

«I KNOW IT'S NOT NICE, BUT...»

THE CHANGING FACE OF «RACE»



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The idea of race is one of the most contradictory and violent in our world today. Having been for so many years, probably more than a century, a sort of first truth, something so obvious that no one ever thought to call it into question (in much the same way as «sex» today), it has become over the last few decades an explosive topic. As something which was part of, and exploited by, a world becoming increasingly efficient technologically, and more and more centralized, race became transformed in the middle of the present century into *a means* for states to achieve their goals of domination, exploitation and extermination. *This is a matter of simple fact.*

RACE IS NOT A NEUTRAL IDEA

No, the term «race» is not just one banal, harmless designator among others. Nor is it a «given», a word which in itself is neutral and can be used socially in a way which is either «good» or «bad», indifferent or pernicious, according to the circumstances. The

notion of categorizing humankind into closed, anatomical and physiological entities is a strange one, and it seems astonishing that as it grew and became more complex it was not greeted with greater suspicion. At a time when the whole idea of «race» was becoming socially accepted (essentially around the beginning of the nineteenth century), de Tocqueville was virtually alone in sensing that there was something shameful underlying its use. No doubt the same thing was seen by other, less famous people whose voices were not so widely heard, but among the notable intellectuals and politicians of the day, precious few showed any reticence.

At the very time when the idea of race was acquiring such social importance, during the first half of the nineteenth century, the anthropologist Franz Boas was already aware of the unreliability of anatomical measurements, which varied from one generation to the next according to living conditions, so that the shape of the bones in our skull was influenced by that most vulgar of commodities, the food we ate... Today we know perfectly well (as we probably always did, but what we know and what we are prepared to acknowledge are not always the same thing...) that any physical characteristic whatsoever can be made into a «discriminator» in some socially or politically motivated system of classification (by opposition to a disinterested, scientific one). The choice of somatic criteria is symbolic of the intentions of the classifiers, and nothing more. The Nazis *deciding* «*who*» was (and was not) a Jew, as they put it more than once (when offering Fritz Lang an important role in the cinema industry of the Third Reich, for instance), or the government of the Republic of South Africa classifying Chinese people as belonging to one «race» and Japanese to another, are sufficient illustration that these things are a matter of politics rather than objective reality, and that the users of such distinctions are well aware of the fact.

«RACE DOES NOT EXIST»

What is the position today? For about the last ten years we have clearly been at a crucial stage in the development of the notion of race. A number of voices have been raised claiming that «race» does not exist. They are not very numerous, but their importance is considerable. While the meaning of the term has been constantly changing since its emergence, this is the first time any attempt has been made to destroy the very concept itself, which is extremely important. It is certainly crucial in that it marks a break with one of the most untouchable sacred cows of our time, but it becomes even more so when we look at the real significance of this attempted rejection. A number of researchers are currently working to ensure that «race» is shelved away among other notions which, in the history of science (and *natural science* in particular), belong firmly to the past. This tendency developed progressively through the period 1965–1975, beginning with the questioning of the idea on theoretical and conceptual grounds. The physical anthropologist Jean Hiernaux remarked at the time: «*Race is not a fact, but a concept*»¹. This apparently simple observation in fact represents a turning-point. It acts as a logical introduction to the statement made by the haemo-typologist Jacques Ruffié in his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France in December 1972: «In our part of the world, in most Latin countries, physical anthropology has gradually become separated from the sociology of culture [...] *Now, in man, there is no such thing as race*. That is why, despite numerous and rigorous studies, nobody has ever been able to agree on how humanity should be divided up into races.» This position and its variants underlie the critique of race advanced by population geneticists as well as by physical anthropologists in the strict sense of the term.

[1] See Jean Hiernaux, «De l'individu à la population: l'anthropobiologie», in *Le Genre humain* #1, «La Science face au racisme» (Paris, éditions Fayard, 1981).

How is it that the scientific community should have arrived at a position so startlingly opposed to the common-sense view of our age?

What we today call a race was not, contrary to widespread opinion, something self-evident to people of earlier centuries. While there may be arguments among historians, sociologists and researchers in all the other disciplines that are concerned with the role of race in society about the precise historical *moment* when the notion emerged in the form in which we know it today, when both the term and the idea *were born*, there is no debate about *the thing* itself.

