American dreams and Brazilian racial democracy
The making of race and class in Brazil and the United States

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Abstract: The extensive literature critiquing the weakness of cross-class Afro-Brazilian solidarity is perhaps equaled in size by the structurally similar literature on the weakness of cross-race working-class solidarity in the United States. For many critics, marginalized or exploited people in Brazil and the United States do not have the political consciousness they ought to have, given apparently objective conditions. What if we started, instead, from E. P. Thompson's insight that class is a “cultural as much as an economic formation,” that it is “a relationship and not a thing,” acknowledging that political consciousness is the partially contingent result of culturally specific struggles and utopias, as much as of determinate historical conditions? Drawing on ethnographic research on conflicts between Afro-Brazilian villagers and Brazil's spaceport, supplemented by comparative data on the mobilization around inequalities in Brazil and in the United States, this article sketches a comparative anthropology of political consciousness that attempts to avoid the objectivizing pitfalls of the genre.

Keywords: Brazil, class, consciousness, inequality, political movements, race, United States, utopia

The outstanding fact of the period between 1790 and 1830 is the formation of “the working class.” This is revealed, first, in the growth of class-consciousness: the consciousness of an identity of interests as between all these diverse groups of working people and as against the interests of other classes. And, second, in the growth of corresponding forms of political and industrial organizations.

—E. P. Thompson, The making of the English working class (1963: 194)

The making of Brazilian quilombolas and rural workers

In 2004, when I began long-term fieldwork in Alcântara, Maranhão—the equatorial hub of Brazil’s fraught satellite launch program—the first place I slept was in the office of MABE (the Movement of Those Affected by the Space Base/Movimento dos Atingidos pela Base Espacial), with whose leadership I had become friendly during earlier visits to the peninsula. I would later rent a house in town, but for these first weeks in Alcântara, I hung my hammock in the movement’s one-room office.
The office was on the ground floor of a decaying but elegant two-story house, probably built during the town's brief period of slave-labor-fueled opulence, which reached its peak from roughly 1776 to 1819. After the American Revolution had created a market opportunity for local cotton production that had begun around 1755, the massive importation of enslaved Africans provided the labor that made the region a major exporter of cotton to Great Britain (Assunção 2010; Beckert 2014; Bethell 1984: 321–322; Furtado 1959; Viveiros 1954). This process, in turn, helped fuel the rise of cotton-based British industrial capitalism at the same time that Britain's industrial working class was emerging as a coherent social entity (Thompson 1963).

The decline of the regional cotton economy during the 1820s created the conditions for the emergence of free Afro-Brazilian and mixed-race villages, long before Brazil's abolition of slavery in 1888. The free villagers of the region lived principally from fishing, gathering, swidden horticulture, and some trade in regional markets. Despite the persistence of slavery, and the presence of escaped slaves, Alcântara's villages were never isolated (Almeida 2006). By 1980, nearly a century after slavery's abolition, the region was one of Brazil's poorest when Brazil's military government (1964–1985) announced it would build the Air Force-controlled hub of the nation's satellite-launch program there. This set off a land conflict between the space program and Alcântara's residents that continues today (Mitchell 2013).

When I slept in MABE's office in 2004, it was borrowed space from the movement's uneasy local ally, the STTR (Rural Worker's Union/Sindicato dos Trabalhadores e Trabalhadoras Rurais), which owned the house and had its headquarters upstairs. By day, descendants of those who once toiled in Alcântara's cotton plantations talked political strategy and sought solutions to villager problems on the two floors of the house as if in two parallel worlds of political identity and mobilization. Those at the union, on the second floor, were rural workers, invited to imagine an “identity of interests” (Thompson 1963: 194) with horticulturalists and small farmers throughout Brazil and against landowning and expropriating classes; those at MABE, on the ground floor, were quilombolas, invited to imagine solidarities with people of African descent and against a system of racial subordination. To simplify: for those upstairs at the STTR, “class consciousness” marked out the boundaries of an imagined community and the means and ends of political mobilization; for those downstairs at MABE, “race consciousness” did the same.

