

PERPETUAL TABOO: WOMEN AND MISCEGENATION IN THE UNITED-STATES

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Abstract: Woman's fate as «object of exchange» (according to Claude Levi-Strauss' theory of general kinship) because she is the «object of desire» (according to psychoanalytical theory) constitutes the kernel inside the problematic of miscegenation. Levi-Strauss' concept allows us to understand the functioning of patriarchal societies, especially the role of woman in tribal or homogenous, "closed", societies, but what about "globalized" and so-called postmodern societies? How does it apply for example to a multiracial society as the United-States? Further, how does a phenomenon as miscegenation functions in such a society? The paper shall argue that miscegenation has always been a taboo in American society despite its mythical credo of the "Melting Pot". Having a model generic population, White Anglo-Saxon Protestant, American society is particularly reluctant to any "métissage". We will see how American society confronts the phenomenon of miscegenation, and by what means it has set up to manage the issue. Finally, we will try to understand the problematic through the light of Anthropology as well as Psychoanalysis.

Keywords: Exchange; Legislation; Melting Pot; Miscegenation; Levi-Strauss; Taboo.

There is not an equivalent to the term “Métis”¹ *per se* in the United-States. As a matter of fact, the notion is not in the popular vocabulary: either one says «Biracial» or «Mixed-race», or one chooses to be «White» or «Black». That is the reason why, for example, one can be surprised to hear that Barack Obama is the first Black president of the United-States, Black and not Biracial. It is because Obama has officially chosen (probably for tactical reasons as well as historical ones) in the census form to declare himself as «Black». Indeed, the 2000 census for the first time allowed one to choose to be Black, White, or else, bypassing the common custom, as it is applied in the Anglo-Saxon Common Law, where Obama could only be «Black», according to the American «One drop rule» custom, in which if a person had “one drop” of “black blood”, he or she will be considered to be “Black”. Whereas in Brazil, it is the other way around: a drop of “white blood” makes you “white” or, at least, “mulatto”. In fact, Brazil represents the exact opposite of the United-States in the miscegenation domain. Miscegenation is being exalted by Brazilian culture which put ethnic harmony as one of its national myth’s supreme goods. Racial distinction, does however exists, but it happens in a more subtle manner, notably for example through altercations of the type, “Do you have a idea of who I am?” or “Who are you

to talk to me like that?”². The one that utters those sentences has the lightest skin. This distinction is in a sense more from a class distinction than from a racial one, knowing that in Brazilian society skin color tends to lighten with the weight of one’s purse.

The closest equivalent to the word «métissage» in the American language is the term miscegenation, invented by *New World’s* journalist David Goodman Croly, who associated the Latin verb «miscere» (to mix) and the noun «genus» (race, type). The term was used for the first time in a satirical pamphlet of 1863, it was out again during the presidential campaign of 1864, to promote race mixture, supposedly to exhort Abraham Lincoln to solve the «Negro problem» by encouraging mixture between Blacks & Whites in order «to form a higher kind of humanity». But the whole thing was actually a hoax to deceive the public on the real position of the Republican Party on the issue, hoping to promote the idea of a racial mixing.

This non existence of the notion of «Métis» is symptomatic of racial relations in the U.S., for it reveals a certain rigidity of mind from the American public on the matter. Indeed, the notions of «biracial» or of «mixed-race» are precise in their denotations: they imply a sharp separation

between the backgrounds of the two parents, while in the term «Métis» there is the idea of unity, a certain harmony that the Métis child would be the banner.

As of the famous «Melting pot», foundation myth of the United-States, it concerns mostly Westerners, among themselves. We are talking here of mingling which is tolerated by mainstream American society, not the taboo ones. There are and have been of course unions between Americans of European descents and those coming from non Western lands. But the phenomenon is still scarce. And the children issued from those unions have certain difficulties to get recognized by American society which, with its obsession about race, does not know where, in which category, to put them.

