



Comments on Suraj Yengde's lecture

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Abstract

Emerging out of religious conflict in early modern Europe, the terms race and caste as we understand them today went on to define hierarchical relations in different parts of the globe. Yet, they have never completely parted ways and Suraj Yengde's essay explores these hidden connections in the use that American sociologists made of both categories. They generally did so by setting one term against the other in the attempt to account for racial discrimination in the United States. Race and caste were mediated by class in these debates, a category seen as being more modern and progressive than either of them. The comments that follow argue that caste and race are not simply the precursors of class and continue to interact with each other without the latter's mediation. Anti-race and anti-caste politics are also more connected to religious forms of universality.

Keywords

Caste, class, India, race, religion, USA

Suraj points out that race and caste share a common origin in the Reconquista, when they were used to distinguish between Christians, Muslims and Jews in the Iberian peninsula. But these categories were also pressed into service during the imperial expansion of Spain and Portugal that followed the peninsula's Christianization. Their globalisation took these terms westwards to the Americas, where race came to dominate debates on social stratification, and eastwards to Asia, where caste possessed similar explanatory power. But race also played a hegemonic role in the southward expansion of the Portuguese and other European empires to Africa, which was linked to the Americas by the slave trade. And this arguably made race into the most crucial global figure of essentialized difference and hierarchy.

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But race and caste were never entirely divorced from each other, and one of the things Suraj wants to do in his research is to trace their hidden dialogue as categories of classification and subordination. He argues that this relationship is not necessarily continuous but comes into view every time activists as much as scholars try to imagine either term globally. For while race in particular has come to be seen as ubiquitous in its world-wide dispersal, it has rarely if ever been understood as a form of universality. Indeed, race thinking tends to repudiate universality altogether, by dividing the globe into competing and hierarchical demographies. The effort to globalise race beyond national or even continental geographies, then, often results in attempts to compare it with and contrast it to caste as another example of non-universal ubiquity.

In his lecture, Suraj focusses on a set of American sociologists from the late 19th to the middle of the 20th century. He shows how they sought to globalise race thinking by exploring its historical as well as structural relations with the practice of caste. But since both forms, despite their ubiquity, were understood as being particularistic and essentializing, they could only be mediated through what these men saw as a truly mobile, historical, and universal social form, and this, of course, was class. If race and caste, in other words, were both products of history and amenable to change, they were not its agents and possessed no revolutionary potential of a universal kind. While class conflict might look like race and class enmity, therefore, the latter had no dialectical potential and could not lead to a universal idea of freedom.

On the one hand, race and caste, taken individually as subjects of analysis in the Americas and Asia, were understood as being undynamic forms of oppressive stratification. And taken together, on the other hand, they could only be mediated by class as the only liberatory form of hierarchy. This meant that race and caste, each in its own way, were taken to obscure and delay the emergence of class-based politics, the first retrospectively as a way of concealing and derailing it, and the latter pre-emptively by placing an obstacle to the emergence of class. As a product of capitalism, then, race was as modern as class but unlike it a reactionary form, while caste was understood as being a pre-modern one preventing its birth. This teleological vision has long and rightly been criticised by scholars of race and caste. And I want to suggest here another way in which we might consider the relationship of these terms.

Let me begin with a personal anecdote. When I was preparing to move from New York to Oxford in 2009, a friend of mine described the difference between the two as far as race was concerned in an epigram. Whereas in America, he said, if you were not black you were white, in Britain if you were not white you were black. This meant that in the United States it was blackness that defined and anchored race as a closed category, while whiteness was open to different kinds and degrees of occupation by other ethnic groups in terms of their treatment and acceptance in white society. In the United Kingdom, however, it was whiteness that defined race, which is what allowed for the emergence of blackness as a political category comprising many ethnicities. Whatever the explanatory limitations of this anecdote, it allows us to think about different ways in which race is manifested in society, with its role in the United States no doubt being defined by the history of slavery there.

