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IN **ACTUEL MARX** 2005/2 No 38 , PAGES 11 TO 28

PUBLISHER **PRESSES UNIVERSITAIRES DE FRANCE**

ISSN 0994-4524

ISBN 9782130554257

DOI 10.3917/amx.038.0011

Article available online at

<https://shs.cairn.info/journal-actuel-marx-2005-2-page-11?lang=en>



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THE CONSTRUCTION OF RACISM¹

Étienne BALIBAR

For what reason do we give certain attitudes the common name of “racism”? Why is a vast, extremely diverse set of discourses that tend to isolate, stigmatize, threaten, and discriminate between human and social groups considered to be “racist”? Why do we label different practices as “racist” that can be spontaneous or institutional, that all create mutual oppression, hostility, and distrust, sometimes leading to extreme violence, and that have affected many different types of societies throughout history up to the present? To my great surprise, the sizeable body of literature that has been devoted to the study of “racism” engages in debates over the ancient or modern origins of the “racist phenomenon” as well as its qualitative and quantitative variations, but hardly ever asks these questions. More precisely, it tends to take the response for granted, making the category of “racism” a tool that is used in sociological and political analysis without raising any eyebrows. It jumps directly into the different definitions, the competing theories and the limits of their validity. An unquestionable *fact* has been there from the start: for more or less time, *a phenomenon has existed and this phenomenon is called racism*. It manifests itself in different ways, it changes over time; it does not coincide with *every* form of violence, or even with *every* manifestation of collective hatred. Yet should we not ask what the basis of such an obvious fact might be?

The need to raise the question here also comes from the fact that, in most contemporary societies, racism is subject to a *ban* that carries legal consequences, even though they are not all the same and lead to contradictory understandings of their legitimacy, method of application, and limits. Is it possible, during an election campaign, to say that there are “too many immigrants,” or “too many non-European immigrants,” or too many “Blacks,” “Arabs,” “Muslims,” or “Jews”? Or that they “cannot assimilate” to “our” cultural models and institutions? Or that some aspect of their “culture” is “inferior”? These are questions that are asked on a

1. This article is the French adaptation of a presentation made on November 5, 2003 for the workshop *Rassismen i Europa – kontinuität och förändring*, ABF-huset, Stockholm, Sweden with the English title “Racism Revisited – Sources, Relevance, and Aporias of a Modern Concept.”

daily basis, not only in moral and political terms but in legal terms as well. The fact that racism is now prohibited forces debates about its origins, nature, and effects into a very narrow framework. It prevents us from considering that the meaning of the word “racism” may be purely conventional, that everyone might limit their understanding of the concept depending on their biases or the premises of their research.

The question of the origins and the meaning of the category of racism is made even more pressing by the fact that we are pulled in several directions by completely contradictory evaluations of the place of “racism” in contemporary societies. This question is nothing less than purely formal. It also carries political and institutional consequences. Some analysts and essayists see racism as a thing of the past, of declining importance, or something that would decline naturally if it were not “artificially” revitalized by counterproductive strategies and the “adverse effects” of institutional definitions and measures such as *affirmative action* as practiced in the United States and the more or less equivalent measures to “fight discrimination” in other countries.² Conservatives and neo-conservatives, such as the American sociologist Dinesh D’Souza, the author of a book/manifesto on the “end of racism” published in 1995, are not the only ones who think they can use the concept of “race” or “racial difference” while claiming that modern societies are close to overcoming prejudice and discrimination.³ Thinkers on the left do not hesitate to claim that professional differences, or generational and gender differences now play the role in social conflicts that race once played, in particular in countries that experienced colonialism and slavery. Sometimes they present themselves as the defenders of a republican universalism with concerns about seeing the defense of minorities and oppressed groups devolve into “community” demands. At other times they seek to establish a “post-colonial” and “post-modern” politics of emancipation that would allow us to move from discussions of race and racism to multiple, “nomadic,” or “diasporic” identities that subvert the traditional, Eurocentric notions of community.⁴ Looking at a broad spectrum of discourses suggests that, for various reasons, the question of racism is only of historical importance in retrospect. Yet others contend the opposite is true, with just as much insistence: not only are different types of racism more thriving and deadly than ever, but they have, let us not be afraid to say, a bright future before them that could outrival their past. Maybe now, with the shape of

2. On the relationship between American and French policies towards “positive discrimination,” cf. V. De Rudder, C. Poirat, and F. Yourc’h, *L’Inégalité raciste. L’universalité républicaine à l’épreuve* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2000).