According to a poll from April 8th, 2011, 46% of Mississippi Republican voters would like to ban interracial marriage³. One of the persons interviewed, favoring the measure, explains in an email that «God created us in different colors not without reasons, and to honor His will means not to marry someone of different color than our own»⁴. A few months later, December of 2011, members of The Gulnare Freewill Church, in Pike County, Kentucky, voted a resolution against the memberships of an ethnically mixed couple. Despite the fact that the woman who is White was baptized in the church, while the man, who is Black, is from Zimbabwe⁵.

This decision, after multiple reactions, had been canceled a week after. Nevertheless, this incident is a perfect illustration of the problematical racial question in the United-States. Interracial couples are not legion, especially outside big metropolitan areas like New York City, Los Angeles, or San Francisco, particularly between Blacks & Whites. Years of struggle against segregation have indeed installed a kind of equality among citizens of different ethnic groups, but as of mixing, in the sentimental stage, taboos are still hard to go away. To marry someone from another ethnicity still constitutes, whether one likes it or not, an obstacle. Looks in the streets and comments inside both families are still a reality. The circuit inside which woman circulates as object of exchange could be validated only between tribes or societies in which members see each other as belonging to the same kind (in aspects and powers). Indeed, Levi-Strauss' famous thesis is based on the analysis of closed societies, where women are exchanged under matrimonial alliances with the objective of consolidating relations between tribes. Yet, in a disparity of cultures and skin colors, this circulation seems rather closed with ethnic criteria playing the border patrolling role which crossings lead to questioning or condemnations. All that is of course relative to a particular epoch and society, but its core, the fact that people tend to

intermarry inside groups that are the most *similar* to themselves, stays, nevertheless, a permanent feature. Or, maybe, is there perhaps an «American exception» in the racial domain as one often says there is a «French exception» in the cultural domain?⁶

The founding fathers of the American republic were all from the Protestant religion, which is an agglomeration of different sects, most of them represented in the British Isles. Those future founding fathers took up exile in order to protect themselves of religious persecutions from concurrent sects that had obtained official status. Sectarian spirit being not particularly auspicious to any mixing in general, the first Americans had kept a certain rigidity coming from their religion: mixing may eventually happen among Protestants of different sectarian backgrounds, but not farther, and preferably among persons of the same social class. Indeed, if class' distinction generally prevailed over religious belongings, one might not in this case envisage leaving the protestant circle. One might not consider for example mixing between Protestant and Catholic families (meaning the Irish, then a British colony, or Southern Europeans). All of that was not particularly favorable to any kind of “métissage”.

It is thus not very surprising says the American historian Peggy Pascoe that the two most insidious beliefs in American history have been: a) interracial relations are not natural and, b) the supremacy of the «White race». Between 1860 and 1960, Americans saw their opposition to interracial marriage as «natural» rather than political. During this long period, interracial unions were perceived as unnatural as well as contrary to common sense and, according to the essence of Anglo-Saxon laws (based on custom), they were integrated into the law of the land. Only unions between a White man and a White woman were seen as acceptable.

The foucauldian idea that laws can modify body's behaviors is pertinent here. The more the population of British origin believed that interracial relations were unnatural and that legal union could only be between two persons of the same «race», the more they saw in their own union as a consequence of a romantic choice rather than the compulsory result of a judicial system.⁷ The objects of those laws were to preserve white domination as well as to protect, sexually, White woman, in order to control her reproductive behavior. The first measures against interracial relations were proclaimed as soon as 1664 in the State of Maryland to prevent eventual unions between White women and Black slaves.

