

**MODEL MINORITY:  
THE COLUMBUS LEGACY AND ASIANS IN AMERICA**

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If you can just imagine with me for a moment, that collective sigh of relief in 1492, audible throughout the Asian world, when the Genoese sailor, Christopher Columbus, missed his intended mark and landed instead on some unknown land somewhere between Europe and Asia. What Columbus did, and more significantly, what he inspired in the legions of Europeans who followed his trail and established empires throughout the Americas, is, some would say, "history."

However, some of us have come to dispute the official history of Europe's intrusion into America as a simple triumph of Western civilization and democracy, when, in fact, the benefits have been very unevenly distributed. We realize that Western civilization was imposed on millions of Native Americans, many of whom at first welcomed the bearded, pale-skinned strangers, only to realize too late the great cost of their hospitality.

Most of us surely know that Western civilization went across the Atlantic to introduce millions of Africans who worked as slaves to produce the wealth that sustained the Euroamerican empires. By the 17th century, Europeans in America also established trade relations with Asia and by the 19th century, began to import labor from Asia in the opening of the American West.

**Race as a determinant**

One obvious outcome of this flurry of activities that Columbus initiated and that others pursued for centuries afterwards was that the Europeans established multi-racial societies in the Americas. However, and this is very important to note, demographic diversity did not automatically translate into cultural pluralism or democracy. Far from it, for beginning with the original subjugation

and decimation of Native Americans and especially with the entrenchment of African slavery, race was used by Euroamericans to consolidate and reinforce social stratifications based on class and caste. Race became the key determinant of one's status, civil and political rights, access to economic opportunities, in short, one's general position in society, in the labor market, and relations with other social groups.

The construction and use of race is, I believe, one of Columbus's and Western civilization's most enduring legacies in America. This assertion does not deny the primacy of class and gender as other great social dividers, but merely underscores how race has reinforced these fundamental sources of stratification and inequality. This is also not to deny that other civilizations, cultures, and histories have no sense of race. But I do assert that race as constructed, used, and manipulated in the Americas is unique to the expansion of Western civilization in America. A necessary corollary to this racial hierarchy, in which peoples of color were relegated to an immutable inferior status, and concurrent with the development of a republican ideology, that is, a nation dedicated to the pursuit of individual freedom and democracy, was the rise of a white national identity.

**Asians in the Americas**

For the rest of this lecture, I propose to take you on a quick journey through time and space to review some highlights of the history of Asians in the Americas from the time of Columbus to the present. This exercise will illuminate how various racial identities-expressed in the form of stereotypes-have been constructed for Asian Americans, and consequently how they have been

made to play some peculiar roles in the formulation of race and race relations. The fluctuating stereotypes, some of which are more subtle than most blatantly racist stereotypes, and a more divergent record of Asian achievement in America, including recently the election of an Asian to the presidency of Peru, have also precluded Asian Americans from being part of the discussion on racial formations and race relations. I hope to correct these perceptions of Asian exceptionality.

### **Manila galleon trade**

In 1513, shortly after Columbus failed in his original enterprise of the Indies to reach Asia, the conquistador Balboa became the first European to sight the Southern Sea, the Pacific, from a point near present-day Panama. Soon, using Mexico and the Philippines as entrepôts, Spain established and conducted a luxury trade with the Orient for three centuries. The so-called Manila galleon trade consisted of Europeans trading Mexican silver for Chinese and Oriental luxury goods—silk, brocade, and other embroidered cloth, porcelain, lacquer furniture, jade and ivory objects.

Along with the goods, some Asians—called “*chinos de Manila*”—settled in Mexico City. A curious colonial document, dated 1635, described the efforts of a group of Spanish barbers in Mexico City to eliminate competition from a group of Chinese barbers in town. Specifically, they requested the Viceroy to remove the Chinese barbers to the outskirts of Mexico City. I introduce this historical item because as far as I know, it is the first known evidence of an established Asian colony in the Americas. Although this initial wave of Asian migration was not sustained, and the early colony in Mexico soon disappeared, the complaint about aggressive Asian business competition sounded a theme that would echo recurrently in the history of race relations in the Americas.

### **The Chinese in Cuba**

Two centuries later, Asians again became news in Spanish America. From 1847 to 1874, the Spanish colony of Cuba imported some 125,000 Chinese indentured or contract laborers—commonly known as “*coolies*”—to supplement the dwindling African slave labor force on the flourishing sugar colonies. While it is not our purpose today to discuss Cuba’s sugar economy and its labor force, let me make a few observations about this experience that are relevant to the discussion at hand.

