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Essay

Migrant Labor and the "Poverty" of Asian American Studies

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At the closing session of the 1984 meeting of the Association for Asian American Studies at UCLA, Lucie Cheng decried the "poverty" of the field. The "poverty" referred to by the longtime director of the country's largest Asian American Studies program was the failure of scholars to develop significant theoretical and methodological tools for understanding our past and present condition. There is considerable merit to her assessment.

Since its inception in 1969, Asian American Studies has not produced scholarship comparable to that of African American or Chicano Studies. We have yet to see the emergence of a prophet like W. E. B. Du Bois or a scholar/activist like Ernesto Galarza. We have yet to challenge the conventions of the melting pot and nation of immigrants with the boldness of internal colonialism or an explication of race and class. (I am thinking here of the work of Robert Blauner, Frank Bonilla, James Geschwender, and Mario Barrera.)

I must, however, disagree with Cheng at another level. Asian American Studies can lay claim to a stellar cast of writers and poets, and to a growing group of scholars coming into full bloom. I refer here to the depth of historical research manifest in the works of Sucheng Chan and Yuji Ichioka, and to the range in theory and evidence in the writings of Edna Bonacich, Michael Omi, and Ronald Takaki. Asian American Studies is not totally impoverished.

Perhaps the most promising venture into theory and history has been undertaken by Cheng herself, along with Bonacich, in their book, *Labor Immigration Under Capitalism: Asian Workers in the United States before World*

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War II.[1] Their book sought to put forth an explicit theory of Asian migration to the United States and to have that theory inform historical case studies—the "empirical reality."

Striking at the Foundations of Liberal Tradition

Labor Immigration strikes at the foundations of the field. Asian American Studies largely mirrors the American liberal tradition—whose icons are the Statue of Liberty and Horatio Alger—of immigration and assimilation. According to that tradition, American history recounts how emigrants, "pushed" by unfavorable conditions in their homeland, became immigrants, "pulled" by attractive forces in the promised land, and how they assimilated and added their cultural and productive vigor to the nation. Despite variations on that theme, such as ethnic pluralist and social stratification models, the essentials remain largely unchanged. As pointed out by Ronald Takaki in *From Different Shores: Perspectives on Race and Ethnicity in America* (New York, 1987), the divergence between the liberal tradition and radical dissent is fundamental, arising from a difference of opinion over what constitutes America.

Labor Immigration comprises a significant strand within that dissent. The idea of international migrant labor derives from attempts to explain Third World underdevelopment and its reciprocal, European and American development. These are represented in the studies of Samir Amin, Paul A. Baran, Andre Gunder Frank, Immanuel Wallerstein, and Walter Rodney.[2] For these scholars, the rise of merchant capital, European colonialism, the development of industrial and monopoly capital, and imperialism were salient factors in the development of the core and in the underdevelopment of the periphery. Those explanations were modified in world-systems theory that perceived dependency as too rigid, lacking the dynamics of process, evolution, and dialectics. Movement of capital and labor, for example, was not in a single direction; the periphery could experience growth and not simply underdevelopment. Thus, migrant labor should be viewed in its totality in the penetration of capitalism of existing social formations, in the efforts of peasants to expand their range of economic options, and in the proletarianization of migrants and their role in the class struggle.

In contrast, the push/pull notions locate the causes for immigration at the level of individual choice, including desire for wealth and freedom, and kin-related factors.[3] A recent, sophisticated version is Charles F. Mueller's *The Economics of Labor Migration: A Behavioral Analysis* (New York, 1982). As Alejandro Portes shows in his critique of the push/pull theory, the "decision model" fails to elucidate on the size and direction of migra-

tions, their changes over time, and their connections with the wider social context and structures.[4] Further, immigration conceptualized as discrete events forms the basis for its equally flawed extension, race relations approaches. These accept the social order as the norm; immigrants are introduced into that order, and the processes of contact and interaction involve assimilation, acculturation, and conflict. Race relations, accordingly, may examine social conflicts as the "Negro problem," or as competition for scarce resources, or as fear of aliens, and so on. Solutions to those "problems" are reformist, usually involving a change of attitude—eliminating prejudice—through education. An international perspective of migrant labor, on the other hand, casts an entirely different light on the "problem." Within the world-system, the core and periphery are linked to the concentrations and movements of capital and labor. Migrants are integral to the world economy, and their relation to the mode of production determines their place within the social formation. That role is mainly restricted to the secondary labor market, characterized by unskilled jobs, low incomes, and inferior working conditions. Thus, international labor migration is structurally required, systemic, and patterned. Seen in this perspective, the "problem" is not the victims of exploitation; the "problem" originates with those who control the means of production, appropriate surplus product, and impose institutions to maintain their class rule. The solution requires structural transformation—nothing less than radical change.