All the history concerning miscegenation in the United-States can be resumed by the laws against race mixing, regulating the intimacy between Blacks and Whites as well as between Whites and all the other ethnic minorities. Those laws banished sexual relations as well as interracial marriages. Even though they were first applied and last abolished in the South, it was in the West that they had been the most sophisticated. Indeed, at the end of the 19th century, legislators built a real set of labyrinthine prohibitions, notably on unions between Whites and Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, Hawaiians, Hindus, or Amerindians, in addition to the «classical» White & Black ban. All and all, there were thirty eight states that forbade interracial sexual relations and marriages. Fourteen of those states prohibited specifically Whites and Asians' unions, seven others between Whites and Amerindians. Those legislation defined identities and racial hierarchies: the two most affected groups were Blacks and Asians.⁸ For the latter, the legislation's confirmed their status of unwanted foreigners. Wedding's restrictions deterred the integration of Asian men, causing them notably sexual frustration as well as symbolically preventing them to have any links with the American nation. The first law against the Chinese was put in Nevada in 1861, where a legislator argued the necessity to reduce and restrict Chinese immigration, because otherwise

it would slow down the European one. Indeed, the latter having less women in their matrimonial choices, due to Chinese competitors, would hesitate to emigrate...⁹

The Chinese arrived massively in California after 1848, following the news on the discovery of gold mines. But the upstream causes of the exodus were due to two historical events: the opium wars (1840-1842; 1856-1860) and the Taiping Revolts (1860-1865) which led to a number of famines. In the United-States, the progressive abolition of slavery engendered a growing demand of a cheap work force, a “wage slavery” of sort. From the very beginning, the American government had clearly stated that “Chinese are not Whites”. Indeed, according to the law of naturalization of 1790, only “free Whites” could become citizens.¹⁰ After the Civil War, Congress amended the law, by taking out “free Whites” as condition for naturalization, allowing in principle Chinese to become citizens. But, nonetheless, the Federal Court perpetuated the ban, so much so that a few years later the Federal government went out its way to define Chinese as “non whites and undesirable”. All that will lead to the Chinese Exclusion Act, supported by a large majority in Congress, banning all Chinese immigration in the United-States until 1952 when it was replaced by the Mc. Carran Walter Act, instituting annual quotas instead of the total ban.

Multiple attempts for naturalization were unsuccessfully made. The Supreme Court systematically rejected the demands arguing that non Whites could not become citizens, since it would be impossible for those persons to adapt to the American Way of Life. It is somewhat the exact opposite of the French model of integration in which all residents not yet naturalized ought to succeed to integrate no matter their origin. During their integration process to the French Nation, those future citizens have to eat, speak and if possible think “French”. We have here a Republican strength of will originated from the French Revolution, consisting of “producing”, through cultural integration, French citizens, while in the Anglo-Saxon model, the notion of “race” would be always the ultimate and unbreakable barrier. “Race” constitutes a categorical stigmata that would not allow anyone to escape their origins by acculturation or personal accomplishment.

The racialized imaginary that informed federal immigration policy dominated debates about the personhood of Asians. Popular accounts analogized the Chinese to Blacks because of their willingness to work in condition akin to slavery, their incapacity to handle freedom, and their distinctive physical appearance. One politician compared the Chinese to Native Americans and recommended their removal to reservations.

Their racial images in turn were linked to a degraded sexuality. One Californian magazine confirmed the depravity of Chinese women by noting that their physical appearance was «but a slight removal from the African race.»¹¹

Starting 1854, the *New York Tribune* characterized Chinese as “lascivious and sensual in their dispositions”; all females were portrait as “the most depraved of prostitutes”¹². The *Tribune* warned its readers to avoid letting their children alone in presence of the Chinese... On the meantime, in the other side of the country, during the elaboration of California’s constitution of 1879, the General Secretary of the Chinese Affair committee declared: “If the Chinese were to mix with our people, it would be the vilest, the lowest as well as the most degrading for our race, and the result of this mingling would be the most deplorable of hybrid, of the most hated monster that has never existed on earth.”¹³

To sustain those affirmations it was necessary to take concrete steps in order to avoid as much as possible any mixing. Thereby, until the 1950, Chinese could not attend white public schools. However, “Oriental schools” were put in place by the government, following complains from Chinese who paid local and national taxes, funding as a matter of fact the same public schools in which their children were being excluded!