3. Dinesh D’Souza, *The End of Racism. Principles for a Multiracial Society* (New York: The Free Press, 1995).

4. In particular, I am thinking of the recent work by Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

globalization as it is today, and with the weakening of the global forces that once contested it, racism will dominate our societies, in the north and the south, in the east and the west.

However, this disturbing perspective can also take different forms that confirm the contentiousness of the “semantics” of racism. Many researchers insist on the fact that contemporary developments are based on a shift in targets, intentions, and discourses—even though they are contained within the general limits of a social and symbolic paradigm of *exclusion of the Other*.⁵ This observation has led some authors to develop the themes of “cultural racism,” “differential (or differentialist) racism,” or even, to highlight the paradox, “racism without races.” In France, scholars like Pierre-André Taguieff (before he developed a much more militant position towards the “new Judeophobia”)⁶ have drawn attention to the negative effects of “anti-racist” policies and discourses that overlook or euphemize the “non-biological” or “non-hierarchical” forms of racial discourse, which are based on essentializing cultural difference.⁷ However, as ethnic-religious conflicts both in the “north” and the “south” (unless they translate their interpenetration) lead to genocides and policies of extermination, in the former Yugoslavia and western and central Africa for example, or as fantasies of conspiracies and shocks of civilizations are projected (as in the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict), the idea has also spread that racism as such is a permanent phenomenon. Its periodic *return* signals the inability of societies to “progress” from the point of view of civilization, or their insurmountable dependency on archaic structures of collective thinking.

We may therefore think that the current debates about the use and applications of the category “racism” not only involve a high level of tension, but also that they could collapse into confusion at any moment. This confusion would have more than just epistemological consequences. Racism is first and foremost a political object where “theory” and “combat” are inextricably linked. Any public use of it sets off an immediate chain reaction of effects. We only need to recall the outcome of the Durban Conference (South Africa) in 2001 under the auspices of UNESCO and the UN Human Rights Commission. With official delegations from every country but also participants from many nongovernmental organizations gathered in a place that symbolized the struggle against the worst discrimination passed down from colonization, it aimed to breathe new life into the fight against the racial prejudices that are

5. See my essay: “Difference, Otherness, Exclusion,” *Parallax* 11, no. 1 (2005): 19–34.

6. See my essay: “Un nouvel antisémitisme?”, in *Antisémitisme: l'intolérable chantage, Israël-Palestine, une affaire française?*, 89–96 (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2003).

7. Pierre-André Taguieff, ed., *Face au Racisme* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 1993).

the major focus of human rights policy.⁸ Yet instead of reaching a platform for common action or at least a definition of the main problems, the Conference fell apart over a series of problems: some delegations called for the assimilation of Zionism with racist ideologies, while others defended the idea of anti-Zionism as the modern form of anti-Semitism; some delegations upheld while others rejected the idea that the economic and cultural consequences of the African slave trade called for the same “reparations” as genocides and in particular the extermination of the Jews in Europe; some wanted to include caste discrimination in Southeast Asian countries (primarily India) among the manifestations of racism, while others opposed it. And so forth. The consequences of this failure were disastrous. It was not just one political episode among many others in the history of international organizations. It was a sign that there is an urgent need to rethink what we mean by “racism” and how we articulate the phenomenon with others that overlap with it historically (such as nationalism, imperialism, and religious intolerance). To begin, we must turn a critical eye to the intellectual history that produced this category.

— As a preliminary contribution, and rather than addressing whether “the invention of racism,” as some authors have called it, is a modern phenomenon or a very old one—a question that takes the general category for granted, especially when positing that the reality preceded the words⁹—I would like to look at the *development of the category itself*. It coincided with a reshaping of the idea of humanity, officially placing the accent on the *equal dignity* of human beings and the *indivisibility* of the human race. The epistemological consequences of this political gesture cannot be separated from a reworking of anthropology. Outlining the meaning of this gesture, I will also emphasize the importance of the resistance with which it was met, showing the other possibilities of theorizing the phenomena in question. We should then, at least in principle, have the means to better understand the internal tensions of the anthropological paradigm that have led finally to its decomposition, in particular in the form of the emerging idea of “differential racism” and a new problem of internal inclusion.

Let us first recall summarily how the *word* “racism” appeared. Most histories of the word draw attention to the derivation of “racism” from “race” (a word with an equally controversial etymology). The first critical uses, in the 1930s, were made by German writers (fleeing Nazi persecution)

8. See the official publication: *United to Combat Racism*, Dedicated to the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, Durban, South Africa, August 31–September 7, 2001, prefaces by Koichiro Matsuura and Mary Robinson (Paris: UNESCO, 2001). For a critical reading by one of the main actors that is informative but debatable, see Michael Banton, *The International Politics of Race* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2002).