The word «race» (which came into French only relatively recently, in the sixteenth century) originally had a very precise sense: it meant «family» or, more accurately, «family relationship». Moreover, it was only ever applied to important dynasties (the race of the Bourbons, the race of David, etc.). In no way was it applied at that time to large groups of people with no legal link of kinship between them. From referring to legally circumscribed, noble families, it shifted to being applied to much wider groups, the attribution to whom of some common physical trait served as a pretext for designating them as a *single entity*, now called a «*race*». This shift from surname to skin colour is a considerable one: from narrow legal link binding family groups together, to complete geographical dispersion, the term underwent a semantic journey of extraordinary proportions. However, it took a long time, and a major change in our ways of thinking, before «*race*» became applied to groups of people lumped together according to some common physical characteristic, rather than just a shared surname.

The evolution of the term then went through another important stage. During the first half of the nineteenth century, other, quite different characteristics began to be slipped in alongside

the physical (or supposedly physical) common denominators of human groups: these were social, or cultural, traits. Philological research had identified specific groupings (Indo-European *languages*, Semitic *languages*, etc.) among the language-forms then known, and these were quickly absorbed into the systems of somatic classification which were then sweeping all before them. It was a short step from there to suggesting the existence of Indo-European and Semitic *races*. We all know what that led to a century later.

BUT WHAT ACTUALLY IS «RACE»?

The concept «race» was formed at a historically determined (or determinable) period, as the result of an oscillation between meanings generated from diverse sources, and the combining of several different types of classification (legal, anatomical, linguistic...). Heterogeneous lines of thought came to be fused *in the single claim that human groups were differential by nature*, and that there was a natural line of separation between them. This has now become the de facto everyday meaning of the term «race». But, however irritating it might be to go on repeating it, we should never forget that «race» is not a spontaneously given product of perception and experience. It is an idea built up (and slowly, at that) from elements which might equally well be physical traits as social customs, linguistic peculiarities as legal institutions, lumped together and homogenized according to the precept that they must ultimately all be biological phenomena. This idea carries a great deal of weight in a society obsessed with the sanctity of «Science», which has been invested with the power not only to unveil and understand natural phenomena, but to establish what actually constitutes those phenomena themselves.

Jacques Ruffié's assertion that no such physical category exists within humanity certainly marked a turning-point. At the same time, though, it fell within a *critical tradition* which was not

new, but had been expressed quite differently in the middle of the present century.

This was the period when race, which had originally been a purely descriptive notion, became transformed into a legal one. *From being an «idea» it was turned into a concrete social fact.* The scientific community in the 1930s, particularly people working in the social sciences, made strenuous efforts to oppose this and to defuse the legalization of the notion of race which the Nazi regime was bringing about. They proclaimed the complete inadequacy of such a «purely physical» notion to account for, describe and influence those aspects of human life which were dependent on society and culture, although they did not challenge its relevance to the physical domain. Many different stands were taken at that time. In December 1938, for instance, the American Psychological Association declared that: «In the experiments which psychologists have made upon different peoples, no characteristic, inherent psychological differences which fundamentally distinguish so-called ‘races’ have been disclosed. [...] There is no evidence for the existence of an inborn Jewish or German or Italian mentality. [...] The Nazi theory that people must be related by blood in order to participate in the same cultural or intellectual heritage has absolutely no support from scientific findings». But these warnings could never be more than symbolic, since the legal and political systems which exploited the notion of race were already in place.

So a critical attempt was made to break the syncretic link between physical and socio-cultural traits which had been forged and developed over the preceding centuries. But it did not call the notion itself into question. It was a statement of principle as well as a moral protest. Both are necessary, but not sufficient. The idea of race was left very solidly in place, and in the end went absolutely unquestioned as such. There had been an attempt to

limit the damage, it had failed, and in 1945 the state of South Africa in its turn adopted legal categories of race.

These stands were to influence various declarations of the international organizations throughout the 1950s. Their concern was still the same: to demonstrate that the material, physical fact of «race» (which still went unchallenged except by the occasional isolated researcher) was quite separate from social or psychological characteristics. The intention was to show that race, still assumed to exist in itself, had no connection with or influence over the way in which human beings behaved.

