

On “Race” and Related Categories of Dubious Value An Introduction

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According to certain authors, racism in a broad sense defined as an ideology justifying social, economic and political inequality on grounds of putative or real innate differences is as old as hierarchical society. From the moment humans began to exercise political power over other humans, power needed to be legitimised, should it not be based on brute force alone. Force might be sufficient to establish rule, but something else is needed for its maintenance: a belief – shared by both ruler and ruled – in the legitimacy of the dominant order of things. While racism in itself is insufficient as an ideology underpinning systems of rule and authority, it provides a powerful justification for structures of domination and subordination present in all societies. The view that intellectual capacity, character and ultimately also social position basically reflect inborn differences comfortably allows for qualifying people: some are held to be naturally inferior while others are supposed to be of a far superior nature. What turns this argument in a racist belief is that it is not confined to individuals but that it is generalized to entire social groups. Someone who belongs to – or is said to belong to – one group, is taken to share the traits declared typical for this specific group – irrespective of his actually showing those traits or not. By this last token racist thought proves to be empirically immune. In psychological terms, racists are using immunisation strategies.

It is safe to say that such a line of thought is almost nowhere unknown. Stratified societies composed of different groups and classes have found various ways of developing the pretence that imbalances in the distribution of power, wealth and leisure are perfectly in harmony with the legitimate order (Hund 2006). To argue their point, “[t]hey connect biological with cultural arguments to justify a hierarchy of social groups. The gradation of genders gets transferred to class structure and to outward political relations. The attributes of differing degrees of being human – permeated by dominance – form the core of racist discrimination.” (Hund 2003: 7) While

all forms of racism share a tendency to naturalise social hierarchies and groups associated to specific social positions, the way they do so varies widely, historically, geographically, and culturally, both in terms of how natural differences are conceptualised and in terms of the specific categories used to denote groups perceived to be (naturally) different. Thus, Indian Hindus may refer to the category “caste”, western trained scientists speak of “nature”, people trained in the humanities and social sciences eventually prefer one of the following terms: “class”, “tribe” or, nowadays more fashionable, “culture” or “ethnic group”. In many other contexts, there may not be any overarching generic category to conceptualise (or substitute) “race”, but racism may still loom large. In their basic legitimatory function these different categories are very much alike, despite the different cultural backgrounds out of which they have grown and with which they must come to terms.

During the last 300 years, however, “race” was the central concept, even if often different terms were used to express the underlying idea that people were *naturally* different. This, of course, is primarily true for Europe – but due to the European colonial impact on almost every corner of the world, it is almost as true with regard to the other world regions. The difference rests on the manifold transformative ways in which “race” was actively appropriated by non-Western elites. They adapted it to their needs, fitted it to their particular cultural frames of reference, modifying it, and, in some cases, they were successful in diffusing the specifically modified versions of racial thought to wider publics. In order to find an analytical etiquette for these, partly still ongoing, processes, Frank Dikötter (2008) speaks of “the racialization of the globe”. At the same time Dikötter warns against misinterpreting these processes as uniform and unidirectional and emphasises the simple but often neglected truth, “to say that racism has become global does not mean that it is either uniform or universal.” (Dikötter 2008: 1494)

The exact etymology of the term “race” is unclear. European languages borrowed the word from Arabic where it had been commonly used with regard to horse breeding. Towards the end of the 17th century a French traveller to India, Francois Bernier, was one of the first to use “race” in print referring to human beings. Soon afterwards biologists, philosophers and geographers made use of the racial concept in order to deal with the

increasing knowledge of human societal diversity. Famous scholars like Carl Linné, Immanuel Kant and Johann Friedrich Blumenbach as well as many others who today are largely forgotten pinned down the visible variability of human societies in a simple ordered frame of reference (Geiss 1988, Mosse 1978). They proclaimed the existence of a few races, understood in terms of naturally distinct human types. This order was conceived in hierarchical terms and inscribed in the ancient concept of a *scala naturae* (Lovejoy 2001). This – traditionally static – scheme became more dynamic in course of the 19th century when evolutionary thought spread widely. The evolutionary transmutation of species allowed for the idea that stepping from one point on the natural scale to another might indeed be possible, although such progress was believed to unroll within aeons, rather than in human time.