9. For example, this is Christian Delacampagne’s position in *L’Invention du racisme. Antiquité et Moyen Âge* (Paris: Fayard, 1983.)

who expressed themselves in English or in English translation. In 1928, in *Race and Civilization*, Friedrich Hertz only used the expression “race hatred.” In Magnus Hirschfeld’s 1933-34 book, however, translated and published with the title *Racism*, he uses the term and distinguishes it from “xenophobia.”¹⁰ Compared to the objective phenomenon itself, this usage comes later. It “naturalizes” the expression *Rassenlehre* on which the Nazis based their hereditary categorizations and their persecution. From a philological point of view, the subsequent step came from the developments of the debate started in the scientific community by scholars like Julian Huxley (who became the first Director-General of UNESCO) to determine whether the Nazis “diverted” a biological concept, valid in itself, from its legitimate usage, or whether the very concept of race represented a pseudo-scientific notion, a “mythical” construction or a “superstition” with no explicative value that projected cultural and linguistic differences (Aryans and Semites, etc.) into the realm of life.¹¹ In a third step, the debate spread to the fields of ethnology and anthropology when confronted with the vicissitudes of colonization and the more or less problematic aspects of the distinction between civilization and savagery. Representative of this generalization (and remarkable in the duration of its influence) was Ruth Benedict’s *Race and Racism* in 1942.¹² From there, it was only a short step to the definitions contained in the “scientific” critiques made official by the UNESCO declarations in 1950 and 1951 on the “race question.” These definitions served as standards and guides for a series of educational and political uses (that some authors have described as a movement of “permanent inflation” of their meaning).¹³

Other work requires us to modify this all too linear presentation, in particular French sources.¹⁴ The word *racisme* was already in use at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries with a *positive* meaning for those nationalist ideologues who wanted to indicate the superiority of the “French race” over its enemies, portrayed as “foreign bodies” on the inside and the outside carrying the threat of degradation. This self-referential use was not abandoned until the 1930s, when they found a need to distinguish themselves from Nazi Germany: the term then chosen was “nationalism” which designated a set of political values that were supposed to be typically “Latin” in opposition to the “racism” or “racialism” which were more “Germanic.” Taguieff emphasizes the

10. References taken from Robert Miles, *Racism* (London: Routledge, 1989).

11. This critical conception of the notion of race as the product of “false science” leads some scientists to ask that it not be used, even in a negative way, in legal and political texts, which tends to give credit to the illusion. It is interesting to reread the debates at the conference organized at the Université de Paris XII in 1992: “Sans distinction de... race,” *Le mot race est-il de trop dans la Constitution française?*, in *Mots—Les langages du politique* 33 (December 1992).

12. Ruth Benedict, *Race and Racism*, foreword by John Rex (London: Routledge, 1942).

13. See Miles, *Racism*.

14. See P. A. Taguieff, *La Force du préjugé. Essai sur le racisme et ses doubles* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 1988), 122–151.

importance of this reversal as an illustration of the notion's ambivalence, alternating between self-referential identification and extrinsic and polemic use, tending to reproduce a mirror image of the logic of stigmatization that is presented simultaneously as its central aspect (from this point of view, it becomes possible to characterize some people and some nations, as well as some individuals, in an essentialist manner, as intrinsically "racist" or more naturally "racist" than others).

I see all of these uses as belonging to a preparatory phase, a "prehistory" of the historical-political category of racism. The decisive turning point seems to be the definition of a "myth" or "prejudice" that would have universally affected humanity throughout its history and that would have to be eliminated or eradicated by means of a "human rights policy" centered on refuting the scientific arguments for the idea that "inequalities" are related to "racial differences" within humanity. It leads to the project for universal education against racial prejudice and discrimination based on "race" to be developed by the concerted efforts of democratic states and national and international institutions. This meaning did not exist before the two Declarations of 1950 and 1951 composed by a group of renowned scholars (biologists, anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists) gathered together by UNESCO at the behest of the United Nations Economic and Social Council. They were followed by the publication in 1956 of a series of explanatory brochures by the same authors (Juan Comas, Kenneth Little, Harry Shapiro, Michel Leiris, Claude Levi-Strauss, L. C. Dunn, Otto Klineberg, etc.) later collected in French in a single volume (*Le racisme devant la science, 1960*).¹⁵ Here there was a true "epistemological break" that started a new intellectual paradigm and its remarkable characteristics merit closer examination.

