The Legacies of ‘Race’ Science, Anti-Chinese Racism, and COVID-19 in Mexico

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In Mexico, links have been made between the COVID-19 pandemic and China that point to the continuing depreciation of the Chinese and the perpetuation of anti-Chinese logics reflecting the legacies of ‘race’ science. This short article argues that these dynamics reflect a systemic and collective anti-Chinese sentiment that stems from Mexican eugenics and the modern conceptions of mestizaje. The purpose of this piece is to observe how discourses of ‘race’ link with the COVID-19 pandemic in order to explore how these ostensibly natural occurrences exacerbate pre-existing social inequalities.

Since the early days of the Mexican nation there has been an ‘underlying racial logic that ties anti-Chinese politics to government efforts to tame unruly Indians and mestizos after the 1910 revolution’ (Oliver Chang, 2011: 331). With the COVID-19 pandemic, we see have seen how these eugenic and racist logics have resurfaced and transformed in different ways according to the context. For instance, the famous Mexican actress Carmen Salinas has said:

How am I gonna make fun of them? This is a terrible disease. This is what happens to the chinitos for eating doggies and kitties [...] They were not punished by God: life punished them for gorging, gorging on those things. (Infobae, 2020)

In a condescending tone, Salinas uses the word chinitos (little Chinese person) as a way of softening her racist remarks by tying together diet (a common topic among eugenicists in the twentieth century) and religion. However, this is not an isolated case, but instead reflects a systemic and collective anti-Chinese sentiment that stems from Mexican eugenics and the modern conceptions of mestizaje. The purpose of this short article is to observe how discourses around ‘race’ link with the COVID-19 pandemic and to explore the ways in which these ostensibly natural occurrences exacerbate pre-existing social inequalities.

During the emergence of the figure of the mestizo in Mexico as the national symbol, ‘other’ groups – like Chinese, Jewish, Japanese, and Black populations – were systematically excluded. During the 1920s, groups that were not considered ‘assimilable

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whites’ (i.e., white people of Latin descent) were constructed as not-quite or non-human by the logic of mestizaje (Moreno Figueroa, 2010; Weheliye, 2014; Wade, 2017). For instance, during the Mexican Congress of the Child (1921), Antonio F. Alonso, a physician and member of prominent medical and biological associations in Mexico, presented a paper entitled ‘Eugenic Heredity and the Future of Mexico’. Alonso argued that there was a need for clearer migration policies to favour ‘white races’ and restrict the entrance of ‘black or yellow races’ to Mexico (Suarez y López Guazo, 2005: p. 99–100). Similarly, naturalisation measures in Mexico were used as a eugenic tool for state control by excluding populations deemed ‘undesirable’, for instance denying the naturalisation of Jews, Japanese, Turkish, Afro-Caribbean and Chinese migrants, among others (Iparraguirre and Campos Goenaga, 2011: 15; Press Gleizer, 2015: 125). However, there were even more extreme cases such as the ethnic cleansing campaigns targeting communities of Chinese farmers in Mexicali during the 1920s (Oliver Chang, 2011).