In spite of their ideological differences, the people working in the two offices were sometimes each other’s kin and often from the same villages. And, although those upstairs at the Worker’s Union were generally older than those downstairs, there was nothing materially or ethnically distinct about the two groups. Moreover, the two institutions were and are allies, if frequently bickering ones; their structural differences do not stem from an absolute opposition of interest. Yet the two organizations draw on different sources of funding and institutional support; foster distinct ways of imagining relationships of inequality and difference; and seek, to some degree, different political goals.

The relationship between these organizations and the different forms of political consciousness that they seek to mobilize suggest how the development of political consciousness is not an automatic process—a process of acquiring consciousness that is simply commensurate with seemingly objective circumstances. One cannot, as E. P. Thompson put it, “mathematically” (1963: 10) derive the forms of consciousness that political movements and subjugated groups ought to develop. Rather, there are, in many cases, multiple—overlapping but not identical—possible forms of consciousness and solidarity that can accurately (though incompletely) apprehend and act on conditions of inequality and conflict.

Thompson’s concern in The making of the English working class was the development of class and class consciousness. This article aims
to extend Thompson’s insights and some of his method to a broader set of solidarities (in particular, race and class, crucial to the ethnographic case I briefly discuss). In considering these both as forms of political consciousness, I am not suggesting that race and class are, ontologically, the same kind of object; they are not. Nor am I suggesting that characterizing them as forms of political consciousness exhausts the ways in which they may be socially meaningful; it does not. But class consciousness is only one of the ways in which social inequalities and conflicts are rendered intelligible and actionable, albeit an especially powerful one.

In this article, I make four arguments: (1) political consciousness, and the forms of mobilization that produce it, are variable—even given similar material circumstances, as we can see by comparing a variety of literature on and circumstances in Brazil and the United States; (2) scholarly assumptions about the kinds of political consciousness that groups ought to have are also highly variable, determined as much by the theoretical and ideological predilections of the scholar as by lived conditions of those studied, as can be seen comparing some literatures on Brazil and the United States; (3) E. P. Thompson’s *The making of the English working class*, as well as some critiques of the work, suggest how we might better do politically engaged ethnography of the formation of political consciousness; and (4) forms of political consciousness develop not just out of solidarities, antagonisms, and structures of mobilization—as Thompson’s epigraph to this article suggests—but also utopias, conceptions of how the world ought to be. Scholars of political consciousness should pay attention to these utopias.

**Dilemmas of race and class consciousness in Brazil and the United States**

Many US and some Brazilian scholars argue that racial politics in Brazil are conspicuously inadequate—often in implicit or explicit comparison to the United States: black and brown Brazilians do not consistently identify with a common ethnoracial and political identity of the sort that the one-drop-rule has helped produce in the United States, preventing the widespread formation of possibly liberatory political solidarities and social movements.

The best-known and most rigorous version of this argument appears in Hanchard’s *Orpheus and power: The movimento negro in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, Brazil, 1945–1988* (1994). Hanchard argues that Brazilian society is characterized by a “process of racial hegemony” that reproduces racial inequalities while simultaneously denying their existence (1994: 6), blocking the formation of politicized “collective racial consciousness” for nonwhite Brazilians (1994: 19). Comparing twentieth-century Brazilian social movements to those in the United States, the Caribbean, and Africa and finding those in Brazil wanting, Hanchard asks why Brazil never developed a widespread movement comparable to the US Civil Rights Movement and answers: “A process of racial hegemony has effectively neutralized racial identification among nonwhites to a large degree, making it an improbable point of mass mobilization among Afro-Brazilians … [T]he specific consequences for blacks, I will argue, are the overall inability of Afro-Brazilian activists to mobilize people on the basis of racial identity, due in large part to the general inability of Brazilians to identify patterns of violence and discrimination that are racially specific” (Hanchard 1994: 6; Gilliam 1992; see also Hasenbalg and Silva 1993; Htun 2004; Marx 1998; Telles 2006).