In fact, since 1850, an amendment of the legislation prohibiting marriage between Blacks and Whites or Mulattoes was extended to Whites and “Mongolians”, the term had the advantage of regrouping all the Asian populations. In 1888, the State of Utah passed a similar measure, the State of Mississippi followed in 1892. In the same year, the State of Oregon extended the measure to include “persons that have one quarter or more of Mongolian or Black blood”¹⁴.

The cunning of the economy of marriage or, more precisely, what Lévi-Strauss’ thesis implies, reveals here in all its clarity: all these discriminatory legislation had the aim of managing the exchange in favor of European men, so as to give concrete expression to ethnic preference, a little bit similar to the anti-Semite and anti-Muslim ones implemented during the Middle-Ages. Beyond the sociological and demographic aspects, we have here a typical expression of jealousy: the fear of losing “their” White women for the benefit of the Jews or Muslims during the Middle Ages, of the Blacks or Asians in 19th century United-States. The unconscious motor behind the different legislation is an attempt to refrain from allowing one’s daughter or sister (incarnated here by any woman of one’s “kind”) from giving themselves

away to “foreigners”, i.e., the “others”. Assuredly, miscegenation is still problematic because in the mind of the men, to see women of their kindred marrying out is equivalent of sort to “offer” their sisters or daughters to other men (for the latter’s sexual consumption): and, to “give” a sister or daughter away to a man bordering its kindred is already somewhat traumatic, but “giving” to a man way outside one’s kindred can be an unbearable thought to many, engendering a taboo. Let’s remember that Levi-Strauss’ theory rest on the idea that women are being exchanged in order to solve the incest dilemma. According to Levi-Strauss, it would be a lot more rational for men to marry women from their own clan than to search bribes outside their clan and to hope that others would do the same. We are here more in the domain of belief than economical rationality. To give up one of their own, they expect to have in return one of the others. Here enters Marcel Mauss’ gift exchange theory that explains the essence of social inter actions by a cycle of gifts: the exchange of women allows the possibility of a society.

One cannot talk about miscegenation in the United-States without getting into the complexity of the racial question, nor can one discusses the racial problematic without

mentioning the history of the anti-miscegenation legislation. The way leading to miscegenation in North America is full of pitfalls: from society in general as well as from families of the mixed couple, all kind of objections emerge about this mixing, often considered to be “damned”. As of the biracial child, born in the USA, he or she has to confront legitimization and recognition difficulties in a society where mingling is seen by a substantial amount of people as a stain. The biracial person represent an embarrassment, his or her presence means a reconsideration of racial categories as they have been elaborated by American society, and will always give anxiety to those that swear only through classification.

Biracial subjects are like grains of sand in a classificatory machine. As author Carol Roh Spaulding says, the biracial person is characterized by an abject figure: he or she is hybrid, between two worlds. In a word, only a degenerated person can commit a miscegenation act! In the popular imaginary, notably the American one, this vision was the source of different legislation as related above forbidding ethnic mingling, until 1967 onward! In literature, unsympathetic biracial protagonists go from the novel of William G. Simms, *The Partisan* (1835), until those of Tony Morrison’s.¹⁵

Nevertheless, the so celebrated “Melting pot” does actually happen in American society, but mostly within

Americans of European descents. Indeed, in the 20th Century, unions between Protestants and Catholics took place, joined eventually by Jews¹⁶.