The main parameters of the thesis on migrant labor were formulated during the 1970s. Influential books include Francis Wilson's *Migrant Labour* (Johannesburg, 1972), a study of migrant labor in southern Africa; and Stephen Castles and Godula Kosack's *Immigrant Workers and Class Structure in Western Europe* (London, 1973). The latter's basic argument was first put forth in an article titled, "The Function of Labor Immigration in Western European Capitalism" in *New Left Review* 73 (May–June 1972). Other articles followed, refining the idea through comparative and in-depth case studies, particularly application of the paradigm to Third World people.[5]

In the 1980s, the theory was advanced through closer examinations of capitalism and pre-capitalist formations, contradictions within that system of labor, the migrants' responses to exploitation, proletarianization and developing class consciousness, and racism. Notable contributions include: Julian Laite, *Industrial Development and Migrant Labour in Latin America* (Austin, 1981); Scott Whiteford, *Workers from the North: Plantations, Bolivian Labor, and the City in Northwest Argentina* (Austin, 1981); Sharon Stichter, *Migrant Labour in Kenya: Capitalism and African Response, 1895–1975* (Harlow, Essex, U.K., 1982); Robert Miles, *Racism and Migrant Labour* (London, 1982); and Shula Marks and Peter Richardson (eds.), *International Labour Migration: Historical Perspectives* (London, 1984).[6]

Testing the Migrant Labor Hypothesis

The history of Asian Americans is well suited for a test of the migrant labor hypothesis. We have long been aware of the intrusion of European merchant capitalism in Asia, the role of U.S. imperialism in the Pacific, and the patterned immigration of Asians—termed "waves"—and their successive exclusion. Yet, before *Labor Immigration*, we failed to connect these in any coherent way. We also concerned ourselves with the anti-Asian movement, its links with white labor and politicians and its rise and decline accompanying cycles of recession and economic growth as discussed by Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensible Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley, 1971). But we neglected to locate those manifestations within wider social structures. We recognized the super-exploitation of Asian workers—a workforce overwhelmingly comprised of a single gender, their concentration in selected industries and in unskilled positions, their virtual full employment, restrictions placed on their mobility, and attempts at repatriating them when they became "surplus" labor—yet we were blind to the origins and logic of that exploitation.

That is why I consider *Labor Immigration* to be a landmark book. The first section offers a theory of migrant labor, an account of U.S. capitalist development, and an application of the theory to Asian immigration. The second section examines nineteenth century Asia and migration within the world-system. The final section seeks to position Asian migrant workers in relationship to the mode of production.

Despite its achievements, *Labor Immigration* is curiously deficient in historical analyses—of explanations, continuities, and the peculiarities of time and place. Thus, the first section is remarkably clear in theoretical discussion; however, its explication of history is surprisingly disjointed. Perhaps we are given a clue in the strange juxtaposition by the editors of "theory parts" and "history parts," as if history could not be informed by theory and vice versa. To illustrate, the reader is presented with Asian migrants in particular economic niches, such as "middlemen," without a consideration of how and why they came to occupy those positions. An historical explanation would view that phenomenon as process; a Marxist explanation would present that process in terms of the dialectics of class formation and struggle. Instead, we are offered a single sentence: "The main point is that self-employment or the running of a small business proved to be an outlet for many Asian immigrants, who were thereby able to escape the role of laborer."[7] Some of the historical questions left unanswered include: How did Asians become "middlemen"? Was it permitted or gained through struggle? Did it represent a new stage—no longer migrant labor—in the history of Asians in America? There are also broader unanswered ques-

tions: Were Asian workers influential in altering the conditions of their oppression? Were they instrumental in making their own history?