Hanchard’s argument was famously criticized by Bourdieu and Wacquant as an instance of US “cultural imperialism” (1999), setting off a major scholarly debate that has never quite ebbed (Caldwell 2007; Collins 2011; French 2003; Fry 2005; Hanchard 2003; Healey 2003; Pinho 2010). I am not interested in entering this debate, but I will note that Hanchard’s claim echoes the views of many leaders of the quilombo movement with whom I have worked. My good friend, whom I refer to with the pseudonym Machado, for example, an important
leader of MABE, echoed many other quilombo movement leaders when he decried in 2006 that “the problem with making anything happen in Alcântara is that everyone wants to be white, so they can’t see how racism affects them and won’t assume negro or quilombo identity.” Hanchard’s perspective is shared by many US intellectuals—and opposed by some well-known Brazilian intellectuals (e.g. Kamel 2006; Maggie 2005; Risério 2007)—but its consistency with the concerns of so many Afro-Brazilian political leaders makes it hard to sustain Bourdieu and Wacquant’s claim of mere ethnocentric cultural imperialism. The difficulty of producing broad race-based political solidarities in Brazil is a real problem for Machado and other organizers of the quilombo movement, beyond these still-contentious scholarly disputes.

Rather than directly engage this debate, I want to consider it from the point of view of a comparison that I have not seen elsewhere. The literature on Brazil’s “racial hegemony” has structural similarities to the also voluminous literature that critiques the weakness of cross-race and class-based solidarities in the United States. While the literature on Brazil (and on much of Latin America) often notes the weakness of a race consciousness that ought to be there but is not quite, the parallel literature on the United States similarly notes the lack of class consciousness that ought to be there but is not quite. The latter judgment was famously made by W. E. B. Du Bois, who, in 1935, wrote:

There probably are not today in the world two groups of workers with practically identical interests who hate and fear each other so deeply and persistently and who are kept so far apart that neither sees anything of common interest.

It must be remembered that the white group of laborers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage. They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white. They were admitted freely with all classes of white people to public functions, public parks, and the best schools. (1935: 700; see also Cox 1948; hooks 2012: 117; Roediger 2007: 9).

In Hanchard’s assessment of weak Brazilian race consciousness, “racial hegemony” prevents nonwhite Brazilians from recognizing and mobilizing around their common racial interests. In Du Bois’s appraisal of weak US class consciousness, white supremacy, and the “psychological wages” paid even to poor whites prevent poor white Americans and poor black Americans from recognizing and mobilizing around their common economic interests. But putting these two critiques side-by-side raises questions: To what extent would the Civil Rights Movement have been possible if cross-race and class-based forms of consciousness had been stronger, as Du Bois hoped—if solidarities between poor whites and poor blacks had been as strong in the United States as they sometimes were in Brazil, where the lines between “black” and “white” were not so sharply drawn? Or, to return to the ethnographic situation I discuss above, to what extent can the Rural Worker’s Union and the quilombo movement both succeed at fostering the different kinds of political consciousness they seek to foster for the mass of Alcântara’s population?

Such questions are, of course, unanswerable. But I raise them, and the parallel critiques of political consciousness made by Hanchard and Du Bois, to argue that solidary forms of political consciousness inevitably involve some forms of exclusion and, as E. P. Thompson’s epigraph to this article suggests, antagonism. No form of political consciousness is completely commensurate with a given exploitative situation, and no form of political consciousness is universal. I am not only making the obvious (though important) point that any form of political consciousness is dependent on a rooted perspective and on determinate sociohistorical experiences. I am also arguing that it is dependent on an interpretation of those experiences, an interpretation that is never the only one possible (cf. Sahlins...
The real problems of race consciousness that Hanchard (and Machado) identified in twentieth-century Brazil and the real problems of class consciousness that Du Bois (and many others) identified in the twentieth-century United States both point to the partial nature of any politicized form of mobilization and consciousness, even those clearly just, necessary, and responsive to unjust circumstances.

To push this point a bit further, consider the anecdote with which Hanchard begins *Orpheus and power* (1994). An African American graduate student conducting field research in Rio de Janeiro in 1988, Hanchard had his first “real introduction to the politics of racial difference in Brazil,” in a supermarket in the middle-class Catete neighborhood. After paying at the register and heading for the exit, he was stopped by a clerk who asked if he had purchased the items in his shopping bags, as he watched white customers walk by unimpeded. The incident helped Hanchard conclude “that Brazilian society could not be immune to the forms of prejudice, discrimination, and exploitation on racial grounds present in similarly constituted societies” (1994: 4) and helped him formulate a research project that would investigate why Afro-Brazilians had not developed “racially specific, Afro-Brazilian modes of consciousness and mobilization” (1994: 5).