Typically enough, the taxonomists of the 18th century as well as the physical anthropologists of the 19th century could neither settle on the exact number of those “natural” entities, in the beginning oscillating between three and five, later increasing up to some hundreds and even thousands, nor agree upon the criteria relevant to draw the line between one race and another (Stocking 1991). What they agreed upon was, however, first that “races” were real and, second that they correspond to innate differences of kind, character, feeling and intelligence. Such difference made it seem quite logical and morally justifiable to treat humans according to their “racial” rank because it allowed for systematically ignoring both the social roots and cultural constructedness of such ranking.

Scientific racism contributed greatly to the legitimacy of discriminatory practice. Even so its popular appeal remained limited until the second half of the nineteenth century when the emergence of modern press facilities supported its wide circulation (Pallua 2006: 95ff.), scientific racism was crucial for the self-perception of European elites as belonging to a superior class of humans as well as to a superior “race” (Mosse 1978). The first belief may be illustrated by Francis Galton’s uncritically accepted premise that “[...] those who are the least efficient in physical, intellectual, and morals grounds, [are] forming our lowest class, and those who are the most efficient [are] forming our highest class.” (Galton 2001/1869: 37) To the father of eugenics there was no doubt that the status of individuals in society was due only to “natural ability” and to what he called “hereditary genius”, respectively (Galton 2001/1869: 26). Such reasoning comfortably

justified the elite status in view of other social strata at home – a status that came under recurrent attacks since the late 18th century when European revolutionaries, for the first time, had put the ideals of *liberté*, *égalité* and *fraternité* in effective action demanding political rights on behalf of those hitherto excluded. The second belief in belonging to a superior “race” was more directed towards the people inhabiting other regions of the globe, even though already Franz Boas (1944/1911: 19ff.) and Ruth Benedict (1947/1940: 112ff.) showed that both categories were directly linked in early racist – or should we better say “classist”? – thought. Indeed, elites tended to view themselves as peculiar higher “race” or “breed”, thus naturalizing social difference and status position.

With the rise of nationalism, however, the racialisation of class difference became increasingly less attractive to elites who now emphasised their fundamental likeness with the wider population, now increasingly entering the stage as much feared protesters and revolutionary crowds, but also as supporters and voters. Indeed, as Tom Nairn (1981: 340) has remarked, nationalism in a sense can be read as “an invitation to the masses to enter history” and it is no coincidence that democracy was a prominent objective of mass nationalist movements in the 19th and 20th centuries. Conceptually, nationalist ideology was premised on the idea that the nation was composed of “equals” however narrow the full members might be defined. Thus, to a large degree the story of nationalism is one of promise for the masses, of emancipation, greater equality and empowerment, hence also its enormous attraction to political movements across the political spectrum and at different times and in different places. The overall inclusionary impetus of nationalist ideology, however, was accompanied by a fierce exclusionary dimension directed both at outsiders within and outside “the nation”. And racism provided a powerful rationale for such exclusion.

The racial question was also closely related to imperial and colonial politics which in turn were closely intertwined with the politics of nationalism at home. At the turn from the 18th to 19th centuries, European imperial powers – primarily Britain – intensified the efforts to expand their territories and deepen their colonial control (Osterhammel 2009: 624-662). Right from the start colonial subjects were – and remained – excluded from the improvements granted, however reluctantly, to the citizens of the imperial metropolises in course of the 19th and 20th centuries (Stoler/Cooper 1997). And the justification of such exclusive politics was supplied by racial thought.

Both overseas and at home it effectively worked towards the legitimization of social inequality.