The UNESCO «Statement on the Nature of Race and Race Differences» of 1951 provides a good illustration of this position: «Since ‘race’, as a word, has become coloured by its misuse in connexion with national, linguistic and religious differences, and by its deliberate abuse by racialists, we tried to find *a new word* to express the same meaning of a biologically differentiated group. On this we did not succeed, but agreed to reserve ‘race’ as the word to be used for anthropological classification of groups showing definite combinations of physical (including physiological) traits in characteristic proportions. [...] National, religious, geographical, linguistic and cultural groups do not necessarily coincide with racial groups; and the cultural traits of such groups have no demonstrated connexion with racial traits. Americans are not a race, nor are Frenchmen, nor Germans; nor *ipso facto* is any other national group. Moslems and Jews are no more races than are Roman Catholics and Protestants; nor are people who live in Iceland or Britain or India, or who speak English or any other language, or who are culturally Turkish or Chinese and the like, thereby describable as races. The use of the term ‘race’ in speaking of such groups may be a serious error, but it is one which is habitually committed.»²

[2] See A. Montague (ed.), *Statement on Race* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1972, 3rd edition), pp. 139–147.

TALKING ABOUT «DIFFERENCE»

Looking back on this from our position today, we are struck by the pathetic aspect of a protest so resolute and yet so far removed from a reality of repression and violence. It is also striking to see that we are forgetting here—and when I say «we», I mean all of us who work in the human sciences and are reduced to exasperation and despair by this notion so difficult to tie down—that *the idea of race did not belong exclusively to the natural sciences*, either historically, or socially, or ideologically. Despite that, however, the idea was challenged as if it did. Moreover, as if that were the *only* way in which race could, and should, be envisaged.

And yet, while it had become a geographical classification in the work of Linné, and was extrapolated into linguistics in the first half of the nineteenth century during the triumph of philology, race was also a subject for debate in the streets, in political quarters, in the salons, where it came to represent what was «peculiar» about each human group. It was the equivalent of our «difference», and that is certainly how it was understood. A case in point was Balzac, the first major novelist to make extensive use of the idea. The current vogue notion of difference is so ambiguous that it is often defended just as much by traditional racists as by anti-racists, whilst even the victims of racism themselves invoke it as something they wish to cultivate. This is because difference has come to inherit all the connotations relating to the specificity of human groups which in the old days were carried by the notion of race. It is true that the idea of difference is an attempt to get away from the imperative of physical naturality imposed by race, and in that sense its aim is certainly to break down the rigidity of the racist system of thought. But at the same time it attracts those who persist in thinking in racist terms, but no longer dare use the word «race». When, for reasons of censorship, political prudence or simply cynicism, these people choose «difference» instead of «race», they know that they will still be understood as saying

something about the «natural» specificity of human groups. For it is impossible to destroy the deeper strata of a system of thought simply by *taking away* a particular element; its configuration needs to be modified by *adding* some new trait.

So, the social sciences forgot the circumstances in which the idea of race came into existence and developed, and failed to take account of the fact that the great theorists of race were from their own camp, rather than from the natural sciences. Gobineau was not a scientist, nor were Vacher de Lapouge and, later, Chamberlain and Rosenberg, and so on.

Today, a few people in the human-related sciences are awakening from this lethargy and trying to reject a notion whose origin is clearly to be sought in socio-intellectual modes of thought which have nothing to do with experimental scientific practice. But this awakening has come as a surprise for the social sciences, which thought that they had discreetly disposed of a category for which they were largely responsible by pushing it off into the domain of the natural sciences. If the responsibility is indeed theirs, it is less because they had a part in the invention of «race» than because they are the very disciplines on which the study of the phenomenon depends: as a social trait, it falls within their sphere of understanding and analysis. Sociologists, historians and epistemologists were perhaps unwilling to see that this hot potato was their problem, but that is certainly the case. And the natural sciences keep reminding them of it by denying that race has anything to do with them.

WHAT IS THE POSITION OF «RACE» TODAY?

We now find ourselves at a stage where the pertinence of the notion of race in the natural sciences of man is being refuted on grounds of scientific reason and intellectual honesty (not to mention logic and common sense). This is quite an event, something new in

these fields of research. As we have seen, however, it is not an isolated move, for race has been analysed and challenged by other disciplines for some decades now. But this stand is unlikely to achieve its desired aim of eliminating the idea that human beings are «naturally» different, and that the great divides in society (national, religious, political, etc.) reflect «natural» differences. For negations are not recognized as such by our unconscious mental processes. From this point of view, a fact *affirmed* and a fact denied exist to exactly the same degree, and remain equally present in our affective and intellectual associative networks. Just talking about race means that it will always be there in residue. «Race» is about the least conceptional, cold and abstract of notions, so it appeals from the start to the unconscious side of the mechanisms we have for acquiring knowledge and relating to other human beings. The ideologues of racism have always been well aware of this, which is why they are still peddling their views today.