This is a powerful anecdote that lays bare some of the forms of racial prejudice and subjugation common to many of the former slave societies of the Western Hemisphere. But this same anecdote could be taken, instead, as a problem of class inequality, with quite different consequences for scholarship and political consciousness. In 1988, Brazil was among the world’s most unequal countries and suffering from high unemployment, hyperinflation, and an economically suffocating conflict with international lending institutions (Riding 1988). Most Brazilians at that time—Afro-Brazilians especially but not exclusively—were simply not able to walk out of a middle-class supermarket with bags full of goods; they could not afford to. Should, then, lines of solidarity and imagined community extend out to those unable to purchase anything at the store for reasons of economic class? Or should they extend to those with money to pay but stopped at the exit, for reasons of racism? The answer to this question hinges partially on the kind of just world, the kind of utopia that its answerer imagines and strives for, as much as it does on any objective conditions from which political consciousness derives. And both social movements and scholarly interpretations help produce the forms of utopia, consciousness, and imagination that make such lines of solidarity real for masses of people.

To make clearer still the point that both circumstances and utopias matter in producing and understanding forms of political consciousness, consider a discussion in George Reid Andrews’s wide-ranging history, *Afro-Latin America, 1800–2000* (2004). Andrews asks: “how were workers in Latin America able to come together to create the cross-racial alliances that proved so hard to construct in the United States and elsewhere?” (2004: 147). Whether intentionally or not, this question inverts the critique of weak Brazilian race consciousness. Instead of asking why race-based solidarities have been historically weaker in much of Latin America than in the United States, Andrews asks why cross-race, class-based solidarities have historically been stronger. Assuming, as part of a liberatory project, class consciousness, rather than race consciousness, Andrews ends up asking very different questions than Hanchard: a different utopia leads to different research questions, leading to different historical interpretations. As I have previously summarized Andrew's arguments:

He gives three basic answers [to why workers in Latin America developed stronger ‘cross-racial alliances’ than workers in the United States]: 1) the “laws and ideologies of racial egalitarianism” forged during the independence period favored class-based rather than race-based forms of exclusion, and led to a consequent re-
jection of “racial preferences of any kind” among the working classes; 2) the presence of non-white majorities (or large minorities) in much of Latin America would have made it suicide for labor unions to become reserves of white privilege (as often happened in the U.S.); and 3) a long history of labor organization among Afro-Latin Americans facilitated multi-racial working-class alliances (Mitchell 2006: 516; Andrews 2004: 147).

I am not arguing that class-based forms of social mobilization are inherently better or more universal than race-based ones or vice versa. Social movements, whether they draw on experiences rooted in class, race, gender, sexuality, region—or any of the other social vertices along which the fruits and thorns of inequality are historically distributed—can and should aspire to greater forms of universality, even as their specificity may foreclose certain possibilities of solidarity and mobilization. Particular class formations, as Barbara Fields has argued powerfully about race, do not have a “transhistorical, almost metaphysical, status,” although like race they are sometimes treated as such (1982: 144). In a critique of “Neo-Enlightenment Left” authors (Gitlin 1996; Tomasky 1996) who regard class politics as inherently more universal than “identity politics,” Robin Kelley (1997) makes a related point: “There is no universal class identity, just as there is no universal racial or gender or sexual identity. The idea that race, gender, and sexuality are particular whereas class is universal not only presumes that class struggle is some sort of race and gender-neutral terrain but takes for granted that movements focused on race, gender, or sexuality necessarily undermine class unity and, by definition, cannot be emancipatory for the whole” (see also, Frase 2014).