Until the arrival of the Chinese coolies, the people of Cuba, a prototypical New World plantation society, were divided into free and slave statuses re-

inforced by race, that is, white and black. The Chinese presence challenged this careful arrangement which had preserved a clear social and ideological order. In addition to occupying an intermediate position between slave and free in the social hierarchy, they also occupied an intermediate position on the color scale, between black and white.

On the plantations, tension developed between the black slaves and the Chinese coolies, a condition that was quickly understood and manipulated by the white plantation owners and their majordomos.

But that did not resolve questions of social status and color classification. As long as the Chinese were under contract and hence semi-slaves, they were treated as slaves and, if necessary, classified racially as “*black*.” Early coolies who had managed to gain their freedom after serving out the eight-year contract, were baptized and married as “*whites*.” The white planter elite and its allies in the colonial administration contrived to put an end to this practice because, one, they wanted to keep the Chinese as a captive labor force and two, they feared that free Chinese would convey dangerous ideas to the enslaved Blacks. Thus, to keep the Chinese from gaining their freedom after the expiration of their original contract, the planters forced the coolies into successive recontracting, that is, if they did not collapse first from hard work and brutal treatment in the sugar fields. The Cuban example is a good illustration of how Euroamericans constructed and manipulated race to preserve a labor system and an ideological order that served specific economic ends.

### **Immigrants**

In U.S. history every school child recites the fact that this country was built by immigrants. Still, the prevailing notion of immigrants has been informed by the history of European immigrants voluntarily crossing the Atlantic to America, the “*land of opportunity*.” This view of America as the land of immigrants seeking better opportunities gives little or no place to Native Americans. Africans, because they came over as slaves in a most involuntary fashion, more as cargo than as humans, also hardly fit this description. The earliest and still largest Latino population, the Chicanos or Mexican-Americans, were originally incorporated wholesale into the U.S. when Mexico lost or sold vast stretches of its northern territory to the United States.

### **Chinese labor for the mines**

So that leaves only the Asians, who did cross the Pacific to the American West, not all voluntarily to be sure, but none technically as slaves. With the discovery of gold in California in the mid-19th cen-

tury, which coincidentally came on the heels of the worldwide decline of the African slave trade, the U.S. introduced continuous waves of mostly male Chinese for the sole purpose of supplying cheap and docile labor for the Western mines and railroads. Of all non-European groups in America, Asians come closest to the idea of immigrants, yet historically they have not been accorded the same treatment or status as European immigrants.

By the 1860s and 1870s, when railroad building and mining were giving way to industrialization, urbanization, and agriculture, the Irish and other Euroamericans, some only recent immigrants themselves, came to resent the Chinese workers as unwelcome competitors. Initially subjected to a process of "negroization"—some white workers even called them "nagurs"—the Chinese acquired their own distinctive identity as the idea of the "yellow peril," later compounded by the "heathen Chinese," took shape: while cheap Asian laborers were necessary evils in the absence of alternative sources of labor, they were judged ineligible for citizenship.

American opinion makers of the time—missionaries, diplomats, employers of Chinese workers—invariably portrayed them as idolatrous and godless, politically servile, morally depraved, physically degenerate, loathsome disease-ridden, savage and childlike, lustful and sensual, in short, irredeemably backwards. How could they be expected, then, to assimilate into American society committed to freedom and a cohesive nationalism? Indeed, seen in this context, the yellow masses were no longer tolerable, but constituted a downright threat, a peril to progress and the unity of this still new nation.

### **1882 Immigration Law**

In 1882, when Chinese labor was no longer indispensable, they became the first group of people to be specifically barred by law and by virtue of their race from entering the United States. This exclusion, which soon became extended in practice to include other Asians, was not lifted until 1942. However, Asians still could not migrate to the U.S. in any significant numbers, because the Immigration Law in effect at the time contained national origins quotas that favored Europeans and severely limited the entry of peoples from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean.

### **Japanese internment camps**

The lifting of the exclusion was followed by another ignominious act in the annals of U.S. history. I refer to the decision by President Roosevelt during WWII to round up Japanese American families on the West coast and intern them in camps for the du-

ration of the war. (By the way, even as we are finally learning about and, as a nation, accepting responsibility for this shameful event in our history, most of us are not aware that the U.S. government also convinced the Peruvian government during WWII to round up its Japanese residents for transportation and internment in the United States.)