While racial discrimination has never been uncontested, it became an object of more systematic scientific criticism from the 1920s and 1930s onwards. Indeed, it is in this context that people who fought against racial discrimination coined the word “racism”. Then discrimination against whole groups was almost totally phrased in racial idioms. Things have changed. As a result of the combined efforts of responsible scholars, activists, anti-racist organisations, international activities under the United Nation system, including UNESCO, and the anti-imperialism of the decolonisation era, the term “race” has gradually ceased to be an accepted term, and rightly so (Brattain 2007, Sonderegger 2008a). Today, as Eric Hobsbawm observes, racism is among those “words nobody likes to be associated with in public.” (Hobsbawm 2009: 95)

Nevertheless, intellectually undermining the conceptual basis of racism was much less successful. On a superficial level, there is now a broad consensus on the contested famous observation of the first UNESCO statement on race that “[f]or all practical social purposes race is not so much a biological phenomenon as a social myth” (UNESCO 1952, Annex, para 14). Yet the underlying conception of deep rooted, unsurmountable differences that allegedly separate culturally or ethnically different human groups, has not waned, but only shifted semantically. As Stephen Howe reminds us,

In the post war world [...] there has been a powerful tendency [...] to talk of human difference in terms of ‘ethnic groups’ rather than ‘races’. [...] But the change to the language of ethnicity has not necessarily wholly severed the link with biology; for it is evident that lurking behind many usages – scientific, popular and bureaucratic – of the discourse of ethnicity are ideas about physical rather than – or as well as – cultural differences. (Howe 1998: 19)

The belief in natural differences which are acquired by individuals through their genetic links – which, in turn, are thought to be marked by specific group characteristics – is still with us (Hund 2007, Dikötter 2008). Indeed, while certain forms of overt, biological racism associated, for example with eugenics, Nazism or white supremacist ideology in the American South or in South Africa may indeed be a thing of the past, various other forms of racism have arguably become more important in the past few decades. These include xenophobia both in developed and developing countries, new

forms of anti-Semitism, fed, in important parts by the deadly dynamics of the Middle East conflict, or the genocidal ethnic hatred part of many of the “new wars” in the global South. To many the persistent attraction of racism came as a surprise, as they naively had supposed that racism could be overcome by sheer argument and education, without changing fundamentally the highly uneven order of the world we live in.

Between about 1750, when Carl Linné’s *Systema Naturae* was available in its tenth edition, and 1945, when Germany was freed from Nazi rule, the race concept ruled supreme. The first hundred years, however, racial discourse did matter only to elites. Not before the second half of the nineteenth century was the race idiom popularized. Afterwards almost everybody used racial vocabulary in order to frame his (and much less often: her) position in life in contrast to others who now were perceived as absolutely different, almost subhuman. Such racial talk was by no means limited to Europe and the US nor to the imperial spaces they controlled, but could be found in imperialist Japan and revolutionary China as well (Dikötter 1992). Be that as it may, after World War Two racial discourse met severe scientific criticism and educatory programmes helped to distribute the findings. Subsequently, at least in Europe, racist language became effectively banned while racialized ideas, however, remained being in use (Rattansi 2007) – so much, in fact, that in the 1980s some authors noticed the alarming activities of a “neo-racism” or “class-racism” (Balibar/Wallerstein 1992).

Such “racism without race” (Hund 1999) became politically prominent in more and more European countries since then. The same alludes to the situation in South Africa where “race” retreats into the background as the frankly uttered reason for black-white-disparity in almost all spheres of life (Kuper 1999: xiff., 1ff., Racism 2004). Its agents simply substitute “culture” for “race”, because they understand culture not as the manifold and modifiable, ever changing “webs of significance he [i.e. man] himself has spun” (Geertz 2000: 5) but conceive it, wrongly, “as substances or things or entities or organisms or collective individuals – as [...] discrete, concrete, tangible, bounded and enduring »groups«” (Brubaker 2002: 167). Such essentializing language and essentialist reasoning is the crucial link between explicit and thus easily recognisable racism on the one hand and, on the other hand, the newer and subtler variants of racial thinking and racist talk which do not use the word “race” but employ related terms to the same end – categories, indeed, that spring from the same source as “race” and,

therefore, are of the same dubious value. Their only usefulness is to justify the dominance of the dominant, a given *status quo*. Therefore they are an obstacle to the overcoming of prevalent asymmetries. Furthermore, the new racisms hamper the adequate understanding of the processes and politics of power that lead to, and support the perpetuation of, social inequality (Hauck 2006: 8ff.).