Kelley’s criticism of the position that only class can be universal fits nicely with my analysis of the partial character of both race and class politics for interpreting inequality and exclusion in Brazil and the United States. However, no form of political consciousness can be “emancipatory for the whole,” despite Kelley’s subsequent suggestion. Structured as they are by antagonisms, by relations of conflict within a “field-of-force,” to use Thompson’s metaphor (1978: 151), they are inevitably partial. Political judgments about what social movements and political consciousness should strive and hope for (what I call, utopias) can usually be found as unstated premises to objectivizing arguments about how forms of consciousness should derive from sociomaterial conditions—ignoring the uneven but real distance between ought and is. Instead, politically committed scholars and those interested in understanding political consciousness should be explicit about the utopian imaginaries we bring to our political evaluations of consciousness, and examine in historical and ethnographic detail how important forms of political consciousness develop out of the dialectic between historically specific forms of experience and forms of social mobilization.

American dreams of Brazilian racial democracy

An earlier version of this article was titled “American dreams of Brazilian racial democracy” (instead of the current title, “American dreams and Brazilian racial democracy”). At the useful suggestion of an anonymous reviewer, I changed the title to its present form. However, each of these meanings helps get at the article’s key arguments. The Brazilian ideology that obscures and denies the existence of racial animosity and subordination is, in Hanchard’s analysis, an aspect of the nation’s “racial hegemony.” It is more often glossed in the literature as the “myth of racial democracy.” This ideology blurs the edges of Brazilian society’s racial inequality and violence and represses the formation of race consciousness. Similarly, the ideology of “the American dream,” in its promise that anyone can ascend the class structure, blurs the edges of US society’s class inequality and violence and represses the formation of class consciousness. The two are parallel ideologies, linked to histori-
But, although Brazil’s class relations are clearly undergoing changes that I have only begun to understand, “race consciousness” in Alcântara is gaining ground on “class consciousness.” In Alcântara, young adults confidently refer to themselves as negros and as quilombolas, while their parents usually refer to themselves with the highly ambiguous and depoliticized morenos. As if a metonym of these changes, MABE now occupies the top floor of that house, while the STTR occupies the ground floor. The quilombo movement represented by MABE is not only perched above the class-focused STTR, but it has increased its mobilizing energy and has garnered far more prestige and far-flung support from diverse social movements (and anthropologists) over the last decade. While the STTR office is today air-conditioned and well-staffed, much of its everyday work is quietly administering the pensions of retired rural workers.

I am currently finishing a manuscript about the conflicts between Brazil’s space program and villagers in Alcântara that, drawing on Thompson’s analysis of the emergence of the English working class, shows (among other things) how and why racialized quilombo politics have become meaningful to many people there. There were many contingent factors in this transformation, notably the political work of various individuals—including politically involved intellectuals such as me. But I argue that four interrelated factors help structure the nature of political struggle in Alcântara, shaping today’s quilombo consciousness there. Although I do not have space to elaborate, I outline those four factors briefly: (1) the decline of “whitening” as a model of mobility for nonwhite Brazilians, (2) the increased national and international juridical and symbolic power associated with quilombo-identified political movements, (3) the decline of relations of patronage with the wealthy and powerful for poor rural Brazilians, and (4) the increased power of relations and ideologies of formal equality over older Brazilian relations and ideologies of complementary hierarchy.
While my ethnographic work shows how race politics have been gaining ground over class politics in Alcântara, on a less rigorous basis, I have perceived some movement toward class politics among my US students. Over the last few years, I have noticed a change in the perceptions of my ethnically diverse students at a large public university in the urban northeastern United States, many from working-class backgrounds. I taught a large class in “The Anthropology of Inequality” in January–May 2011, and economic inequality was the principal concern of only a few students. However, since the Occupy Wall Street movement that began in September 2011, my students have been much more concerned with matters of economic inequality, even as the movement itself has disappeared from the headlines. The language of the “99 percent and the 1 percent” is now part of students’ everyday lexicon and class consciousness generative of many political and scholarly concerns. “The 99 percent” was apparently a coinage of the anthropologist David Graeber (Runciman 2013), and the events that led up to Occupy Wall Street were partially contingent and idiosyncratic. These shifts in political perception and concern were not an inevitable outgrowth of determinate conditions.

Still, as in Alcântara, they are partially shaped by such conditions. The power of Occupy Wall Street as a social movement drew on frustrations and privations caused by decades of deepening inequality in the United States and in much of the Global North (Piketty 2014). And, as one of this paper’s anonymous reviewers pointed out, Graeber’s coinage of “the 99 percent” drew on his reading of Stiglitz’s (2003) use of economic data compiled by Piketty (Graeber 2013).

