

American Journal of Sociology

Blackness without Ethnicity: Constructing Race in Brazil. By Livio Sansone. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. Pp. 248. \$59.95 (cloth); \$18.95 (paper).

Mara Loveman
University of Wisconsin, Madison

Livio Sansone begins his book with a provocative confession: "I am more skeptical than ever about any intrinsic liberating and emancipating possibility in political mobilization around ethnic identity and race" (p. 2). In Sansone's view, scholars and activists alike have invested too much in ethnic and racial mobilization as an antidote to racism. Scholarship on race and ethnicity needs to chart an analytical middle road between the delusions of color blindness and the deceptive allure of celebrating ethnic particularism. Ethnic or racial groups, Sansone suggests, may not be necessary or even ideal agents in the struggle against racism. Those concerned with racial injustice in Brazil should reject the teleological notion, derived from U.S. experience, that racial polarization is a necessary stage along the path to racial justice (p. 9). Instead, Sansone points to the need for alternative routes to racial equality more in tune with Brazilians' particular understandings of race.

Framed by this polemical argument, *Blackness without Ethnicity* is a collection of essays that explores the meanings of "blackness" in contemporary Brazil. Sansone, an anthropologist, does not offer a single, central argument about the construction of blackness in Brazil. Instead, he explores the polyvalence of "blackness" through a series of essentially self-contained essays on a variety of interrelated subjects, including modalities of racial classification in everyday life, the commodification and use of "African" cultural objects and forms in Brazil, global and local influences in the construction of Afro-Bahian culture, a comparison of "funk" dances as cultural practice in Rio and Bahia, and a comparison of the experience of lower-class black youth in Salvador (Bahia) and Amsterdam. The book concludes with reflections on the "place of Brazil in the Black Atlantic." Similar concerns recur in slightly modified form across the essays. Sansone is particularly interested in the relationship between "ethnicity," "culture," and "community" and in how this relationship is shaped by the hierarchical interaction of global cultural flows with local forms of cultural practice.

The essays draw on extensive ethnographic research in two lower-class, mostly nonwhite communities in the city of Salvador and among lower-class black youth in Rio de Janeiro and Amsterdam, together with Sansone's firsthand experience living in Brazil for over a decade. Overall, the book reads more as a series of informed reflections on this combined experience than as a rigorous analysis of ethnographic data. Taken as such, however, the book is provocative and contains much to inform and

inspire social scientists engaged in the study of race in comparative perspective.

For sociologists, the essay on racial classification is of particular interest. Sansone goes beyond the standard description of the Brazilian system of racial classification as “ambiguous” and “flexible” to report the variety of more or less systematic ways that this ambiguity and flexibility works in everyday practice. He describes how the use of color terms tends to vary in patterned ways according to the physical space where classification happens, the status and age of those in interaction, the relationship to others in the setting, the type of activity (leisure or work) in which people are engaged, and so on. Sansone notes that the value of “blackness” vis-à-vis “whiteness” is not the same across contexts, and he argues that the situational flexibility of color classification is not a sign of false consciousness of nonwhites, as implied in many existing studies, but rather a tool that is deployed to manage social relations with “cordiality” in different settings (p. 45). Later, he adds that the accomplishment of such cordiality “is not an anachronism in a world where ethno-racial relations appear to be steadily becoming more tense” (p. 194).

Throughout the essays, concepts such as “race,” “ethnicity,” “globalization,” and “black culture” are used rather loosely. The title of the book itself may prove enigmatic for some readers. (“Blackness without ethnicity” is meant to convey one of the book’s main points: that black symbols and black identities can exist without a strong sense of ethnic or racial group membership.) Selected chapters from this book could make nice supplementary reading for graduate or advanced undergraduate seminars on race in comparative perspective, though accessibility may be an issue for students unfamiliar with the literature on race in Brazil. Indeed, some of Sansone’s most important contributions might not be evident to those unfamiliar with the debates among researchers who study race and ethnicity in Brazil.

For those familiar with this literature, however, Sansone’s book offers a fresh, unique, insightful, and highly controversial perspective. Exploration of the “complex and sometimes contradictory” (p. 174) uses of “blackness” in contemporary Brazil leads Sansone to raise questions that challenge much existing work in this area, not to mention the recent implementation of race-conscious public policies in Brazil. Taken together, the essays make a strong case against the “analytical ethno-centrism” that characterizes much comparative work on race in Brazil.