In other words, simply showing that a category of this type has no scientific basis is insufficient to remove it from the mental universe not simply of the majority of people, but even of those who are intellectually convinced that it does not exist as a «natural» reality. It is a necessary operation, but not a sufficient one.

The human sciences began by saying: «race» is a matter for the natural sciences, it is none of our business, it has no influence on cultural and social phenomena, and so on. Today, the natural sciences are replying: «race» does not exist, it is not a pertinent criterion of classification. Each of these two propositions is partially true, but they hide a third which comes much closer to fitting the real facts. And if ever one revolution or one proposition could conceal another, this is certainly a case in point. Whether race is or is not «a fact of nature», whether it is or is not a «mental reality», it is today, in the twentieth century, a legal, political and

historical reality which plays a real and constraining role in a number of societies.

(a) That is why any appeal to race (even under the pretext of a love of different cultures, or the search for «roots», etc.) is a political move which can never be neutral, given the facts. For it is a question of facts, and not one of intentions or opinions, as some people would once again have us believe.

(b) That is why simply *rejecting* the notion of race is not enough. Denying its existence as an *empirically valid category*, as the human, social and, ultimately, natural sciences are trying to do, can never, however correct the intention, take away that category's reality within society or the state, or change the fact that while it may not be valid empirically, it certainly exerts an *empirical effect*. To claim that a notion which is present in a society's vocabulary, i.e. in both its way of organizing the world and *in its political and human history*, can be negated in this way is a paradoxical position, because that which is negated has *de facto* existence. It is perhaps also an attempt to take away the horror of that reality, its unbearable brutality: it is impossible that something of that kind should exist. Precisely because its existence is unbearable.

However, while the reality of «race» is indeed neither natural and biological, nor psychological (some innate tendency of the human mind to designate the other as a natural entity), it does nevertheless exist. It is not possible to argue that a category which *organizes* whole states (the Third Reich, the Republic of South Africa, etc.), and which is incorporated into the law, does not exist. It is not possible to claim that the category which is the direct cause, the primary means, of the murder of millions of human beings does not exist.

But the slow path to intellectual understanding traced by successive and cumulative attempts to elucidate the concept shows that race is a *social* category of exclusion and murder. Its real nature has gradually been unmasked. The process has not been a simple one, for it is hard not to believe that «race does not exist» when the idea that it is a «natural» category has been proved false (as indeed it is), while at the same time that idea was all that was left after the patient critique undertaken by the social sciences. And when, above all, that celebrated «natural» definition was the very same one which «legitimized» the legal inscription of «race» in racist regimes.

Yet the legal inscription of race and the practices that accompany it certainly do exist. And they are precisely the reality of «race». *Race* does not exist. But *it* does kill people. It also continues to provide the backbone of some ferocious systems of domination. And in France today *it* is rearing its ugly head once again. Not in the shameful margins of our society, but behind the honourable mask of «opinion» and «ideas». Let us be clear about this. The idea, the notion of race is a technical means, a machine, for committing murder. And its effectiveness is not in doubt. It is a way of rationalizing and organizing by murderous violence the domination of powerful social groups over other groups reduced to powerlessness. Unless anyone is prepared to claim that, since race does not exist, nobody is or can ever have been repressed or killed because of their race. And nobody can make that claim, because millions of human beings have died as a result of their race, and millions of others are now dominated, excluded and repressed for the same reason.

No, race does not exist. And yet it does. *Not* in the way that people think; *but* it remains the most tangible, real and brutal of realities.

COLETTE GUILLAUMIN (1981)

Also available at Zanzara athée:

- Audre Lorde, *The transformation of silence into language and action*, 1977.
- Audre Lorde, *La transformation du silence en paroles et en actes*, 1977.
- Colette Guillaumin, «*Je sais bien mais quand même*» *ou les avatars de la notion «race»*, 1981
- Horia Kebabza, *L'universel lave-t-il plus blanc ? : «Race», racisme et système de privilèges*, 2006

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