José Vasconcelos (1882–1959) is another good example of the systematic deprecation of Chinese populations in Mexico. For instance, in his best-known book entitled The Cosmic Race (1925), ‘Vasconcelos redeems the figure of the mestizo only at the expense of other groups, particularly Asians, whom he continually denigrates’ (Manrique, 2016: 8). Although Vasconcelos actively accused the United States of ‘the exclusion of the Japanese and Chinese from California’, the deprecation of ‘yellow races’ was a common topic throughout The Cosmic Race, especially parts 1 and 2 (Chang, 2011; Vasconcelos, [1925] 2013: 25). Thus, in Mexico anti-Chinese logics are built into the mestizo nation, which rests on a seemingly post-racial social structure that predicates unity on the exclusion of certain groups (Moreno Figueroa and Saldívar Tanaka, 2015; Chang, 2017; Wade, 2017).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, certain dynamics have demonstrated the continued deprecation of Chinese people and the consolidation of anti-Chinese racism, reflecting the legacies of ‘race’ science in Mexico. For instance, at the Ocampo Carnival in Tamaulipas, Mexico in March 2020, three children performed a musical number to ‘educate people’ about the dangers of the COVID-19 pandemic (Milenio Digital, 2020). To the rhythm of La cumbia del coronavirus by Mister Cumbia (Mister Cumbia-Topic, 2020), the three children appeared on stage. One boy was dressed as a doctor, the girl was dressed as a nurse, and another boy was dressed as the molecular structure of the coronavirus. However, in addition to his bright green attire with foam ‘spike proteins’, this last child also had a traditional Chinese conical hat with a long beard down the front of his costume. While La cumbia del coronavirus played in the background, the nurse and the doctor followed the coronavirus. The doctor ran behind the virus with a syringe in an attempt to kill it while the nurse showed the audience how to wash their hands. Thus, the child in costume, the virus, and the racist ‘Chinese’ tropes are all entangled in what Wise (2013) calls the ‘material-semiotic’ to produce particular racialising practices that inform the Mexican social order and public understanding about the coronavirus. Hence, illness and the possible contagion of COVID-19 are used as a metaphor (Sonntag, 2009). It is not just the virus we all have to ‘kill’ or eradicate but the actual Chinese person enmeshed in this semiotic assemblage. The process of becoming the virus is produced through different racialising assemblages that respond to a long history of ‘race’ science in Mexico (Weheliye, 2014). Moreover, children are being socialised into thinking about their ‘roles’ in society as directly related to ‘race’ and racial stereotypes. In this sense, the mestizo – as the organising figure of Mexican nationalism – is compelled to eradicate this material semiotic trope that places the virus in Chinese bodies, in order to
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maintain a certain sense of normality both by protecting acceptable mestizos from contagion and by establishing a narrative that exculpates Mexico from the global pandemic while upholding the mestizo as the archetype of the Mexican nation. This reflects the ways in which internalised eugenic ideas tend to promote an acceptable mestizaje based on historical racist tropes that can be found across different spheres of Mexican society.

Anti-Chinese racism during the COVID-19 pandemic can also be observed in one of the most important newspapers in Mexico, El Universal. At the beginning of June 2020, columnist and publicist Carlos Alazraki wrote and published a letter written by his ‘Chinese friend’ at the Universal newspaper entitled ‘Letter to my Friend Chin Gun. (He is very mad with me)’ (Alazraki, 2020). In an attempt to critique the current presidency of Manuel López Obrador and his cabinet, Alazraki wrote this letter using racist linguistic stereotypes to impersonate a Chinese person. He started his letter with a claim that stated that Chinese people could not pronounce the Spanish ‘r’, and thus, he decided to make the ‘editorial’ decision to change ‘r’ for ‘l’ throughout. Then he decided to record one of his weekly videos reading the letter out loud changing the phoneme ‘r’ for the ‘l’ and making ableist remarks throughout his letter (López-Dóriga, 2020). For instance, when critiquing the lack of employment in Mexico he stated in the letter, ‘do you think we are mentally retarded’ (Alazraki, 2020). Thus, Alazraki made use of racist humour at the expense of historically pathologised and racialised groups to construct his critique of the current Mexican government and the global pandemic. The fact that one of the country’s most important newspapers published the letter and circulated it on Twitter with the same ‘humorous’ phonetic and racist stereotypes shows how the structural legacies of ‘race’ science influence contemporary Mexican society and media.

In conclusion, anti-Chinese racism in Mexico operates as an organising principle in the construction of the mestizo as an ‘assemblage in itself and a component of other assemblages’ that are in ‘need of constant work and regulation to act [and be seen as] solid and institutional’ (Wade, 2017: 47). Thus, the successful operation and structuring of the logics of mestizaje rely on the constant need for systematic exclusion of different sectors of the population (Moreno Figueroa, 2006). However, simultaneously, and somewhat paradoxically, there is an aspect of inclusion insofar as certain racist tropes are incorporated: i.e., the ‘other’, the diseased Chinese body. In this sense Chinese populations are strategically and symbolically incorporated to maintain their exclusion from mestizaje.

Eugenic ideas, systematic exclusion through migration and naturalisation processes, and the advocacy of the ‘cosmic race’ come together to exclude Chinese people while giving the mestizo a sense of unpolluted structure and organisation as the archetypal symbol of the Mexican nation. Following Wade (2017), the mestizo needs to be thought of as an assemblage in itself and, concurrently, one that operates as a constituent of other assemblages to establish and consolidate configurations that make the mestizo seem as an immutable entity and the archetype of the Mexican nation (Wade, 2017: 45–51). In this sense, systematic exclusion of and racism against Chinese people is one of the constitutive elements that make the mestizo. In short, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbates ideas and practices of ‘race’ that aim to exclude and eradicate certain bodies that, according to the logic of mestizaje, do not belong in Mexico.

References


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