As pointed at above, racism has become global but it is not universal. This is due to the fact that racism is never the only one possible option for ordering social life and justifying inequalities (Hund 2003, Cooper 2005, Dikötter 2008). Nor is racism uniform. Racialized politics takes distinct forms depending on local and national histories which refer to specific dealings with particular problems. In Brazil with its myth of a "racial democracy", people make quite different use of "race" and related categories than in the US with its long and continuing tradition of juridical racialism. Racist discourses in the countries now forming the European Union recur on various traditions of Anti-Semitism and xenophobia which, in particular, is directed against people of African and Asian appearance. They do so, however, in divergent ways differing profoundly in time and place even within that small continent that is Europe. The same applies to racist ideas and practices to be found in Asian countries, from India to China and Japan and beyond, as well as to those located in Africa (see contributions in Gomes/Schicho/Sonderregger 2008).

The slave trade and colonial slavery in the Americas as well as later colonial rule over Africa was justified by recourse to a hierarchical order of things formulated in the name of an allegedly natural entity called "race". From the 18th century onwards, human history was almost entirely written in terms of racial history and the perception of the relations between Europe, Africa and the Americas became patterned according to a simplifying racialized black-white-dichotomy. The emancipating efforts of Blacks in the New World which started in the 18th century (Reinhardt 2007), had to react strongly to their vilification on the part of slave holders and defenders of slavery, but the only way to do so was in the racial terms then already dominant.

Accordingly, they took over the binary dichotomy that set "Blacks" and "Whites" as extreme opposites which were thought of as being deeply divided. Their view, therefore, was almost the same as that proposed by

their opponents, albeit their assessment of the respective “race” was antipodal (Sonderregger 2008b: 19f.). When some decades later, Africans entered diasporic discourse they took up this basic idea of a natural dividing line. The concept of a particular, racially conceived “African personality” (Edward Wilmot Blyden) was crucial for the early formulations of Pan-Africanism around the turn from the 19th to 20th centuries. And, despite recurrent critiques from sympathizers and adherers of Pan-Africanism, it remained important since then (Appiah 1993, Adeleke 1998). This historical record that produced a situation where it is extremely difficult to avoid falling back into racialized patterns of thought yields for students of Africa, both African and non-African, a highly intricate difficulty. It particularly arises from the uneven and exploitative history that characterizes Africa’s relation to other regions of the world, especially to Europe and the Americas, to this day. “In an unequal world – and we surely live in an unequal world – the strong or privileged by definition have an edge, and this edge is reflected in, and reinforced by, their efforts in the world of knowledge”, wrote Immanuel Wallerstein ten years ago:

Those who struggle against the distortions that are a consequence of unequal power as refracted in scholarship find themselves in a dilemma, for they must fight on all fronts simultaneously, with fewer resources than their opponents, [...].

[...] Today’s African scholarship about Africa is lively, but it also has a weak institutional base precisely because of the weak position of Africa in the world-system. [...] Meanwhile, non-African scholars of Africa are not in a much better position. [...] There is no easy way out of this imbroglio. What one can counsel sounds platitudinous. Continue the discussion, listen to the partner, and lower the decibels of the debate among those who enter into the dialogue. [...] Go beyond Africa to discuss the underlying issues of reconstructing the social sciences as a knowledge activity. Do not leave these issues to the “generalists,” and surely not to the non-African “generalists.” (Wallerstein 1999: 215f.)

This assessment has nothing lost of its significance.

“Race” however, is not just a matter of knowledge, of knowledge production, of categorisation, classification and ideology and about theories regarding the link between physical and social differences. Because the ‘race concept’ always was about concrete groups and categories of persons, its effects have been much more profound, affecting both those engaging in such categorising and those so categorised. As a result, “race”, as any

student of countries like Brazil, the US or South Africa can tell, is also a matter of deep felt identity, of identification and ways of seeing the world. In this respect 'race' is not so different from ethnicity, or rather, it can also be read as a specific form of ethnicity. Like "race", the concept of "ethnicity" refers to differences between different groups of people. What makes ethnicity potentially a less problematic and at the same time more dynamic concept, is that it does not necessarily involve a claim that differences in language, "culture", traditions, etc. which usually serve as markers of ethnicity are "real" in a simplistic, positivistic sense and *per se* relevant. Thus, conceptually, both ethnic boundaries and the cultural stuff these enclose are relatively arbitrary (see Barth 1998 [1969]) and subject to constant shifts and changes. More important than any real or putative differences is the fact that ethnicity serves as both a cognitive and discursive frame of reference. Ethnicity thus is a complex and fluid phenomenon, which involves processes of self-identification, collective internal discourses of ethnic groups and external discourses on ethnicity and practices of categorisation and classification.

