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Deep Denials: The Discourses of Racism and Difference'

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Racism is not ethnocentrism.

Ethnocentrism is about thinking more about ‘us’ than thinking about ‘them’. The Greeks (not the ones today but the real ones of the great Hellenic past) were ethnocentric. They viewed themselves as first among the Mediterranean civilizations. Second, thirds and down were barbarian βάρβαρος, foreigners ‘others’ not ‘us. But barbarians could change and become Hellenic that’s to say civilized. Even the very dark Nubians could become civilized if willing to acculturate. Culture and skin color were not interlinked as they are today.

Racism is not a caste regime.

The Hindu karma theology posits higher and lower caste status as a distinct possibility for all in previous lives or in future rebirth. People might be born into a cast but belonging to it is not part of its inherited racial constitution (Gregory 1998, Gregory and Sanjek 1994). Dark and light skin color is not a rarity in high-cast status, nor is its reverse.

Cast regimes and ethnocentrism might not be nice and many times their consequences might be terrible, for they create rigid states of social inequality, but when compared to racism they might be considered benevolent for in one way or another they consider exit possibilities.

Moreover though slavery is always slavery, slavery is not always racist (which does not make it any better). There has been slavery throughout history but slavery has not been always associated nor justified based on assumed race.

Racisms is different.

Historians have now shown that between the 16th and the 18th centuries, race was a folk idea in the English language; it was a general categorizing term, interchangeable with such terms as type, kind, sort, breed, and even species (Allen, 1994, 1997; Hannaford, 1996; Smedley, 1999a, 1999b).

Toward the end of the 17th century, race emerged as a term referring to those populations then interacting in North America—Europeans, Africans, and Native Americans (Indians). In the early 18th century, usage of the term increased in the written record, and it began to become standardized and uniform (Poliakov, 1982), and its meaning solidified as a reference for social categories of Indians, Blacks, and Whites (Allen, 1994, 1997; Smedley, 1999b).

The fabrication of a new type of categorization for humanity was needed because the leaders of the American colonies, at the turn of the 18th century, had deliberately selected Africans to be permanent slaves (Allen, 1994, 1997; Fredrickson, 1988, 2002; Morgan, 1975; Smedley, 1999b).

In an era when the dominant political philosophy was equality, civil rights, democracy, justice, and freedom for all human beings, the only way Christians could justify slavery was to demote Africans to nonhuman status (Haller, 1971; A. Smedley, 1999b).

Throughout the 19th century many believed that Africans were created separately from other, more human, beings (Smedley and Smedley 2005, Allen 1994).

What about today

The UN does not define "racism"; however, it defines "racial discrimination": According to the 1965 UN International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the term "racial discrimination" shall mean any distinction, exclusion, restriction, or preference based on race, color, descent, or national or ethnic origin that has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life.

In their 1978 United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Declaration on Race and Racial Prejudice (Article 1), the UN states, "All human beings belong to a single species and are descended from a common stock. They are born equal in dignity and rights and all form an integral part of humanity."

The UN got it right this time, there are NO biological basis for racism

The following are the main characteristics of race based societies:

1. They perceive designated racial groups as biologically discrete and exclusive groups, and certain physical characteristics become markers of race status.
2. They hold that races are naturally unequal and therefore must be ranked hierarchically (inequality is fundamental to all racial systems).
3. They assume that each race has distinctive physical features and cultural behaviors linked to their biology and that these justify the separation of races in schools, neighborhoods, churches, and they also have proscriptions against intermarriage.

However, physical features and differences connoted by these distinctive features are not the effective or direct causes of racism and discrimination. It is the culturally invented ideas and beliefs about these differences that constitute the meaning of race (Smedley, 1999b) and bring about chronic disparities among racial groups.

In the US for example Blacks are more likely to be poor, to be in jail, to be homeless, to abandon education, to be unemployed and or to die earlier than whites.

Justifications for this sad reality could come in different forms.

Religious justifications could be found in the interpretation of the book of Genesis in which Ham's sin against his father Noah condemned his supposedly black descendants to be 'servants unto servants'.

Justification could also be found based on pseudoscientific reasoning in the work of Linnaeus 'Systema Naturae' (1735) which was the first to create a classification of race based on skin color, and in which different races were actually said to be different species of living things.

To this pseudoscientific reasoning Johann Blumenbach added a 'science' called craniology, which tried to use the shape and dimensions of human skulls to measure intelligence ratios being this the precursor of 'eugenics' developed, originally by Sir Francis Galton (a cousin of Charles Darwin) and based around the idea of improving the quality of the stock of human beings on the planet, by various methods which would reduce the numbers of 'less desirable' kinds of people.