The exchange of women in tribal societies as it was practiced among the Amerindian tribes or between the aristocracies of the kingdoms of Europe either to consolidate alliances or to avoid wars was performed only within people that are either similar in looks, skin colors, or social classes, that is in kindred (let's not forget that Levi-Strauss' theory of exchange concerns the unions between cross cousins), rarely to people with dissimilar ethnicity and culture. Not so much due to some kind of "natural racism" between people, but simply because the minority population (African Americans or Asians) do not have an equal stake in the gift exchange's field. Indeed, let's take the Chinese immigration at the beginning of the 19th Century: a large majority of those workers was males coming notably to build the Transcontinental Railroad. Here, there is a clear unbalance of possible expectations of reciprocity of the implicit exchange: by marrying their daughters or sisters out, the WASP majority knows (unconsciously) in advance that they won't have the same proportion of women in return. But, this was just, of course, a cherry on the cake of the explanation on what we have discussed so far: the historical racism that followed the first

waves of Western imperialism that had directly influenced the different anti-miscegenation legislation exposed above, implicitly put in place to prevent those that are considered racially “inferior” to marry those above them (justifying by the same token slavery in the case of African American, serfdom in the case of the Asian population), and, officially, to avoid “unnatural” unions.

More than the anthropological explanation, there is a historical one, both stand because they are from distinctive disciplines looking at the same phenomenon. They are, as anthropologist and psychoanalyst Georges Devereux would call, *complementary* frames, that is, frames from different disciplines which allow to comprehend the complexity of a phenomenon. In our case, for example, the historical explanation does not invalidate the anthropological one, and vice versa. They are two angles of a same reality.

Conclusion

Miscegenation is still an anomaly in the sky of the gift exchange’s domain, EVEN in so-called Post-modern societies, in which the reciprocity principle has been shelved, or so it seems. Finally, what has become of the famous “Melting Pot”, the American Empire’s myth by excellence? Truly, if there were “Melting Pot”, it sticks to Americans of Euro-

pean descents. The American experience is of a Communitarian one, a cohabitation between different ethnic groups on the same soil, under the same flag. This phenomenon quite closed to what sociologists call “Alone together”, referring to humans living in contemporary society, which the United-States constitute a kind of an “avant-garde”: it combines at the same time individualism and the mass, but without mixing, in any case as less as possible.

Notes

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¹ From the Latin *mixticius* or *mixtus* meaning «mixing» / «blending», referring to the mixing of two distinct elements.

² In François Laplantine, *Ethnopsychiatrie psychanalytique*, Beauchesne 2007.

³ AOL News, April 8th 2011, www.aolnews.com, in *Le monde diplomatique*, April 2012, p. 14.

⁴ An email from a Republican voter answering to Public Policy Polling, in *Le monde diplomatique*, April 2012, p.14.

⁵ Bill Estep, *Pike church takes stand against interracial couples*, December 5th 2011, in: <http://www.kentucky.com/2011/11/30/1977453/small-pike-county-church-votes.html#ixzz1fZYtrpeV>

⁶ This cliché of France's «cultural exception» deserves to be questioned, especially in regard of the globalisation phenomenon as well as the uniformisation of the world to the image, precisely, of the American culture.

⁷ Peggy PASCOE, *What Comes Naturally*, Oxford University Press 2009, p. 3. The two provisions in the anti-miscegenation 's legislation were corrected in 1998 and in 2000 in South Carolina and Alabama. Categorization according to one's race stays, however, an essential feature among local, State and Federal governments.

⁸ Rachel F.MORAN, *Interracial Intimacy: The Regulation of Race & Romance*, The University of Chicago Press 2001, p. 17.

⁹ PASCOE, p. 82-83.

¹⁰ PASCOE, p. 28.

¹¹ PASCOE, p. 28.

¹² Ibid., p. 31.

¹³ Ibid..

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 85.

¹⁵ In *American Mixed Race: The Culture of Microdiversity*, Edited by Naomi ZACK, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 1995, p. 103.

¹⁶ Although, for Jews, it is a more recent phenomenon, for if one watches Elia Kazan's "Gentleman's Agreement" (1948) on anti-semitism, one can still pondering on the matter.

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