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# About Nation, Race, and Ethnicity in Latin America in the 19th and 20th centuries

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**APPELBAUM, Nancy P., Anne S. Macpherson and Karin A. Roseblatt** (Eds.) (2003). *Race and Nation in Modern Latin America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 329 pp.

In their introduction to *Race and Nation in Modern Latin America*, Nancy Appelbaum, Anne Macpherson, and Karin Roseblatt argue that scholars of Latin America cannot understand processes of nation and state formation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries without acknowledging the “tensions between sameness and difference and between equality and hierarchy” that have shaped these processes. Debates between elites and popular classes over who should be included in the nation, have shaped economic and social policy in this region from independence onward, as new emergent nations dealt

with colonial legacies and sought to build national identities shaped by racialized and gendered constructs.

For Appelbaum *et al.*, neither race, nor nation is a universal or coherent concept. Both of these terms are rather fragmented and dynamic their variation depends on historical as well as regional contexts.

One of this volume’s most important contribution is its ability to show how definitions of race and nation are unique to specific times and spaces, as well as the ways in which historical actors themselves deployed these terms. Thus the essays in this volume show how “racial systems of classification” in Latin

America through the mid-twentieth century drew from both cultural and biological criteria to manifest racial difference. Whether biology or culture would be emphasized also varied according to region as well as time period. Both the authors and Peter Wade in the volume's afterword warn against a rigid separation of references to biology and culture to justify racial difference. As Peter Wade points out, "*when culture is thought of as innate and heritable, and considered as fundamental as a soul or spirit one wonders where the difference lies between in and something we call biology*" (Appelbaum, 2003: 274).

In addition to contextualizing the development of racial systems in Latin America, contributors to this volume highlight how ideals of citizenship and nationhood, often tied to racial and gendered constructs, were contested and negotiated by popular actors throughout the region. For some of these actors, citizenship (particularly under the context of nineteenth-century classical liberalism premised on an "unmarked, raceless, genderless individual") was not incompatible with an assertion of their racial or ethnic identities.

James Sanders' essay on indigenous

communities in Colombia's Cauca region throughout the nineteenth century highlights these processes of negotiation. In this particular instance, Indigenous groups from this region took advantage of partisan conflict between Liberals and Conservatives to assert their right to hold communal lands and maintain special corporate privileges *vis-à-vis* the state, successfully warding-off Liberal attacks on their lands and Conservative attempts to exclude these groups as second-class citizens from the nation.

In *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America* Anthropologist Peter Wade provides an overview of scholarly approaches to the study of race and ethnicity in this region, from early functionalist frameworks to post-modern and post-colonial ones.

In addition to tracing the approaches taken by scholars of race and ethnicity in a Latin American context, Wade examines the construction of race and ethnicity in their historical context. Viewing both of these terms are part of the "*enterprise of knowledge*" one that is "*situated within power relations*" (Wade, 2010:5). According to Wade, race is a social construct, but rather than simply stating this, he adds that

*"the idea of race is just an idea [...]"*

*that the notion that race exists with definable physical characteristics, and even more so, that some races are superior to others is the result of particular historical processes which, many would argue, have their roots in the colonization by European peoples of other areas of the world” (Wade, 2010:12).*

By historicizing the emergence of race as a concept used to legitimize and justify European colonial expansion, Wade shows the inconsistencies in a term that seeks to naturalize hierarchical differences among groups by pointing to physical and cultural characteristics seen as innate. His engagement with ethnicity is less extensive. Wade acknowledges that defining the term is at once easier and more difficult, perhaps because of its shorter history, but also because it is sometimes used as a less emotionally loaded term for race. Wade asserts that in general ethnicity refers to “cultural differences” using a language of place. For him, “*cultural difference is spread over geographical space by virtue of the fact that social relations become concrete in spatialised form*” (Wade, 2010:16). In short, Wade defines ethnicity as a language of cultural geography, one that is both relational and situational.

## **Bibliography**

APPELBAUM, Nancy P., Anne S. Macpherson and Karin A. Roseblatt (Eds.) (2003). *Race and Nation in Modern Latin America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press

WADE, Peter (2010). *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America*. [2nd edition]. Pluto Press