This event took place in a "power-knowledge" field, in the Foucauldian sense. The historical status of institutions like the UN and UNESCO is complex and not without ambiguity. Their authority issues from power delegated by nation-states, but it is not purely political, without being precisely scientific. Its legitimacy is borrowed from the disciplinary power of the sciences (biology, sociology, anthropology, etc.), while turning against them to question their presuppositions and pushing them to reform so that they can play an active role in developing human rights policy. There is a circular reinforcement here between power and knowledge, a circle that the present and future uses of the category of

15. The Declarations of 1950 and 1951 first appeared in the pamphlet *The Race Concept* (Paris: UNESCO, 1952). They were reprinted along with the two subsequent declarations (1964 and 1967) in the French volume *Le Racisme devant la science* (Paris: UNESCO/Gallimard, 1960) (we should note that the content changed significantly over the course of successive reprintings, the last of which was in 1975) and in *Four Statements on the Race Question* (Paris: UNESCO, 1969).

“racism” cannot escape. We can also reflect on the connection between the epistemological event of the “construction” or invention of racism and a particular historical context: the time immediately following the end of World War II during which the liberation movements of colonized peoples began to take shape along with civil rights movements in societies of social segregation like the United States. Let us not forget that the UNESCO meeting was held just after the Nuremberg Tribunal defined the new crime of “genocide,” a definition that the United Nations adopted in 1948.¹⁶

The notion of “racism” constructed at the time subsumes three types of situation under a single term, which from that point became the specific forms of “racism.” They are *anti-Semitism*, of which Nazi Germany represented the most extreme case; *colonial racism*, which implied the division of humanity into “superior” and “inferior,” or “civilized” and “barbarian” races (the *subject races* of the British colonies); and finally, *prejudice based on skin color* related to segregation or the institution of *apartheid* in post-colonial societies that accord inferior status to the descendants of slaves. We should note that this categorization helps identify social and ideological analogies that make sense. It leads to questioning the connection between the institution of inequality and the phenomenon of extreme violence, either through the form of forced labor or of extermination. Yet it also represents a choice in a specific historical context; it translates a perspective on and a selection from the multiplicity of collective experiences that make up the construction of the new category of “racism.”

There was a third aspect to this event: positing that the forms subsumed under a single name arise from the application of the same “theory” (more generally designated by the name of “myth”)¹⁷ of the *biology of human races*. More precisely, it is a combination of the idea that evolution is driven by the “struggle for existence,” that cultural dispositions and intellectual capability have a “hereditary” aspect, and the idea that eugenic policies are necessary to defend the superiority of dominant “populations” against the threat of degeneration. This pseudoscientific combination led to or legitimized both the thesis that the races that make up the population of humans are unequal, in particular the superiority of the “white race” over “colored” races, and the imaginary struggle between “Aryans” and “Semites” for control of the world. Conversely, its critique implies the recognition of a *philosophical* principle: *the indivisible unity of*

16. See Yves Ternon, *L'Innocence des victimes. Regard sur les génocides du XXe siècle* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2001).

17. See the title of the work by Léon Poliakov, *Le Mythe aryen. Essai sur les sources du racisme et du nationalisme* (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1971), which refers to one of the three “racial myths” identified by Juan Comas at the beginning of the UNESCO publication (but which also echoes *The Myth of the Twentieth Century* by Nazi theorist Alfred Rosenberg). Spanish anthropologist Juan Comas (1900-1979), who became a Mexican citizen in 1940, played a key role in shaping these expressions.

the human race, which we could also call the “humanist” basis of universalism (as opposed to its religious or scientific foundation). More often than not, this principle is expressed negatively and becomes the equivalent of a categorical imperative: any division of the human race into distinct groups that are *essentially* different from a cultural or biological point of view is both *impossible* and *unacceptable*.