There are a number of lessons in these examples. First, the political ideas of intellectuals who act historically are not simply free floating or limitless. Occupy Wall Street’s anarchist horizontalism (Graeber 2013; Hammond 2015) and slogans such as “we are the 99 percent,” were propagated, and partially designed, by intellectuals such as Graeber, but only in a dialectical relationship with changing forms of sociomaterial existence and political consciousness. Although I have so far presented utopias as though they were contingent factors in the production of political consciousness, they are only partially so, and are themselves products of historical process. Second, those utopias and ways of conceptualizing unequal sociomaterial conditions become real to people in the process of social struggle.

Many scholars continue to treat political consciousness as though it were the result of a mathematical formula, but there is no formula. Although the development of forms of political consciousness is rooted in historical experience, it involves surprises and contingencies. Since I first observed what I understand to be changes in my students’ political perception toward a kind of class consciousness, partially reflecting the impact of Occupy Wall Street, the Black Lives Matter Movement has emerged, increasingly providing a partially overlapping—but far from identical—frame for interpreting and acting politically on inequality, violence, and marginalization.

E. P. Thompson’s work provides an excellent guide to researching how different forms of political consciousness form in the partially contingent process through which individuals and groups face their determinate historical circumstances. As Don Kalb writes: “For [Thompson], class was not about this position or that one, nor was it just about money. Rather, it was about social being, about moralities, about the nature of social relationships and about how people became aware of, publicly thought about and organized themselves against the social forces that were preventing the full flowering of their human capacities” (2015: 4).

I turn now to some discussions of Thompson.

**Against mathematical approaches to consciousness**

Thinking about the problems of different forms of political consciousness present in these literatures, as well as questions raised by my ethnog-
raphy and my everyday observations, has often led me to think about E. P. Thompson's work on class consciousness and his own struggle with some Marxist accounts of the consciousness that the working class ought to have, given its apparently objective conditions: why does the proletariat not know that it is the proletariat?

E. P. Thompson's insight that class is a "cultural as much as an economic formation" (1963: 13), "a relationship and not a thing" (1963: 11), and that political consciousness is the partially contingent result of historically and culturally specific struggles, as much as of social or economic conditions, helps in thinking through some of the complicated ways in which conditions of privation, exploitation, and struggle may result in politicized forms of consciousness. But the tension between race consciousness and class consciousness in these literatures on the United States and Brazil should also point us to the fact that politicized forms of consciousness are not straightforwardly derivative of material conditions. For any given set of conditions there are going to be multiple (though not limitless) possible ways of translating them into solidary and politicizing forms of consciousness.

The preface of E. P. Thompson's *The making of the English working class* sets his project against normative and mechanical accounts of class consciousness that Thompson saw in the Marxist writing of the time:

> There is today an ever-present temptation to suppose that class is a thing. This was not Marx's meaning, in his own historical writing, yet the error vitiates much latter-day "Marxist" writing. "It", the working class, is assumed to have a real existence, which can be defined almost mathematically—so many men who stand in a certain relation to the means of production. Once this is assumed it becomes possible to deduce the class-consciousness which "it" ought to have (but seldom does have) if "it" was properly aware of its own position and real interests. There is a cultural superstructure, through which this recognition dawns in inefficient ways. These cultural "lags" and distortions are a nuisance, so that it is easy to pass from this to some theory of substitution: the party, sect, or theorist, who disclose class-consciousness, not as it is, but as it ought to be (1963: 10; see also 1978: 79).

After the brief theoretical introduction, the long body of the text fleshes out this account of the relationships between productive relations and class consciousness. Productive relations are generative of forms of class consciousness in dialectical relation with historically specific and culturally shaped forms of experience and social mobilization. As wielded by a historian of such obvious patience in the archives, rich ethnographic imagination, and literary skill, this commitment to the specificity of experience as a crucial mediating factor between material conditions and political consciousness makes for fantastic reading—and a model for many political ethnographers, including this author.