While the book's disjointed treatment of theory and history poses a basic problem, more astonishing is the editors' assessment of the anti-Asian movement. Having listed several of the possible causes (such as, the advance of capitalism no longer required cheap Asian labor; recessions in the business cycle favored exclusion; and labor militance made Asians less desirable), Bonacich observed that generally capitalists profited from Asian cheap labor and were thus opposed to exclusion since it worked against their self-interest. Who, then, led the anti-Asian movement? According to Bonacich, workers led the movement, as exemplified by the Workingmen's Party. What was the nature of the movement? Bonacich concluded: "The anti-Asian movement was less a movement against Asian workers themselves as it was against big capital. It was an expression of the class struggle."[8]

Racism benefits capital, not labor. It is not "an expression of class struggle." Racism is inherent to capitalism and serves to divide and oppress the working class. The anti-Asian movement epitomized racist ideology and was directed against Asian workers, not "big capital." Some of the benefits of racism to capital, according to Castles and Kosack, derive from its functions: to conceal and legitimatize exploitation of labor and resources; to deflect working class antipathy away from class struggle and toward victimizing migrants; and to divide the class, creating a false consciousness and reducing the will to resist. The overall result is a "restructuring" of the working class that favors the ruling class through depressed wages and increased profits, a weakened class consciousness, and a "denationalization" of migrant workers. In those ways, racism is manipulated by capitalism for its self-interest.[9] Further, was not the system of migrant labor itself designed to oppress Asian workers specifically and the working class generally? Does not migrant labor, thus, constitute an aspect of the anti-Asian movement and a strategy for class rule?

Reassessing Asian American History

Despite its shortcomings, *Labor Immigration* provides us with a guide for a reconsideration of Asian American history, as follows. Suppose we were to conceptualize Asian American history to World War II, the time frame of the book, as consisting of two major periods: migrant labor and dependency. These roughly coincide with stages in the development of U.S. capitalism and are defined by the relation of Asian Americans to the mode of production under merchant capitalism and industrial capitalism. Of course, each Asian ethnic group underwent these transitions at various times—in different social contexts—which, in turn, affected the mechanisms of oppression and the migrants' responses. Further, those responses

can be generally viewed as resistance to oppression—a dialectical relationship—that helped to determine the rate and direction of historical change. Thus, for example, although Asian migrant labor as a whole occurred under merchant capitalism (I am reminded here of Ron Takaki's discovery of a sugar plantation manager's order for "bonemeal, canvas, 'Japanese laborers,' macaroni, and a 'Chinaman'"),[10] Chinese migrant labor should be confined to the period from around 1850 to 1882, Japanese labor from 1885 to 1907, and Pilipinos from 1906 to 1934. While the general attributes of migrant labor typified the collective experience during those time frames, each Asian group faced unique circumstances. (These circumstances, and the migrants' responses to them in turn were influential in shaping the course of their history.) Other variables intrude as, for example, the requirements of the Hawaiian plantation colonial economy and pattern of land tenure and the maturing agricultural and industrial needs on the West Coast. When Asian migrant labor no longer fit the requirements of an evolving capitalism, when Asian laborers increasingly resisted oppression, and when migrants sought permanence by forming families and communities (also resistance, insofar as permanence frustrated the aims of migrant labor), they were discarded and oftentimes replaced by another, more malleable workforce. It was at this juncture that the ruling class fanned the flames of racism and nationalism for its own ends.[11]

The next phase—the period of dependency—witnessed the establishment of communities, the rise of an American-born second generation, and the consequent need for new means of oppression to reduce the likelihood of revolt. Again, as in the earlier period, one must recognize the particulars of time and place. Hawaii, for example, witnessed a more thorough anti-Asian movement than the West Coast because Asians comprised a majority of the population and thus posed a threat to the ruling class. During the 1920s and 1930s, Hawaii's anti-Japanese movement planned the containment of alien and citizen Japanese in the event of war with Japan, while pushing the "Americanization" of the Nisei and back-to-the-plantations schemes to direct Nisei aspirations away from higher education, professional employment, and electoral politics. No such equivalent movement arose on the West Coast. Instead, institutionalized racism enforced segregation and ghettoization. This was sufficient to stifle "the second generation problem," exploit Japanese American labor, and render them powerless. Yet the overarching elements of dependency and resistance remained essentially the same. Oppression included economic domination, political hegemony, and cultural modification; while resistance involved a whole range of strategies for economic self-determination, ethnic solidarity, and cultural persistence.[12]

The reassessment of Asian American history could also compare Hawaii with the West Coast, explore the urban and rural dimensions, define race

and ethnicity, and examine the dynamics of class formation, class struggle, and the social formation. But that will be left for another day.

We, in Asian American Studies, are not completely impoverished. We have been enriched by Cheng and Bonacich. *Labor Immigration* is a seminal book, and those who write in the field, henceforth, will ignore this work at their peril.