A declaration of this kind, let us not fool ourselves, is by no means unassailable. Not only did it go against deep-set beliefs that were apparently inseparable from the category of “civilization,” but it represented a less than stable balance between the pure and simple denial of differences within the human race and their interpretation in essentialist and hierarchical terms. From there, the positive sciences would never stop trying to prove that this balance can have a precise content—an infinite task, as it turns out. It is also impossible to avoid noticing, however, that from the start, the creation of this political, philosophical, and scientific paradigm suffered from a latent conflict that would lead to its displacement and reformulation under the cover of an apparently simple scientific “update.” It was made all the more clear by the surprising fact that UNESCO *could not content itself with one declaration on “race” and “racism” but had to publish two in a row* (1950, 1951). Various scientific organizations (in particular the British Royal Academy) had raised objections to the first declaration, saying that it went “too far” in denying the existence of biological factors that determined the transmission of individual physical and intellectual traits, but it also came from the reversal of the individualist idea of the “struggle for survival” in favor of a principle of “solidarity” within the race that was also without scientific basis. In this initial divergence, shown by the juxtaposition of the two texts, we can see the prototype of the conflicts and rewriting that, up to the present, have turned the critique of racism into an endless process where various “universalist” discourses fight to influence educational policy and “anti-racist” legislation.

As marginal as they seem in relation to current debates, these considerations are vital for articulating the three types of consequences that we have inherited. First, there are the epistemological consequences that affect the very organization of contemporary knowledge about “humans.” Then there is the rise of resistance to the dominant paradigm, which could be called “humanist.” Finally, there is the progressive transformation into another paradigm, of “racism without races” or “cultural racism” (“differentialist” racism).

The epistemological consequences are striking not only in that they affect the organization of the human sciences, but also in the way that they show how the question of racism, philosophically interpreted as

an ideological or mythical projection of natural differences within the human race to the detriment of its essential indivisibility, is at the heart of the assumptions of anthropology and is not related only to particular applications. I would say that there is a *Copernican revolution in the history of anthropology* that takes it from an “objectivist” point of view to a “subjectivist” one in its use of the concept of “race.” Anthropology separates itself from the study of differences between races and their inequality, considered as objective phenomena with consequences that have to be traced politically and culturally; and it moves to the study of “racism,” or the subjective *belief* in the inequality of races that projects a “racial” interpretative grid on all history, or *reduces* all human differences to an *imaginary* model of supposedly original and hereditary differences.

Such a change in point of view transforms the entire methodology of the human sciences, albeit not unequivocally. The primacy of biological determinism, and in particular the determinism of Darwinian or pseudo-Darwinian evolution, is called into question. But not necessarily the possibility of including biological conditions or the representation of races as a derivative concept, a phenomenon of “population,” in cognitive and affective psychology research programs. It does not impose a particular direction on the search for the “roots” of racial prejudices: they can be socioeconomic structures, in the Marxist sense (the hierarchical, more or less functional division of labor in capitalist societies),¹⁸ or symbolic structures and systems of representation projected into the imagination according to the direction selected by *cultural studies* (it is not by chance that they were formed out of an interpretation of racism and more generally of figures of alterity in post-colonial societies).¹⁹

I do not hesitate to think that this change marks a *new beginning* in the history of the anthropological discipline. We should ask, however, if there is not an *element of continuity underlying the reversal of objectivism into subjectivism* (without taking into consideration the opposition of their practical consequences). Anthropology is always a project of knowing or recognizing humanity in itself, or identifying the human in humankind; it tries to answer the question of identity and difference in the “human world” as a historical, geographical, or cultural world. *Who are we and where are we in relation to one another?* From the eighteenth century to the middle of the twentieth, natural history, biology, and psychology attempted to respond to this question. After World War II,

18. The work of Immanuel Wallerstein (cf. with Etienne Balibar, *Race, nation, classe. Les identités ambiguës* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 1988)) is a good illustration, along with Robert Miles (*Capitalism and Unfree Labour* (London: Routledge, 1987); *Racism After “Race Relations”* (London: Routledge, 1993).

19. See primarily the work of Stuart Hall (I refer to his article “Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance,” in *Sociological Theories: Race and Colonialism* (Paris: UNESCO, 1980). Levi-Strauss himself, when attempting to distinguish between racism and xenophobia, went in this direction.

and despite the precursors to the Copernican revolution in the critique of biological determinism by culturalism (in particular, in the United States, the concurrent work of W.E.B. Du Bois and Franz Boas), the perspective switches abruptly to the study of “racism” and its theorization. *Humanity* as such is no longer the race whose development is ordered by the differences between the races, but a race composed of individuals and groups that are *capable of developing racism*, and perhaps even inevitably led to construct *racist myths* (and more generally “xenophobic” or “heterophobic” illusions) under the effects of a type of transcendental illusion, or as a consequence of its organization into cultures, societies, and communities separated by relationships of objective domination. We could call it the “Sartre theorem,” thinking of how at the same time, in his *Reflections on the Jewish Question* (1946), he suggests that “the Jews do not exist,” that “anti-Semitism makes the Jews Jewish.”