Throughout history lesser desirable kinds of people have been Blacks, Indigenous people, Jews, Armenians, Tutsi, etc. Today Moslems are in danger of becoming such a kind of less desirable people.

In classical antiquity categorization of humanity by race did not exist for the ancients used a political archetype to order their world - citizens and barbarians.

Only starting on the 12th century, out of a wide variety of sources that explained human differences as based on blood, physiognomy, climate, land, soil, and language, the racial archetype gradually developed.

Between the end of the 17th century, and the beginning of the 19th this thinking was fully developed and articulated.

Folk, an ethnic or racial concepts denoting affinities of blood, soil and language, took over from populus, the people organized as a political community.

Citizenship gave way to 'language, color, and shape' as tests of true belonging.

Racism as we know it today is better understood when following its development in the American colonies as they evolve into the United States of America

Not such a long history, just 400 years or so.

Believe it or not Europeans were not born white. For them to become white whiteness had to be invented first. Before they came to America, Europeans were Spanish, Portuguese, French, English, you have it.

In the first decades after the Jamestown settlement was founded in 1607, in North America, there might have been English and other peoples but there were no Whites.

A bit latter and to adapt the system to the changing demographics in the colonies English and Protestant Europeans where described as Christian or Baptized. Later on, Christian as a generic denomination became insufficient for, now, Negros were baptized as a asocial control mechanism. Thus Christian could not any more serve as a marker of difference between Europeans and Negros. A new word was needed.

The new word was....

WHITE

The differences between white and Niger and Indian are also of essence.

White confers legitimate status before the law.

Whites are full human beings.

Indians are not taxed, not considered to be part of the body politics except as dependents. Indians are not full human beings and have no status before the law.

Negros were 3/5 human and this only for purposes of determining Southern white representation in Congress.

Back in the 15th century white slaves were to be found in the colonies. Their status was that of Indentured servants that is to say a man, women, and even at times a child (mostly white European and poor but also at times black) whose passage to the colonies had been paid in exchange for a prescribed number of years of work.

By the 1650s colonial administrators feared the prospects of European servants making a common cause with either Indian or African slaves; moreover by the early 1660s white indenture men were loudly protesting against being made slaves in terms which strongly suggested that they considered slavery not as a wrong but as inapplicable to themselves.

In 1691 (just a bit over 300 years ago) for the first time the word white was used to refer to the legal status of persons of European descent in the first miscegenation law passed in Virginia “An act for suppressing outlying Slaves”. It states.

“...Be it enacted by the authoritie aforesaid, and it is hereby enacted, that for the time to come, whatsoever English or other **white** man or woman being free shall intermarry with a negroe, mulatto, or Indian man or woman bond or free shall within three months after such marriage be banished and removed from this dominion forever. . .” (Higginbotham 1980)

Between 1691 and 1787 (just over 200 hundred years ago) when the US constitution was ratified white and American became synonyms.

The **Naturalization Act of 1790** restricted **citizenship** to "any alien, being a free white person" who had been in the U.S. for two years. In effect, it left out indentured servants, slaves, and most women.

To understand this legislative act we need to recall other developments which took place 300 year before the codification of the naturalization act. In 1493 Pope Alexander the VI announced the papal edict called Doctrine of Discovery which entitled the conquering Europeans to claim all lands and people found by them in the lands conquered in the name of Christ and his church.

Pay attention, PLEASE, that the solidification of the racial system undermines any efforts to organize across class lines. Whiteness overcomes class and applies to Europeans whether rich or poor male or female adult or child.

In 1857 (just 160 years ago) in the Dred Scott v. Sandford, landmark decision by the United States Supreme Court on US labor law and constitutional law it was held that "a negro, whose ancestors were imported into [the U.S.], and sold as slaves", whether enslaved or free, could not be an American citizen and therefore had no standing to sue in federal court

On similar lines the Chinese Exclusion Act, a United States federal law signed by President Arthur on 1882 (just 135 years ago), can be seen as one of the most significant restrictions on free immigration in US history. The Chinese Exclusion Act was the first law implemented to prevent a specific ethnic group from immigrating to the United States. It was repealed only on 1943.

More recently on May 13, 1939 (just 78 years ago), the German transatlantic liner St. Louis sailed from Hamburg, Germany, for Havana, Cuba. On the voyage were 937 passengers. Almost all were Jews fleeing from the Third Reich and were forced to return to Europe.

All in all...