Asian Americans will always wonder why, in the absence of a single act of sedition by any member of this community, all due process guaranteed by the Constitution was suspended for the entire population of American residents of Japanese descent? Why, in the name of national security and military emergency, only they were subjected to such a draconian measure when no such blanket order was issued to German and Italian Americans, with whose mother countries we were also at war?

The answer is well worth exploring because it lies at the root of how the white majority of this country has historically viewed itself. In the deeply ingrained notion of Asian unassimilability that had developed in the American consciousness, Asians were not seen as potential citizens; they were inherently incapable of Americanization.

Conveniently for the white majority who held this attitude towards Asians, the Federal Naturalization Law, enacted in 1790 and not overturned until 1952, denied non-white immigrants access to citizenship.

As the only other immigrant group next to Europeans, Asians were very deeply affected by this attitude and by this law.

### **The "sojourners"**

Therefore, until the mid-20th century, no matter how long Asians and their families had been in this country, they were regarded as "sojourners"—passing travelers and permanent alien residents. Thus it was easy to curtail Chinese immigration in 1882 and violate the civil and human rights of the Japanese in America during WWII. Denial of citizenship, a prerequisite to full political participation, also explains the lack of integration of Asians into American society. Ironically, the victims were often blamed for their social marginalization: well into the 20th century, Asians were derided as "inscrutable," their communities denounced as "closed." Eligibility to become citizens, (as distinct from being born into it) came to be equated, at least in the Asian experience, with race, that is, with being white.

### **Recent Asian immigration**

In 1965, when new immigration laws finally eliminated quotas based on national origins, there

were only about one million Asians residing in this country, an insignificant number. Since then, they have constituted the largest single group of legal new immigrants to America, so that by 1990, Asian Americans have surged to over seven million, constituting about 3% of the total population. Although still concentrated on both coasts and in certain large interior cities, Asians can now be found everywhere, including the Midwest and the South. Although dominated by traditionally prominent groups such as the Chinese, Japanese and Filipinos, the new Asian immigrants are also well represented by Koreans, Indochinese, especially the Vietnamese, and Asian Indians.

Changes in immigration and naturalization laws and relatively high birth rates do not fully explain this great influx. The fact of the matter is, much of the upsurge is the direct consequence of U.S. political and military intervention in Asia during WWII and the post-war years, including notably the Chinese Revolution, the Korean War, and especially the wars in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. These interventions explain the flood of Asian refugees during the last three decades.

#### **Entrepreneurial middle class**

But another kind of Asian immigration is directly traceable to the new economic order of post-war Asia that the U.S. helped create. The labor intensive, consumer product manufacturing economies of Korea, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, have given rise to a prosperity in these societies that produced in turn a well educated middle class. However, the very same educated middle class of Asia has found it difficult to find a proper niche at home and to enjoy the kind of upward social mobility that they aspire to, but cannot find in the labor-intensive economies at home. Thus, a significant proportion of the new Asian immigrants come from well educated, motivated, ambitious, urban entrepreneurial middle class background—all adding up to what sociologists call “human capital,”—to fulfil the dreams that have eluded them back home.

Markedly different from the poor and uneducated laborers of the 19th century, these new immigrants are once again challenging Euroamerican self identity, ideology and conceptualizations of race and racial practices, but in different ways from the past. Remember too that they are entering this country upon the conclusion of the civil rights movement, when legal barriers against peoples of color had been dismantled, but when America’s major ethnic minority groups, that is, African Americans, Latinos and Native Americans, have not, in fact, advanced so-

cially or prospered economically in spite of the end of legal discrimination. In short, it was an awkward moment for the Euroamerican elite, desperate to find some proof that the American system does indeed work for all its people regardless of race. It found, it thought, its vindication in these new Asian immigrants. Thus was born the new projection of Asians as the Model or Super Minority.

#### **Model Minority**

In a nutshell, stories of Asian success began appearing in California and nationally in the late 1960s, when Watts was burning. These stories gradually jelled into the catchy phrase “Model Minority,” and quickly popularized by journalists and some academics during the last ten years to describe Asian Americans, whom they characterized collectively and uniformly as highly successful in small businesses and education, who managed to pull themselves up by their bootstraps (Horatio Alger “orientalized”) in a matter of a generation *without* government aid, and without having to engage in massive civil disturbance and political action to get their way.