As we can clearly see, “science” or “scientific knowledge” is supposed to provide the ultimate response in each case. Making this observation by no means disqualifies the idea or the possibility of scientific knowledge; it suggests that applying an epistemological critique to “racial theories” could also be turned against their descendants, the theories of “historical racism.” Most of all, it means questioning the “transcendental-empirical double” (again Foucault) that in this case does not concern the individual but “humankind” (*Gattungswesen*) from an amoral and philosophical principle of the unity of humanity, assigning the task of explaining the rise of racial prejudices, of “racist” subjects or subjectivities, to the anthropological disciplines. It is obvious that this function is marked by an ambiguity that may be impossible for us to avoid. Following the initial program of international institutions, it forms part of a perspective of progressive abolition of racism by science and scientific vulgarization, pedagogy, and legislation, which reproduce the Enlightenment ideal of humanity’s self-improvement. From another angle, in the framework of societies that could be characterized as “racial states” (as used by David Goldberg),²⁰ it forms part of a program to regulate “race relations,” or *racist conflicts and representations*. In this sense, *all* contemporary states are “racial states,” even if racism is no longer *institutionalized* as an ideological principle of its citizens; these states have inequalities and social conflicts that can be represented in terms of racial differences or their equivalent—ethnic differences, migratory conditions—and they are engaged in political and legal endeavors to *reestablish equality*, at least formally. They devote themselves to the task of “fighting racism,” of “removing” it from the public arena and the institutions of the political

20. David Goldberg, *The Racial State* (London: Blackwell Publishers, 2002).

community. This has important political consequences, starting with the development of a series of laws related to the forms of racial discrimination and the modalities of racism. It may be that this represents the other side—the institutional side—of the epistemological revolution that I mentioned above.

It is therefore important for us, in conclusion, to compare the identification of this epistemological revolution—which places the study of “racism” as an ideological phenomenon at the heart of the anthropological discipline and simultaneously posits that racism in its causes, variants, and historical changes has an anthropological explanation (from universal models of social and symbolic structures)—it is important to compare this with the *resistance that it provokes and the exceptions that it allows*. They are as old as the anthropological model itself, while calling into question this model’s dominance, and the institutional legitimacy conferred on it by cultural and political organizations.²¹ They offer alternative models for understanding racist attitudes and representations, and they question the validity of the category of “racism” as a universalizing category.

Having suggested that the anthropological paradigm is tied to a “categorical imperative” of humanist meaning from which a representation of politics as “human rights politics” is derived, we might obviously wonder if resistance to the anthropological paradigm, and the implicit critiques of its validity, correspond to an *anti-humanist* point of view in philosophy. I do not think things are that simple. I would only suggest that these critiques must inevitably question the coherence of humanist principles in philosophy and in the political domain, unless they lead to pushing them to the limit, which would mean that they no longer appear as “self-evident truths” but as uncertain postulates or hypotheses. Let us say a quick word about those forms of resistance that appeared *during the period when the UNESCO paradigm was being constructed*, immediately after World War II. Several cases with equally meaningful disparities come to mind.

I am thinking of the example of writers such as Robert Antelme in France (his book *L’Espèce humaine* [*The Human Race*], written in 1947, was only published in 1957),²² or Primo Levi in Italy (his book *Se questo è un’uomo* also appeared in Turin in 1947).²³ In their search for a “literary” expression of the experience of the concentration camps and system,

21. Even by what we could without exaggeration call, in the case of UNESCO, “philosophical organizations” (see Patrice Vermeren, *La Philosophie saisie par l’UNESCO* (Paris: UNESCO, 2003)).

22. Revised edition (Paris: Gallimard, 1994) [*The Human Race*, (Marlboro, VT: Marlboro Press, 1998)]

23. English translation, *If This Is a Man* (New York: Little, Brown Book Group, 1991).

which made their *inhumanity* perceptible beyond the possibilities of a “causal” explanation, these authors could decide whether to use the category of “racism” (Levy does, Antelme does not). In any case, (and Antelme’s title should not lead us astray), the problem that they raise has nothing to do with a hierarchical division of the human race: it relates to the contradictory possibility of *denying human beings their quality of being human*, or “excluding them” from the human condition, not only in words but in practice. It is the thought of this *limit experience*, the destruction of all ties to humanity, that has to be invoked to reaffirm the indivisibility of the human race in a problematic or even desperate way, much like Pascal’s wager. Opposition to the anthropological paradigm can be found here, in that we would have to start again from these limit experiences to interpret the potential for extremism inherent in racist cultures or structures. The anthropological paradigm, on the other hand, works tirelessly to do the opposite, to explain the development of racism structurally, to approach the “cause” and describe from there the conditions of a radical transgression of the human imperative.