We might say that racially defined societies are often unipolar in conception, with one group serving as their unchanging anchor, while the other is far more open to variety and

mobility. But the anchoring group can be socially disempowered as in the United States or privileged like in the United Kingdom. A society defined by caste as in India, it seems to me, is bipolar in character. There, two groups anchor the society at either of its ends, Dalits at the bottom and Brahmins on top. While these two remain closed and unchanging, relatively speaking, the castes in between are permitted much more in the way of mobility and variety. Indeed, Dalits and Brahmins can even be said to mirror each other in a number of ways, each being 'untouchable' for opposing reasons and each crucial in defining the boundaries of the caste system in a way no other group can. Both are also demographic minorities which nevertheless comprise the poles between which all Indians must locate themselves culturally as much as politically.

What role does class play in these unipolar race societies and a bipolar caste one? In America, we could say that the broader variety of groups included in the category white (and in fact historically ethnic groups like Arabs and Indians were once included under this category by the state) allows for the emergence of variable class identities and mobility within it. Whereas race may still overdetermine African-American identity despite some amount of class mobility. In Britain, similarly, we see the rapid mobility of ethnic minorities and their increasing identification in class terms. This is particularly evident in electoral politics and appointments to official positions. It is in the white group that hierarchies appear much more intractable, with people's actual or historical class position defined in almost racial terms by their accents, vocabulary and appearance. Is it possible to suggest that British society, which has traditionally been defined by class, has in the wake of immigration been racialised on the part of whites rather than non-whites? The existence of racist parties and politics seems to confirm this.

In India, class is not an independent variable but directly linked to democratic politics. Already in the 1950s, the famous sociologist M.N. Srinivas showed how independence and the universal adult suffrage it made possible led to a transformation of caste and class identities. He argued that by enfranchising the low-caste majority, that is to say, groups classified as Shudra and OBC as opposed to Dalit or SC, India's democracy resulted in their rapid upward mobility and the simultaneous upgrading of their caste status. Groups like the Reddys of Andhra Pradesh, for example, came to be accepted as upper caste as they became wealthier and politically more powerful. So, in India, too, we can argue that class identities and mobility developed within the mixed social strata that did not define caste society.

If their numbers and therefore political importance led to the class mobility of some Shudra groups, it was the process of Sanskritization, in Srinivas's famous term, that allowed for their caste mobility. And this meant that Brahmins and Dalits still defined the two ends of caste society. But he also tells us that Sanskritization did not work for Dalits, who in any case did not possess the numbers to give them significant political influence regionally or nationally. Yet, this abject remainder is present in all democracies, where it seems that struggles for social inclusion halt once about 85% of the population has benefitted from them. How are we to account for this remainder? Marxists might call it a reserve labour force, though it is often identified in terms of race and caste: Roma in parts of Europe, Dalits in India, African-Americans in the United States, and immigrants of various kinds elsewhere.

Visibility, of course, classically marks racial identity, as it also did caste in terms not of colour or physiognomy but dress, residence, food, names, occupation and comportment.

In both forms of stratification, it is the inability to make such distinctions visible that produces anxiety and even violence. In a changing society, it is not difference that makes for discrimination, in other words, but its increasing invisibility. It is precisely when groups are no longer tied to each other in traditional relations of hierarchy, furthermore, that they become more threatening. Indeed, such traditional relations might even preclude the atrocities that have come to define caste violence since they entailed the mutual interdependence of caste groups. The same, as Suraj points out in his lecture, has often been said of race relations after slavery in the United States, once hierarchy is no longer marked by mutual dependence but rather capitalism's free labour.

It is in this situation that race and caste, having lost their traditional functions, become open to transformation. They can either claim assimilation into the world of their former superiors, as Srinivas pointed out was true of certain Shudra groups and is happening with ethnic minorities other than African-Americans in the United States, or exit these classificatory systems altogether. But instead of doing so by emphasising class identities which, as we have seen, may not be available to society's abject remainder, this exit often becomes a religious one. Buddhism in Ambedkar's view and that of many of his Mahar followers, allowed Dalits to extricate themselves from caste society not by escaping its discrimination so much as by removing themselves from its terminology and even geography by adopting a global religion for themselves. And the same can be said for Islam among African-Americans in the United States.

