2007: 113). Comparisons between President Obama and Chief Minister Mayawati, the Dalit leader of India's most populous state, have already begun (Wankhede 2008; Kahn 2009; Varshney 2009). These comparisons, while marking progress, should also remind us that African Americans and Dalits remain disproportionately poor and marginalized. Race/caste comparisons, while at times inspiring both transnational solidarity and self-criticism, have more often served to defend the status quo. If the promise of these analogies remains with us, so does their failure.

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