— Then there is the example of Frantz Fanon, and in particular his first book: *Peau noire, masques blancs* [*Black Skin, White Masks*], published in 1952. The author, a French doctor and writer born in Martinique, took a position as head physician of the Blida psychiatric hospital before joining in the liberation struggle of the Algerian FLN, for whom he wrote the famous essay *Les Damnés de la terre* [*Wretched of the Earth*] (1961) with a preface by Jean-Paul Sartre.²⁴ In many ways, Fanon’s work seems like an early *reversal of the reversal* that had moved from a scientific analysis of “race” to an analysis of “racism.” It was not a question of reestablishing an objective definition of “race” but of developing a use of *race names*—such as “negro”—that could be called “performative” (already at work in the “Négritude” movement, but in a much more ambiguous way, caught in the culturalist paradigm). It was a way of bringing the challenge straight to the heart of the discriminatory discourse that, for Blacks, is never external, but introjected, constitutive of their “personality”; it was a way to make heard not only a “point of view” but also the “trembling voices” of the oppressed.²⁵ Against the sanitized representations of “democratic society” that triumphed after the victory over the Nazis and that tended to mask the persistent reality of colonialism, Fanon insisted not only on the fact that racism is a *social structure* (and that individuals are “racist” because societies are based on the absolute distinction between

24. Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1972) [*Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 2008)]. See the recent biography by Alice Cherki, *Frantz Fanon, portrait, 1952* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2000) and the article by Françoise Vergès.

25. Authors inspired by deconstruction continue to examine these problems, such as Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (St Paul, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

“masters” and “slaves”) but also on the *ambivalence* of the psychological effects of this structural racism, that had to be described phenomenologically. What he calls *alienation* applies to both the colonized and the colonizers, even if does not apply in the same way; it is centered around the phenomenon of “divided consciousness” and the perversion of sexual relationships and fantasies, sometimes going as far as psychosis, that impregnate the mutual representations of dominant and dominated, and the fetishistic identification with their own “color.”²⁶

During these same years, Hannah Arendt published *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), in which we can read an illustration of the point of view of *political philosophy* (despite her reticence towards this term in its academic use) contrasted with the *anthropological* point of view.²⁷ Fundamentally, Arendt is less interested in a structure than in a *particular history* of Europe. In this history “anti-Semitism” comes to *encounter* colonialism and imperialism, which developed independently, creating the empirical genesis of the “racial state” in its form as a *state of exception*. She is led to carry out a *reversal* of the traditional relationship between “human rights” and “citizens’ rights” or *political* rights that we could call the “Arendt theorem.” She insists on the question of the “stateless” or those individuals and groups who are deprived of their fundamental rights and practically excluded from the human condition after having been dispossessed of their status as legal persons and transformed into stateless persons. The criterion of the “right to rights” is therefore at the heart of her notion of political community. Racism—imagined here once again in function of its “exterminating” forms that reach into imperial and colonial history (it is from there, and not from the classical forms of anti-Semitism, that it gets the mass models and techniques that were later perfected and generalized by Nazism)—is an *institutional phenomenon* affecting the building of “political communities” (which is not quite the same thing as “societies,” even if political union has social foundations and effects).²⁸

There are clear disparities between these forms of “resistance” to the universal extension of the anthropological paradigm (they are not pure and simple negations but they allow us to think its *limits*). This also means that they cannot be added together to create a coherent alternative

26. Fanon's theories, which still await a major philosophical commentary, draw both from the source of the Hegelian phenomenology of the “master” and “slave” as reread by Kojève, Sartre, and Simone de Beauvoir (in *Le Deuxième sexe*, 1949) and from the psychosociology of “double consciousness” in the work of W. E. B. Du Bois (*The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903; *Dusk of Dawn*, 1940) reinterpreted from the point of view of a psychoanalytical “splitting of the self.”

27. We had to wait until 2002 for a complete and reliable French translation of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (by P. Bouretz for Quarto-Gallimard). Her “philosophical anthropology” work, *The Human Condition* (1958) was translated in 1961 with the title *Condition de l'homme moderne*. I will not address it here. Dedicated in large part to a critique of Marxist philosophy in the name of a neo-classical concept of *praxis*, it does not directly relate to the question of racism.