In India, of course, Islam plays an entirely different role, serving as a demographic and political threat that urges upper-caste Hindus to include and make common cause with their lower-caste coreligionists so as to mimic what they imagine is a unified Muslim community. This results in a game of musical chairs in which Hindu unity requires Muslims to take the place of Dalits as the abject remainder of Indian society, something that was already envisioned in colonial times but only became possible after independence, once Muslims lost their significant regional majorities to become a minority much like Dalits. And this allowed Ambedkar and some of his followers to imagine replacing Muslims as the chief minority as also political opposition in India. He soon realised it was not possible and this may in part explain Ambedkar's abandonment of formal politics and turn to social and religious reform. But in doing so, he occupied a place very similar to the one Muslims did after independence.

Having been identified as Muslims as a minority in colonial times and been forced to follow in their political wake in his demands, Ambedkar abandoned the identity of a minority despite his conversion to Buddhism. The term was henceforth used to describe only certain religious groups, with caste treated separately from it. In this way, Ambedkar both occupied the place of the Muslim in gaining reserved representation for low castes as well as redefining Dalits in religious terms, while nevertheless fitting himself into the social structure of the majority as a caste. It was a curious balancing act that is today threatened by Muslim attempts to claim, in their turn, low caste status for themselves on the model provided by Ambedkar. All of these developments tell us that rather than being mediated by class alone, race and caste have come to be entangled with religion in new ways.

The fact that India's constitution authorises the most significant programme of positive discrimination in the world no doubt makes caste rather than class identity politically preferable. And yet caste here serves to mediate class rather than the reverse, as the point of

reservations is precisely to achieve economic mobilisation but only as a caste. Ambedkar, who early in his career had advocated the coming together of low castes and the working class, became increasingly critical of class as a category and of communism in particular as its product and representation. He counterposed Buddhism to communism as its global rival in part because at its heart was a monastic practice of renunciation rather than appropriation. This, he thought, prevented interest or self-interest as a capitalist category from defining all social relations in competitive and unequal ways leading to a communist revolution.

This is not the place to expand on Ambedkar's views on class and communism, and I mention them here so as to conclude these remarks by pointing out that even when caste like race has been challenged and transformed politically, it does not simply give way to class as the American sociologists Suraj speaks about thought. The story of race as of caste, in other words, is a connected one but not necessarily by way of class. Their ubiquity defined by particularity, both terms have instead attached themselves to the universal in the form of religion. Whether Buddhism for Ambedkar or Islam and the Black church for African-Americans, religion has increasingly come to define race as caste identity and politics from Asia to the Americas.

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Résumé

Apparus à la suite de conflits religieux dans l'Europe de l'époque moderne, les termes de race et de caste, tels que nous les comprenons aujourd'hui, en sont venus à définir des relations hiérarchiques dans différentes parties du monde. Cependant les deux termes sont toujours restés en partie liés, et ce sont ces liens cachés que Suraj Yengde explore dans son essai, à travers l'usage que les sociologues américains ont fait de ces deux catégories. Ceux-ci ont en effet généralement opposé un terme à l'autre pour tenter de rendre compte de la discrimination raciale aux États-Unis. Dans ces débats, la race et la caste passaient par la classe sociale, une catégorie considérée comme plus moderne et plus progressiste que les deux autres. Les commentaires qui suivent montrent que la caste et la race ne sont pas simplement des catégories qui ont précédé celle de la classe, et qu'elles continuent d'interagir l'une avec l'autre sans la médiation de cette dernière. Les politiques antiraciales et anti-castes sont également davantage liées à des formes religieuses d'universalité.

Mots-clés

classe, caste, États-Unis, Inde, race, religion

Resumen

Los términos raza y casta, tal como los entendemos hoy, surgieron entrelazados con los conflictos religiosos en la Europa moderna temprana y pasaron a definir relaciones jerárquicas en diferentes partes del mundo. Sin embargo, nunca se separaron por completo y el ensayo de Suraj Yengde explora estas conexiones ocultas en el uso que los sociólogos estadounidenses han hecho de ambas categorías. Por lo general, han contrapuesto un término al otro, en un intento de explicar la discriminación racial en los Estados Unidos. En estos debates, la raza y la casta estaban mediadas por la clase social, una categoría considerada más moderna y progresista que cualquiera de las otras. Los comentarios que siguen sostienen que la casta y la raza no son simplemente precursoras de la clase y continúan interactuando entre sí sin la mediación de esta última. Las políticas anti-raciales y anti-castas están igualmente más conectadas con formas religiosas de universalidad.

Palabras clave

casta, clase, Estados Unidos, India, raza, religión