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RACE: WHAT IS IT?

ABSTRACT: The reappearance of subversive and confused concepts on race as a means of artificial ethnic differentiation suggested to the Author to recapitulate the history and the socio-political implications.

KEY WORDS: Race – Racism – Political and social implications

INTRODUCTION

If we open the Webster dictionary on the word race we can find two entries:

race, n. [Fr. race, It. razza, race, lineage, family.] One of the divisions of mankind; a lineage; a family, tribe, people, or nation believed or presumed to belong to the same stock; a breed or stock; a perpetuated variety of animals or plants. – racial, a. Of or pertaining to a race or family of man. – racialism, n. Racial prejudice, hatred, or discrimination. – racism, n. Racialism, the belief in the superiority or dominance of one race over another; the practice of this. – racist, a. and n.

race, n. [A. Sax. rage, a rush; a rapid course, a stream, same as Icel. ras, a race.] A rapid course; career in life; a contest of speed, especially in running, but also in riding, driving, sailing, rowing, etc. in competition; pl. horse races (to go to the Santa Anita races); a strong or rapid current of water; a powerful current or heavy sea sometimes produced by the meeting of two tides; a canal or watercourse to and from a mill or water wheel; a strong tidal rush of water, as in the Bay of Fundy; the air tream delivered by the propeller of an air machine. – v.i. – raced, racing. To run swiftly; to run or contend in running. – v.t. To cause to run; to cause to contend in running; to drive quickly in a trial of speed. – race horse, n. A horse bred or

kept for racing; a horse that runs in competition. – race track, n. The place where races of horses, dogs, automobiles, etc., are held. – racer, n. One who races; a race horse.

Only the first one is relevant for this paper. The second is certainly out of concern. A similar entry exists in the American Random House dictionary, which given the popular and highly varied English usage of the word "race", defines it as: 1. A group of persons related by common descent. 2. Ethnology: a subdivision of the human species, characterised by a more or less distinctive combination of physical traits that are transmitted in descent. 3. A group of tribes or peoples forming an ethnic stock. 4. The human race itself; mankind. 5. Zoology: a variety; a subspecies. 6. A natural kind of living creatures; the race of fishes. 7. Any group, class, or kind, esp. of persons. 8. A characteristic taste or flavour, as of wine. Taking into consideration the entry of the American Random House dictionary, the definitions of the word race which are pertinent to this paper are only Nos. 2 and 3 (and indirectly 4 and 5). Let us concentrate on the historical development of the concept as defined in points 2 and 3.

The word "race" first appeared in Europe in the 14th century and could either derive from the Latin *radix*, meaning root; or from *generatio*, meaning generation, descent; or simply from *ratio* meaning reason, which in the scholastic language of the 15th century meant, among

other things, the order of succession, on the basis of a group of characteristics, by which a living being was placed in a given line of ascendants and descendants. Used at first in animal rearing, vulgarised in French as "race", it was used for Man by Bernier (1688) and became of common use following Kant (1775).

The concept is, however, misleading as it tends to confuse Man's physical characteristics with those of culture, religion, or of the economy. The cultural and historic characteristics of "ethnic groups" cannot be intermingled with the physical characteristics of different human populations, as the former depend on imprinting and not on genes.

In the modern era, this misleading definition has given rise to the phenomenon of racism, the most virulent variant of xenophobia.

Each individual finds his/her own feelings of collective identity and of repulsion against the outsider whose presence might seem threatening. It is of secondary importance whether the sign of extraneousness is represented by skin colour, incomprehensible language, a different homeland, or a different religion. The force that leads to such repulsion towards another is the fear of losing one's own identity, which from a psychological point of view is the cornerstone of safety. Moreover, each ethnic group tends to consider itself the depository of the measures that allow it to discriminate the real man from the non-human, the real God from the cheats and liars.

The present unequal demographic explosion of humankind is probably reinforcing this attitude and promoting racism.

It is, therefore, interesting to attempt a historic review of the rise of racism in order to find a new way to disprove or at least clarify the basis of the present concept.

The ancient Greeks defined "the others" as barbarians, but they did however have access to Greekness without encountering obstacles, simply by absorbing Greek culture. The Romans made no distinctions between races: men were either free or slaves; the terms were merely economic. They did not hesitate to incorporate individuals from other cultures, integrating them into their own (some emperors were "ethnically speaking" not of Roman origin).

It was during the Middle Ages that the affirmation of cultural diversity became qualified in theological terms. In Medieval Christianity, theocratic doctrines made improper use of information on the Genesis (9, 18-28) by transferring the ancient hierarchies of Judaic tribalism into the context of the new society. Shem was the family founder of the clerics, Japheth of the lords and Ham of the serf stock.

Wherever the power of Christianity spread, the Church integrated diversity into the forms of Christian culture, with two notable exceptions: the presence of Jews within its borders, and the infidels outside of its borders, namely the Moslems who, from the seventh century on, became a serious threat to Christianity.