28. See Marie-Claire Caloz-Tschopp, *Les Sans-État dans la philosophie de Hannah Arendt* (Lausanne, Switzerland: Payot, 2000).

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paradigm. What holds our attention is that they all ask the question of the *human community* instead of the human *race* or *humankind*. It is a paradoxical “community,” both *real* and, in a sense, *impossible* as a “totality” without exclusion or borders—which is precisely what the limit cases show, where the community is confronted with the threat of real or imaginary destruction. Affirming the humanist principle of the indivisibility of the race is therefore not enough to determine the conditions under which *something like a human or universal community could exist*. This principle only reflects its transcendental aspect; it posits the element that is “common” to all human beings from the perspective of the origin and the final destination, and obviously not from the perspective of effective political or social structures. Or it only reflects the need to imagine a common element, an ideal community, like a moral goal that underpins the construction of particular communities that are closed in on themselves and exclusive of each other. It could be that this limitation has to do with the fact that the principles that underlie the official definition of racism were declared by an institution that represented *nation-states* drawn by circumstance into attempting to submit their relationships to international law more strictly. By associating a private human community of institutional power with empirical-historical communities (the Nations) and ideally placing political representation above anthropological differences, or “divisions” of humanity (as completely subjective, ideological, and imaginary as they are thought to be), this model is precisely what loses its meaning in “states of exception,” when colonial states, *apartheid* regimes, and politics of extermination gain the advantage over the “rule of law.”

As a provisional conclusion, my aim was not to give a full presentation of the anthropological paradigm and the problems that it poses or of the transformations that it undergoes when the definition of “racism” is confronted with new historical situations. The aim was only to indicate the need for such a presentation. The question is whether the category of racism has reached a point of decomposition and deconstruction. There are two epistemological problems that we must try to think about together. On the one hand, *within the anthropological paradigm, the understanding of racism is evolving* in the direction of a concept of “cultural racism” or “differential racism.” It represents, in a sense, the final phase of the break that started the move from a naturalist point of view to an historical one and to the analysis of collective representations that are characteristic of the anthropological paradigm. Yet by the same token, it has become difficult to define limits for the category that are needed for its scientific use and analytical value: it seems to cover every phenomenon

of discrimination and every act of symbolic violence. The reversibility of racism and sexism tends to be drowned out by their analogy. On the other hand, new “cases” and new “examples” have tended to substitute themselves, at least in part, for the ternary system underlying the initial definition (anti-Semitism, colonialism, *apartheid*). At the same time, the question of institutional discrimination related to the destabilization of political communities (starting with nations) has become all the more insistent inside post-colonial societies and transnational or post-national groups. The “natural” division of the human race (or the myths and beliefs that invoke it) is relegated to the background. Other criteria for defining racist structures, speech and behavior are coming to the fore, criteria that do not need to refer to “races,” at least in appearance: “exclusion,” for example, or, even better, *internal exclusion*. To continue the research outlined here, an examination of the constitution and of the functioning of these criteria in contemporary works is now needed.²⁹ ■

ABSTRACT

We observe many signs of the fact that the category “racism” not only has profoundly changed its meaning, but could also have reached the limits of its historical validity, both as an instrument of theoretical analysis, and as an instrument of progressive politics. The failed World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance in Durban (2002) was a striking indication in this respect. As a consequence, we can no longer proceed in our struggle against extreme discriminations and violence without critically revisiting the origins and meaning of our notion of « racism ». The term was coined in the 30’s in its current use, but it was not before the 1950 and 1951 Declarations on race and racism, issued under the aegis of UNESCO and the UN, that it denominated a scientific paradigm. The article examines its logical function (to give a unitary description of the phenomena of anti-Semitism, colonialist subjection, and color segregation), its ethical prerequisites (the « humanist » principle of the indivisibility of the Human Species), its epistemological consequences (a Copernican Revolution in the field of anthropology, and finally the alternative conceptualizations that – right from the beginning – confronted its research program with a different problematic of the community, notably in Antelme, Primo Levi, Fanon and Arendt.

29. See the very interesting developments on this point by Wulf D. Hund. “Exclusion and Inclusion: Dimensions of Racism,” in *Rassismus*, ed. Max Sebastian Hering Torres and Wolfgang Schmale, special edition of the *Wiener Zeitschrift zur Geschichte der Neuzeit*, 3, Jahrgag 2003, Heft 1 (Innsbruck, Austria: Studien Verlag, 2003).