However, as William Sewell argues, this reliance on experience doesn't quite save Thompson from the base-superstructure determinism that he eschews in the preface. As Sewell puts it: "If workers' experiences produce class-consciousness, rather than some other sort of consciousness, this is because their experiences are class experiences" (1990: 56). Thompson's account of class consciousness and his identification of it as commensurate with highly varied processes of work, subjugation, and mobilization that make up working class experience still rely implicitly on some analytic (and ethical) conceptualization of what makes an experience a class experience and what makes a form of political consciousness commensurate with material conditions of existence. The interpreters' categories and utopias matter, as I have argued in the preceding section. Rosaldo makes a similar point: Thompson "often glosses over the problem of whether central concepts belong to the author or to the agents of historical change" (1990: 104). To know what counts as class consciousness and what does not, Thompson needs
more of a theoretical (or ethical) commitment than he makes explicit.

Joan Scott (1991) provides a related critique of Thompson's derivation of class consciousness from “experience,” focusing less, as Sewell does, on Thompson’s explicit and implicit theorization of how forms of consciousness are embedded in forms of experience than on Thompson’s discursive choices to interpret and describe particular aspects of experience—and how this inevitably obscures other aspects of experience and other possible interpretations: “The unifying aspect of experience excludes whole realms of human activity by simply not counting them as experience, at least not with any consequences for social organization or politics. When class becomes an overriding identity, other subject-positions are subsumed by it, those of gender, for example (or, in other instances of this kind, of history, race, ethnicity, and sexuality)” (1991: 785).

Rather than search, as does Sewell, for the analytic link that can make sense of all this, connecting political consciousness to experience and to material conditions in a way that makes the author’s interpretive power disappear, Scott’s critique helps point us to how the ethical and political commitments we make as authors are inevitably wrapped up in our historical and ethnographic analyses of political consciousness. She continues: “Thompson’s own role in determining the salience of certain things and not others is never addressed. Although his author’s voice intervenes powerfully with moral and ethical judgments about the situations he is recounting, the presentation of the experiences themselves is meant to secure their objective status” (1991: 785).

Although The making of the English working class is, in my opinion, a model of what history and ethnography of political consciousness ought to be, these critiques highlight the considerable difficulties of thinking about and researching the links between kinds of political consciousness and kinds of experience, particularly in a context of competing claims of political solidarity, as with those of race and class that I have discussed. The links between consciousness and experience are not transparent, and our understanding of them relies on the interpretations and commitments of varied actors, including scholars.

How we might understand the relationships between sociomaterially mediated experience and consciousness remains one of the key questions for social research, as well as for political action. It has long produced opposed and shifting camps in social and anthropological theory. As João de Pina-Cabral notes, “Twentieth-century anthropologists ranged from those who espoused more or less unsophisticated forms of realism to those who adopted semiotic idealisms” (2014: 50). The anthropological debates of the 1980s, for instance, then generally characterized as between “materialism” and “idealism,” may seem to have long receded into irresolution, but they persist in more recent anthropological conflicts over the so-called “ontological turn.” And, as one anonymous reviewer of this paper noted, the disputes of the 1990s that I touch on in this section, about “agency, experience and contingency versus structural determination ... [are] by now rather tired.” But I have returned to these disputes because, although they are perhaps tired, they will not stay asleep. As I have argued, they give us important insights for understanding still-lively scholarly conflicts over race and class consciousness in Brazil and the United States.

The connections among political consciousness, experience, and material conditions are partially contingent, mediated by culture, discursive practice, and the political and ethical commitments of participants in social movements and of those who study them. That does not mean anything goes, partly because some interpretations are better representative of people’s sociomaterial experience than others. But different interpretations of experience also have different consequences and draw on different utopias, or visions of what the world should be like. So any analysis and evaluation of political consciousness forces us to evaluate conceptions
Conclusion

I have argued in this article that forms of political consciousness do not definitively derive from experience. Certain experiences of emergency or extreme oppression—slavery, genocide, imprisonment—make some solidarities more likely than others. But the solidarities implicit in most forms of political consciousness can extend in multiple directions. My ethnographic work in Brazil demonstrates how similar circumstances can, alternately, be generative of race consciousness or class consciousness—with equal fidelity to experience but different consequences for politics. I have also argued that scholars’ interpretations are linked to their own political utopias, which partially shape how they understand the kinds of political consciousness they believe should emerge from historical experiences. Finally, I have argued that E. P. Thompson’s account of the formation of working-class consciousness in early industrial England is a superb (if incomplete) model for political ethnographers exploring the development of political consciousness.