The solution adopted in both cases was that of rejection;

for the Jews it meant confinement to the ghettos, for the Moslems the Crusades. It was not "proper" racism, as biological differences were not taken into consideration, but the Jews were guilty of deicide and the infidels of opposing the design of God that Medieval Christianity claimed to incarnate definitively and absolutely.

It was therefore with the consolidation of Christianity that ideological otherness was confirmed at popular level. At the end of the first millennium the contraposition between the Christian world and that of Islam exploded and Pope Urbano II promoted the first Crusade (1096-99).

The religion to which one belonged was to be a factor that heightened the awareness of diversity. The contraposition "us/them" became an opposition of "believers/infidels" with strong "moral" connotations (the good and the wicked, God-Evil).

Christianity of that time introduced a factor of incommunicability into the perception of otherness excluding any relationship of reciprocity. It was the same conception that defines now as atheist anyone not belonging to a traditional religion.

This became even more important with the discovery of the New World (1492), an event that from this point of view corresponded to the "discovery of absolute otherness" (Todorov 1984, Chiozzi 1991).

The natives of America were absolutely "others"; it was difficult in fact to include them among Abraham's children. Which of Abraham's sons could have travelled so far?

This claim of Medieval Christianity to economic and political sovereignty and to knowledge of the absolute truth was consolidated when Alexander VI awarded to the Christian kings of Spain, through Columbus, "all the islands found or yet to be found, discovered including all their dominions, towns, castles, localities and villages, jurisdictions and appurtenances" with the specific mission of converting their inhabitants to the cult of our Redeemer and to profess the Catholic faith.

Though no clear mention was made of biological racism, in the theological circles of the time there was no lack of reference to the inferiority of the natives across the Atlantic, due to reasons of nature or even of blood.

The discovery of America therefore marked the beginning of a new interest in others, from both a religious and scientific point of view. Apart from the debate about the human or non-human "nature" of the others, men of religion, the missionaries, even when trying to recognise the human nature of the natives, they considered them really human only if they accepted evangelization; that is to say, only if they were converted, repudiating their own God, their culture, and their identity.

In the XVIth century, this approach threw the world into confusion, giving birth to racism, and namely to the need of finding biological justifications for man's domination over man.

In the 1700s, during the Age of Enlightenment, when the ideology of progress developed, distinctions between the populations began to be attempted on the basis of

scientific reasoning. The differences between populations were at first attributed to climate.

According to biblical chronology, humanity originated six or seven thousand years before Christ and the common belief, shared even by Buffon (1749), was that Adam and Eve were like modern Europeans and that the differences between the various populations were due to an adaptation of their descendants to climatic differences. The concept was established that "other populations" were occasional deviant forms of the basic characteristics which had otherwise remained intact in European populations.

Some philosophers, like Voltaire and David Hume, in order to explain this physical heterogeneity, went as far as to propose that only the "white" derived from Adam, whilst others, like the Chinese, the Indians and the Blacks were derived from pre-adamitic couples. The theory of polygenism was put forward to explain this heterogeneity. This however did not give any explanation as it merely took back in time the origin of the differences. It served to confirm these differences by attributing to the variable "time" the responsibility for the differences.

According to Hume, there never was a civilised nation without white skin. It would be useless to seek and discover an artist or scientist among the other races. Such a uniform and constant difference could not be explained if "nature had not sanctioned an original difference between these human races".

These polygenistic positions had the effect of calming down the moral doubts that troubled the conscience of some English settlers who could thus justify the state of slavery to which they reduced the blacks. As Edward Long wrote in his "History of Jamaica" (1774), "they are bestial, ignorant, lazy, faithless, deceitful, bloodthirsty, thieving, suspicious, superstitious", and Charles White, a Manchester physician, in a work published in 1799, including anatomical evidence, showed that "in the long chain of existence", the Negroes occupied a place closer to monkeys than to the Caucasians.

Even Kant considered this diversity as the effect of progress in generations of human beings towards civilisation that reached its peak with the "white race" during the Age of Enlightenment and left behind populations far-removed from full rationality. These included the Negroes, in whom the infancy of the species survived, and the Indians whose moral qualities could be considered a prelude to European maturity.

The crowning of this interpretation of the history as a preordained series of events which was concluded in the European Age of Enlightenment, came with the philosophy of Hegel, for whom the entire question of human thought was synthesised in the bourgeois Europe of his time. Asia was the thesis, Africa the antithesis, and Europe the synthesis. This summary construction of the Weltgeschichte was enriched with precise ethical and racist judgements in his work "Lessons on the Philosophy of Science" (1831), in which we read that "Africa ... is the infantile land, developed in the black colour of night

beyond the daytime of history which is aware of itself" and that "the Negro represents natural man in his total barbarity and wild behaviour".

FROM RACE TO RACISM

The philosophical debate on "natural people" however, was not quite racism; scientific support in the form of biological proof was required before diversity could become racism.