America's twin pillars of wealth – free land from the Indian nations and free labor of enslaved Africans – plus multiple decisions privileging whites and rejecting others produced the riches of the nation's white citizenry.

White supremacy was safeguarded by most US Supreme Court decisions and US federal courts rulings till the Civil Rights Act was enacted and signed by president Lyndon Johnson on July 2, 1964 (**just 53 years ago**). The Civil Rights Act is a landmark piece of civil rights and US labor law legislation that outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.

But 1964 was a limited victory. Billings and Cabbil (2011) emphasize that race is the Rubicon which the US has never crossed.

After 1964 there was, Goldwater, Nixon, and Regan and his derogative ‘driving welfare queens buying stakes with food stamps’, though he well knew there had always been more white people on welfare than blacks or Latinos. Yet, only black poverty was dramatized and explained as having to do with racial traits laziness etc. White poverty was hidden and explained in terms of bad luck, as a temporary situation.

In the UK Margarete Thatcher was doing pretty much the same.

Some claim that race is no longer a factor in the United States, that the US is “beyond racism”; that the US is color blind. The opposite is actually the case. Everything in the US is touched by race, from where people live or choose to live, go to school or send their children to school, where they worship and with whom they go to the movies, or even walk at night. Nothing escapes race. And if you doubt this think of President Trump today.

I doubt this is true only for the US.

Racism keeps its hold in America and every where for it is deeply embedded in structural realities.

There are good reasons to like being white in America or Jew in Israel or Greek in Greece?

Whites are allowed to be individuals. People of color, marked people, are always lumped together as part of a group even when the grouping makes no sense (e.g. Hispanic) is ahistorical (e.g. American Indian) or is culturally insulting (e.g. Asian)

In the US (and many other countries in the West today) the word public when used as an adjective, increasingly means Black, Latino or just poor or immigrant.

These countries have public school and public health and public transportation and public housing all of these descriptors are now euphemisms for color, for poor.

Most of us white people, the privileged the rich, have well-honed justifications for our explicit or hidden racism.

People of color or poor people do not work as hard as we do.

We, the privileged, have work hard for what we have and nobody has helped us.

And yet we all, privileged whites, have benefitted for 300 years of affirmative action.

And if the poor or the marginalized use race or ethnicity in a public argument we charge them with playing the race card

And if a teacher tells us how Indians where really treated or why the bomb was dropped over Japan and not Germany we call them revisionists.

The great danger when trying to fight against racism is to fall into a relativistic postmodernist stand. A stand which despairing of social change asserts instead that equality and humanity have no meaning, and that difference and diversity should be our goal.

The terrain of anti-racist struggle needs to become again the struggle for social equality and not the struggle for cultural diversity.

We need to oppose the reconceptualization of equality as the right to be different and return to its original meaning – the right to be (to have) the same.

As Malik (2000) rightfully suggests, equality is not necessarily oppression and difference is not necessarily liberation.

The shift from campaigning for the 'right to be equal' to proclaiming the 'right to be different' is predicated on the anti-humanist, anti-essentialist tendencies in post-structuralist discourses. Campaigning for equality requires one to believe that it is possible to effect social change, to transform society through humanity's collective efforts.

Conversely, proclaiming difference requires us to accept society as it is, to accept as given the divisions and inequalities that characterize our social world. In this sense, the philosophy of difference is a rationalization of the expiration and defeat of social movements over the past decades, which has led radicals to renounce the very idea of social struggle. The ideas of difference seek to accommodate to this new political era.

Similarly Hannaford (1996) mourns the loss of 'the political idea', the original Greco-Roman invention that people of all families, clans, tribes and ethnic groups could find common ground and common membership in the artificial, humanly-constructed polis.

The political idea involved a disposition to see people not in terms of where they came from and what they looked like but in terms of membership in a public arena.

Politics, as a peculiarly human activity, is opposed to all merely naturalistic conceptions of the state and society. Politics released humanity from nature; race re-couples humanity with nature, and puts it - allegedly - under its dictates. The time of politics, Hannaford is aware, has been pitifully short in the full history of humanity. At the present time, he sees little evidence of it, either in thought or in practice.

Though strictly biological theories of race were discredited by Nazism, race survived the Holocaust to reappear as culture. Inequalities are now explained and justified in terms of ineradicable and inheritable differences of culture.

RACE is worth looking at not only as a synonym of CULTURE but also as an antonym to POLITICS.

Only humane egalitarian politics joined by humane egalitarian universal values (\$) that is to say an egalitarian economy can help us counter racism ...our own racism.