Like most concepts in the social sciences, ethnicity is janus-faced and is not just a category of social analysis, but simultaneously also a category of social and political practice (see Brubaker/Cooper 2000). In contrast to the dynamic and nuanced understanding of ethnicity prevailing nowadays in the social sciences (itself a result of long debates between "primordialists" – or those who were accused of being so – on the one hand and "constructivists" on the other), outside academic circles "ethnicity" continues to be used as a concept denoting seemingly fixed, stable and immutable categories much like "race" before it. In this context, research on ethnicity often falls prey to the popular interpretations of ethnicity, for example by taking concepts such as "ethnic conflict" or "ethnic hatred" at face value or the existence of (often rival) ethnic groups as granted. Social analysis thus often tends to unwittingly reify and legitimise certain categories, while the actual task of social analysis should be to critically investigate and deconstruct such categories, to study how these are reified and imbued with meaning and to study their impact (Brubaker/Cooper 2000: 5).

The essays compiled in this issue all engage in the task of deconstructing ethnicity and "race" and other categories. In doing so, they try to

understand the historical, political and social context in which such categories and concepts have become plausible frames of reference, including how political actors, intellectuals, writers, activists and scientists have contributed to giving these categories specific meanings and disseminating and popularising them among a wider audience. As the essays also show, the meaning of "race" and ethnicity and other categories is not only discursively shaped. Rather, the meaning of ethnicity and race is the result of historical experience, social practice and constant interpretations and re-interpretations of such experiences. Indeed, the enormous success of the race concept or appeals to ethnic belonging cannot be explained without taking into account broader historical and contemporary phenomena such as slavery, forced migration or ethnic violence, to name but a few.

The first two articles in this issue reflect on various 19th century developments regarding the image of Africa and Africans. Ulrich Pallua analyses debates on the Atlantic slave trade and colonial slavery. To this end he reviews a broad range of widely circulated texts, published in a variety of contemporary journals from 1722 to 1833. Arno Sonderegger discusses Anglophone discourses on "race", on the basis of writings of both British and African writers of the 19th century. His article sheds some light on the racialization process at work in British scientific circles and illustrates the various ways in which African writers dealt with that racist challenge. Malte Thran deconstructs a specific legal-political category, "expropriation", within a particular colonial setting, namely former German South West Africa, today's Namibia. While his contribution falls outside the thematic focus of this special issue, his conceptual analysis of the underpinnings of the notion of expropriation raises a number of issues which, on a conceptual and theoretical level, are also relevant for the study of "race" and ethnicity.

How processes of state formation in Rwanda over the past century or so have impacted on processes of migration and associated discourses about migration is the focus of Albert Kraler's case study of migration and nation state formation in Rwanda. While Kraler's analysis emphasises the link between the changing nature of the state and associated legitimacy discourses as an important structural condition for contemporary identity politics, Agnes Taibl investigates the micropolitics of ethnicity, taking the use of ethnicity in the 2007 elections in Kenya as a case study. Two

contributions reflecting on the place of “things African” in academia conclude this volume. Thomas Reinhardt critically and sympathetically engages with the US-American concept of Afrocentricity promoted by Molefi Kete Asante and disciples, arguing that what started off with an ultimate claim to free social sciences and humanities from the legacy of Eurocentrism, racism and colonialism has turned into a parody of scientific practice, ignoring the major part of recent and not so recent research, and unwittingly reproducing many of the prejudices, erroneous directions and deeply flawed concepts of 19th century science. Concluding this issue, Henning Melber reflects on the practice, place and relevance of African studies, arguing that current debates within African Studies above all show that African Studies are “alive and kicking”. While African studies are indeed marked by a series of ambiguities, ambivalences and contradictions, African studies will survive as long as self-critical debates on the practice, the focus and relevance of African studies continue.

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