No clear formula for understanding the relation between sociomaterial experience and consciousness is likely to be forthcoming from social theory; there is no substitute for careful empirical research on how this relation manifests historically. Nor is there a substitute for political commitment in evaluating its consequences. Thompson’s work provides a still rare example of social research that investigates in fine detail what he called “the dialectic between social being and social consciousness” that produces history (2001: 493). As I have also briefly suggested, that dialectic keeps moving in Brazil, the United States and, of course, elsewhere, awaiting ethnography that might carefully trace the new forms of “identity of interests [and] … corresponding forms of … political … organizations” (Thompson 1963: 194) that might help us understand what is to come.

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Notes

1. The name of the STR was changed to STTR to mark the explicit inclusion of women workers (“trabalhadoras”) at the prompting of women in the union during the early 2000s.
2. Historically in Brazil, a quilombo was a community of African or Afro-Brazilian people who had escaped slavery and a quilombola, a resident of such a community. The Quilombo Clause is a constitutional guarantee in Brazil’s 1988 Constitution that requires that the state grant inalienable land rights to escaped slave-
descended communities. For those interested in a more detailed analysis of contemporary quilombo politics, including complexities of identification and mobilization, French 2009 is a superb source in English. See also Mitchell 2008.

3. MABE is an important local institution linked to Brazil’s national quilombo movement, the sizable political movement that has formed through mobilization partially around the Quilombo Clause (see note 2). In recent years, there has been an explosion of claims of quilombo status for communities throughout Brazil, particularly in light of a 2003 presidential decree, still in effect though facing legal challenges, that makes “auto-identification” the principal criterion for legal determination of quilombo status. Alcântara is emblematic to the national quilombo movement because of the ongoing dramatic conflicts over land with the spaceport there (Mitchell 2013), and because of the preponderance of demonstrable historical quilombos that were once scattered throughout the area (Almeida 2006).

4. About 20,000 people live in some 200 villages in the interior of Alcântara.

5. Thompson evocatively and entertainingly elucidates the field-of-force metaphor as follows: “I am thinking of a school experiment (which no doubt I have got wrong) in which an electrical current magnetized a plate covered with iron filings. The filings, which were evenly distributed, arranged themselves at one pole or the other, while in between those filings which remained in place aligned themselves sketchily as if directed towards opposing attractive poles” (1978: 151). It is notable that this is a two-dimensional spatial image. By imagining the field-of-force crossed by vertices in three dimensions, I think we get closer to the relation between distinct, yet materially grounded, forms of political consciousness that I analyze here.

6. It is worth mentioning briefly, since this article focuses on a US/Latin American comparison, that the adjective “American” is, in its popular use to refer to the United States of America, contentious, particularly in Latin America, and is frequently understood to be an imperial appropriation of a transcontinental designation.

7. “Racial democracy” is a term most frequently associated with the work of Gilberto Freyre (1933), although, as Guimarães points out, Freyre did not coin the term or use it in his most famous works (2005). It is not Hanchard’s key concept, although the “myth of racial democracy” is used by many who cite Hanchard. Hanchard argues that the ideology of racial democracy, an ideology that denies the existence of all racial animosity and subordination, has ceded historical ground to “racial exceptionalism.” Racial exceptionalism, in this typology, is an ideology that gives the existence of Brazilian racism some “qualified recognition,” while maintaining that Brazil is more “racially and culturally accommodating” than other multiracial societies (1994: 43).

8. These changes to Brazil’s class relations and their significance is the topic of a new long-term research project I am now beginning.

9. Intersectionality theory, an influential body of thought with roots in activist communities and in the legal academy, particularly in the United States (Crenshaw 1991), covers some ground similar to the matters I discuss here. However, its key metaphor of an objective grid marking out a map of distinct subject positions makes it close to a contemporary variant of what, following Thompson, I call a “mathematical” approach and less useful for understanding the contingencies that lead to the emergence of different forms of solidarity and political consciousness (see Nash 2008; Puar 2012).

References