Notes

1. Lucie Cheng and Edna Bonacich, eds. *Labor Immigration Under Capitalism: Asian Workers in the United States before World War II* (Berkeley, 1984).

2. See, for example, Samir Amin, *Accumulation on a World Scale*, two volumes (New York, 1974); Paul A. Baran, *The Political Economy of Growth* (New York, 1957); Andre Gunder Frank, *Latin America: Underdevelopment or Revolution* (New York, 1970); Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London, 1972); and Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System, Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York, 1974).

3. For a recent example in Asian American Studies, see Fe Caces, "Immigrant Recruitment into the Labor Force: Social Networks Among Filipinos in Hawaii," *Amerasia Journal* 13:1 (1986–87), 23–38.

4. Alejandro Portes, "Migration and Underdevelopment," *Politics & Society* 8:1 (1978), 1–48. See also Michael Burawoy, "The Functions and Reproduction of Migrant Labor: Comparative Material from Southern Africa and the United States," *American Journal of Sociology* 81:5 (March 1976), 1050–1087.

5. See, for example, Burawoy, "Functions and Reproduction"; Folker Frobel, Jurgen Heinrichs, and Otto Kreye, "The Tendency Towards a New International Division of Labor," *Review* 1:1 (Summer 1977), 73–88; A.J. Laite, "Industrialisation, Migration and Social Stratification at the Periphery," *The Sociological Review* 26:4 (November 1987), 859–888; Portes, "Migration and Underdevelopment"; James L. Dietz, "Imperialism and Underdevelopment: A Theoretical Perspective and a Case Study of Puerto Rico," *The Review of Radical Political Economics* 11:4 (Winter 1979), 16–31; and Rosalinda M. Gonzalez and Raul A. Fernandez, "U.S. Imperialism and Migration: The Effects on Mexican Women and Families," *The Review of Radical Political Economics* 11:4 (Winter 1979), 112–123. Cf., Michael J. Piore, *Birds of Passage: Migrant Labor and Industrial Societies* (Cambridge, 1979).

6. See also Constance Lever-Tracy, "Immigrant Workers and Postwar Capitalism: In Reserve or Core Troops in the Front Line?" *Politics & Society* 12:2 (1983), 127–157; Adriana Marshall, "Immigration, Labor Demand, and the Working Class," *Politics & Society* 13:4 (1984), 425–453; and Jose A. Moreno, "Economic Crisis in the Caribbean: From Traditional to Modern Dependency: The Case of the Dominican Republic," *Contemporary Marxism* 14 (1986), 97–114.

7. Cheng and Bonacich, *Labor Immigration Under Capitalism*, 171.

8. *Ibid.*, 176.

9. Castles and Kosack, *Immigrant Workers*, 453–460, 476–482. For a less dogmatic, albeit parallel, view, see Miles, *Racism and Migrant Labour*, 165–188.

10. Ronald Takaki, *Pau Hana: Plantation Life and Labor in Hawaii, 1835–1920* (Honolulu, 1983), 23.

11. See, for example, Miles, *Racism and Migrant Labour*, 171–174.

12. For formative attempts at applying the internal colonial and dependency models to Japanese Americans, see George Kagiwada, "Beyond Internal Colonialism: Reflections From the Japanese American Experience," *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* 10:1 (Fall/Winter 1982/83), 177–203; and Timothy J. Lukes and Gary Y. Okihiro, *Japanese Legacy: Farming and Community Life in California's Santa Clara Valley* (Cupertino, 1985). See also Michael Hechter, *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development, 1536–1966* (Berkeley, 1975).

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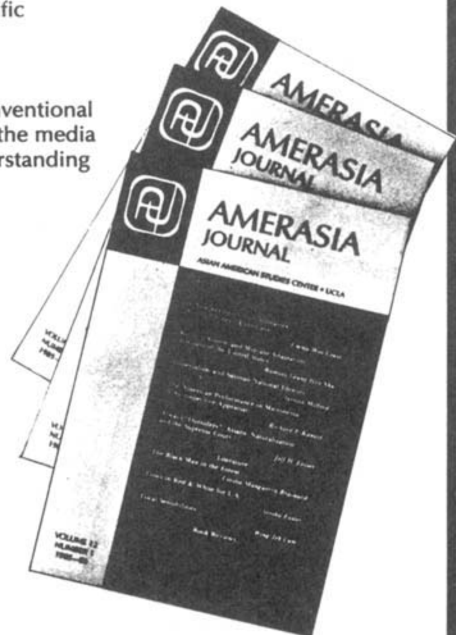

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