They point to the situation on campuses across the land where Asian American students are well represented in the student body and increasingly so in the professoriate of certain faculties, notably those in the sciences, mathematics, and engineering, fields in which Asian American students seem to excel. The invidious but inescapable comparison is to those noisy and unsuccessful minorities of America—primarily African Americans and Latinos—who, despite persistent outside help, generous welfare programs, or affirmative action, have nevertheless failed to get ahead.

Think of the irony in this twist of history! A century ago, Asians were considered ineligible for citizenship and even denied entrance to this country because they were deemed incapable of being Americanized. Today, in the 1990s, Asians are put on a pedestal, paraded around the country via the media as the most Americanized and assimilable minority group, a model, indeed, for other minorities to emulate.

#### **Stereotypes**

In the history of American race relations, rarely has one group been the recipient of what appears to be a positive image. But the Model Minority is just that—a stereotype that is projected from above and from outside the group, and that belies much of the truth as well as masks the diversity and the complexity of the group in question, reducing it to a simplistic monolith. Therefore, as with all stereo-

types, it is susceptible to manipulation to serve all kinds of nefarious purposes. Putting it bluntly, the comparison between Asian Americans and other minorities suggested by this new label is not an innocuous one, for Asian Americans are asked, by their example, to discipline and whip in line other, less docile, minorities, a most unsavory role. Seen in this light, the Model Minority becomes no more than a divide-and-conquer ploy.

Asian Americans have also learned that there is a heavy price to pay for being designated a successful minority. Several years ago, on those same campuses where Asian American students had become highly visible, university administrations had also silently imposed a top down quota on Asian admissions because they had become "over-represented" (a charge familiar to Jewish immigrants earlier in this century).

What is ironic here is that, when for the first time in American history, a non-European ethnic group can compete effectively with Euroamericans on the same terms, the results were found to be unacceptable. Asian Americans can only interpret this to mean that in the eyes of the dominant society, even while being complimented for their model behavior and even while having demonstrated that individually, a significant number can transcend the historical limitations imposed by race and national origin, Asian Americans are still a minority group permitted only a certain reserved and limited piece of the American pie, and not allowed to crowd into the space reserved for whites.

Success does not free Asian Americans from their minority status, that is, a collective identity with a definite assigned place in society. Success, even in Euroamerican terms, does not grant Americans of Asian heritage the privilege of being regarded as a collection of individuals who happen to share certain external characteristics, which is how Euroamericans like to be regarded.

Finally, the Model Minority has helped give rise to a new kind of racism in America. In the last decade, concurrent with the ascendancy of Japan as a world economic power, Japan-bashing has become a favorite pastime of frustrated individuals and corporations in America. Lee Iaccoca, for example, took some non-too-subtle jabs at the Japanese car industry in order to promote his own American models. Mass hysteria about Japanese buying power, specifically the fear of Japanese capital buying up cherished properties and institutions such as Rockefeller Center in New York City, movie studios in Hollywood, the concession license in Yosemite National

Park-have been unfortunately linked in the popular consciousness with the rise of Asian Americans. Thus it was that several years ago in Detroit, two frustrated, laid-off white auto workers beat to death an innocent Chinese American, Vincent Chin, who had absolutely nothing to do with the auto industry in Detroit or in Japan. Closer to my home, in Denver, two Japanese exchange students were severely beaten by local skinheads. In Jersey City near New York City, unemployed and underemployed Italian American youths from the old ethnic community, proudly calling themselves "dotbusters," routinely gang up on new Asian Indian immigrants.

I can go on and on to enumerate other examples of this new kind of racism in America, a violent and virulent form directed against Asians, incited by confused perceptions of Asian affluence and success at home and abroad. Lately, in large, multi-racial cities such as Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., and New York City, this resentment against Asians has taken a very sad and disturbing turn towards inter-ethnic conflict between Asian Americans and other minority groups. An African American led boycott against certain Korean grocery stores is still unresolved. All the politicians and community leaders, including the African American mayor of the city, seem unable to settle this terrible situation, and so it lingers on.

So here we are, looking back on over 500 years of history launched by Columbus' landing on American soil, and asking the question, what impact did this momentous event have on Asian Americans?