For most multiculturalists the old-style equality, rooted in Enlightenment notions of universalism are inadequate, even dangerous. The Enlightenment idea that all people flourish best under the same kinds of social institutions and forms of governance is for them a fantasy because the world is too complex and too varied to be subsumed under a single totalizing theory. They argue that if we want to treat individuals with dignity and respect we must also treat with dignity and respect the groups that furnish them with their sense of personal being. Part of the problem of these perspectives is the constant slippage in multiculturalist talk between the idea of humans as culture-bearing creatures and the idea that humans have to bear a particular culture.

Clearly no human can live outside of culture. But then no human does.

To say that no human can live outside of culture, however, is not to say they have to live inside a particular one, forever.

To view humans as culture-bearing is to view them as social beings and, hence, as beings able to change, to make progress and to create universal moral and political forms through reason and dialogue.

To view humans as having to bear specific cultures is, on the contrary, to deny such a capacity for transformation. It suggests that every human being is so shaped by a particular culture that to change or undermine that culture would be to undermine the very dignity of that individual. It suggests that the biological fact of, say, Jewish or Greek ancestry somehow makes a human being incapable of living well except as a participant of Jewish or Greek culture. This would only make sense if Jews or Greeks were biologically distinct, in other words, if cultural identity was really about racial difference.

A century ago intellectuals worried about the degeneration of the race. Today they fear cultural decay. Is the notion of cultural decay any more coherent than that of racial degeneration? Cultures certainly change and develop, a point few multiculturalists would dispute. But what does it mean for a culture to decay? Or for an identity to be lost?

The politics of ideology has given way to the politics of identity.

Diversity is important, not in and of itself, but because it allows us to expand our horizons, to compare and contrast different values, beliefs and lifestyles, and make judgements upon them.

In other words, because it allows us to engage in political dialogue and debate that can help create more universal values and beliefs, and a collective language of citizenship.

The narrowing of the political sphere makes such a process much more difficult to pursue. As a result diversity has come to be seen as a good in itself. Multiculturalism is not a response to a diverse society. Rather, the pursuit of multicultural policies has led us to imagine that we are far more diverse than we are.

As Brian Barry suggests, in the absence of some compelling reason for doing things differently, people went on doing them in the same way. Cultural inertia, in other words, preserved traditional ways because it was the easiest way to organize collective life.

Ironically, the idea of cultural diversity has captured the political imagination just as anthropologists themselves have started worrying about the concept. They have come to realize not just that the notion of cultural diversity is not self-evidently good but also that the concept of culture is not self-evident.

After all, what exactly is a culture? What marks its boundaries?

Is it possible to accord rights to cultures without treating such cultures as having fixed boundaries? Why should cultural differences be viewed as more salient than, say, class or age differences? In what way is a sixteen-year old Israeli-born boy of Argentinian origin living in Jerusalem of the same culture as a fifty-year-old man living in Buenos Aires? (Malik 2005)

Undoing racism is not easy but it can be done.

One way to do it is to recognize the systemic structural character of racism and try to get organized against it.

This means recognizing that even today, although legal discrimination is outlawed, white people continue to have dominant structural power.

It means to believe that all people can reach their full potential as humans only when our society transforms its institutions so they are no longer biased in favor of white people.

It means abandoning the core ideas that underpin much of current radical thinking on race: first, that social groups define themselves by their history and identity; second, that the particular history and identity of each group sets them apart from other social groups; third, that it is important to recognize this plurality of differences as a positive aspect of society today; and finally, that the struggle for racial equality takes the form of a struggle for group identity (Malik 2000).

It means as Hall would have it understanding that 'The figure of the "Other"', in the west, was 'constructed as the absolute opposite, the negation of everything the West stood for'.

It means realizing, as David Goldberg suggests, that by 'working itself into the threads of liberalism's cloths, just as that cloth was being woven, race and the various exclusions it licensed became naturalized in the Eurocentric visions of itself and its self-defined others, in its sense of Reason and rational direction.'

It means returning to the political which tries to overturn the ‘natural’.

That political which embraces, deliberates, and delivers on the basis of scientific objective propositions which are translatable, without much loss of efficacy, into any cultural milieu (Gellner, 1993).

A politics which recognizes not only the universality of the believes of who ever is in power but the universality of humanity and its essential equality.

It should mean remembering that cultural belonging should not be to humanity what species belonging is to animality (Stoczkowski 2009).

Could it be that through the lasting western dream of raising humanity above the animal world we have lost the unity of that which is human?

I hope we can agree that...

Blacks, Greeks, Jews, Palestinians, Turks are names of humans not names of different animal/human species.