Geological and biological research supplied this ingredient with the development of evolutionary theories. It was the forced interpretation of Social Darwinism, which Darwin himself certainly did not approve, that gave an apparent scientific foundation to racism. Utilising the principle of selection, namely survival of the fittest and elimination of the weakest, a new contribution to a naturalistic justification for the domination of "white" over others was developed. Edward Taylor wrote at the end of the past century:

"History teaches us the great lesson that some races have advanced on the path towards civilisation, while others have remained stationary or have gone backwards, and we should attempt to find an explanation for this partly in the different intellectual capacities and moral standards between certain tribes such as the Amerindians and the natives of Africa on the one hand, and the nations of the Old World who surpass them and subjugate them on the other" (Anthropology 1899: 74).

But racist ideas did not only develop as a result of biological mystification. They were based on the desire for power of the national armies and of the central-European industrial and commercial organizations of the 19th century.

A theoretician who dealt with these conceptions was the French Count Joseph Arthur Gobineau, who explained with great erudition, in his four-volume essay on "L'inégalité des races humaines" (1853-1855), how the inequality in human races is a mechanism that rules history, that no civilisation was born or has survived without the white race, and that in its turn the white race had and still has as its chosen people the Aryan race.

Coming from central Asia, the Aryans accomplished marvellous feats like the overthrow of the Roman empire, inheriting all its positive qualities. But, on the other hand, they were also corrupted and tended to mix with other races and with the local populations, as happened in Mediterranean Europe. However there is an area stretching from the Seine to the Rhineland, where they remained relatively pure and it partly includes the French, the Germans, and also the English and Scandinavians. "A German of the Aryan race" declares Gobineau, "is a fundamentally dominating creature."

When World War I broke out, Houston Steward Chamberlain (an English naturalised German) predicted to Kaiser Wilhelm that "Germany would conquer the world thanks to its intrinsic superiority", and again, in 1923, on

meeting Hitler he said "the fact that Germany has been able to generate Hitler is proof of its vitality ... May God protect you!"

It was with this support that Hitler published "Mein Kampf" in 1925; a project for the redemption of the German people destined to dominate the entire Earth as it represented the only pure race, that of the Aryans.

When he came to power, Hitler immediately applied his philosophy on race, issuing a series of measures such as the sterilisation of people suffering from hereditary diseases, the eviction of people convicted of sex crimes, the "grace of death" for over 270.000 mentally ill people, and finally the anti-Semitic laws that, with the war, developed into the "final solution" and resulted in the ill-famed extermination camps where millions of Jews and non-Jews were massacred.

The involvement of other governments and various religions (Chiarelli 1991) in support of or against these ideologies was part of the situation leading to World War II.

THE UNESCO STATEMENT OF RACE

Due to this involvement UNESCO organised, in 1950-51, a series of meetings and seminars among geneticists and anthropologists during which a statement was prepared on race and racial relations embodying the principles of biological humanism.

The document, however, overemphasised the mental equality of races and the plasticity of species traits. Such ideas were the keystone of the post-war doctrine on the relation of nature and culture. The changed cultural attitude of the following years and some of the incongruities present in this statement, stimulated the Council of the IUAES (International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences) to revise the document. A replaced statement on "Biological Aspect of Race" was then presented at the 13th Congress of the Union which was held in Mexico in August 1993. The Council Meeting of IUAES has recently discussed it during the Florence Inter-Congress (April 1995).

We found, however, the document to be too complicated and not always clear. The concept of racial superiority or inferiority among humans is fallacious and does not have any scientific support. Population differences exist in a continuum of genetic variation. There is heterogeneity among humans in physical as in psychological characters.

Education and culture at the level of individuals can influence their psychological attitude.

Cultural and religious differences have nothing to do with the physical characteristics of the different populations which originate through adaptive selection to different environments.

The recent population explosion and the tendency of global integration of the population as a consequence of massive migrations is creating a new "melting pot" in which

new selective forces will eliminate or improve specific characters in future generations of humankind.

These selective forces can be observed and described, and up to now, not intentionally induced.

This is the reason for our present involvement in the unpleasant debate on the race concept, a word which I never use in my teaching. For us the differences among humans have to be considered in evolutionary and ecological-adaptational perspectives on which the different cultures have no influence. The International Institute for the Study of Man therefore offers a different and more compact statement which I would like to see considered and discussed more widely.

THE RACE DOCUMENT PROPOSED BY THE "INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF MAN"

The reappearance of a subversive and confused concept of race and of the artificial ethnic differentiation promoted by cultural, religious, and political circles is misleading and dangerous for the present state and hope for worldwide integration of humankind.

"The International Institute for the Study of Man, with this declaration intends to clarify:

- a) that the physical differences among human beings, apart from the differences related to sex and age, are due to environmental adaptations developed during 3 or more million years of the evolution of our own species;
- b) that the cultural and religious differences which are the basis for the ethnic barriers are related only to the life of the individual and to the cultures in which the individual has been imprinted and raised during his or her early years of life."

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