#### **Alberto Fujimori**

First of all, if that sigh of relief was ever uttered throughout Asia back in 1492, then I would say it was premature, because, of course, all sorts of Europeans did reach Asia, colonized, exploited, waged wars, and wreaked havoc in other ways. But more significantly for our discussion, Europeans also brought Asians to America and Asians came as immigrants of their own free will. From the early 17th century on, Asians have been a presence in the Americas. Today, we even have a Peruvian Japanese, Alberto Fujimori, serving as president of that South American nation which, forty years ago, collaborated with the U.S. to intern his parents' generation of Japanese immigrants.

In this brief historical survey, I have attempted to suggest some intriguing and significant ways in which Asians were fit into the racial scheme of American societies, especially in the U.S. where race has played a particularly important role. Alone among the four racial minority groups, the racial stereotype

constructed for Asians changed over time, depending on their usefulness to the preservation of the social order.

In moving from the extreme of a vilified Yellow Peril in the late 19th century, to the other extreme of an extolled Model Minority in the late 20th century, some Asian Americans are understandably confused about just where they stand. Even with the problems presented by the Model Minority stereotype, it is nevertheless too seductive for well educated, affluent, professional Asian Americans not to believe that they can whiten themselves and integrate into the dominant culture of the mainstream.

It is also very difficult to forge Asian American unity, not in the U.S. and certainly not across the Americas. Among themselves, Asians are too much aware of their linguistic, ethnic, cultural, and socio-economic differences, in spite of the fact that the larger society, be it the United States, Cuba, Peru, or Brazil, has historically viewed the Asians among them as a homogeneous, undifferentiated mass. Thus President Fujimori of Peru, who is of Japanese descent, is stuck with the nickname of "el chino," something which he can do little to correct.

Yet, I maintain, because history instructs me to reach this conclusion, the only way for Asian Americans to attain full equality is to join forces with other peoples of color and progressive whites in this and other American societies to smash the Columbus and legacy of "white supremacy." I use this term advisedly, and I do not wish to inflame anyone's sensibility. Of course, I do not equate it with Columbus the person, who was, after all, merely a product of his times and, probably, a more innovative, bold, and accomplished individual than most of his contemporaries.

I also do not equate it with Americans of European descent as such, except to suggest that they have inherited an ideology derived from what we can broadly speak of as Western civilization. While I can even credit Western civilization with formulating ideas about freedom and democracy that can have universal appeal and application, I cannot separate these lofty ideals from the expansion of capitalism that extended from Europe to America, and from America to Asia and Africa in search of natural resources and cheap labor, and that required the creation and maintenance of a racialist social order at home.

#### **Chinese and Afro-Cuban freedom fighters**

A century ago, in Cuba, the Chinese coolies and the African slaves, who had not always gotten along well in the sugar fields, found the wisdom to join

forces and helped overthrow the colonial system. These Chinese and Afro-Cuban *mambises*-freedom fighters-are memorialized in Cuban history. Fujimori won the presidency in Peru in large part because of the massive support he received from Peru's poor and largely indigenous and mestizo masses, who identified more closely with him, an Asian of modest means and immigrant background, than with the opposition candidate, the elitist, white, wealthy, upper class and world renowned writer, Mario Vargas Llosa.

Here in the U.S., in part because of a history of successful manipulation by the outside, in part due to the lack of internal unity, Asian Americans have not assumed great leadership roles in the historical struggle for civil rights. Yet they have not been shy about sharing in the fruits of the civil rights movement. In fact, it can be argued that Asian Americans have benefitted disproportionately, disproportionate to their numbers and disproportionate to the blood spilled and lives laid on the line.

But I do see encouraging signs of a growing awareness among Asian American community and educational leaders that they must become politically organized, use the electoral system to vote into power leaders, Asians and non-Asians, who are sensitive to their needs and willing to protect their interests as, for the first time in history, Americans and not aliens or second-class immigrants.

For me personally, the most encouraging sign is the movement of some Asian American leaders, especially among the younger generation, to take politics one step further, cross the ethnic boundaries, link up and join cause with other peoples of color and with progressive, non-defensive Euroamericans, for the continual struggle for equal treatment under the law and equal access to economic, educational, and social opportunities.

I also see in this movement young Asians in music, arts, and literature, proud of their heritage but building bridges to other cultures of America to create a multicultural expression of America that is neither Eurocentric nor narrowly parochial. This is, I believe, the ultimate and most positive way to overcome the Columbus legacy of racism and exclusion once and for all.

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