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The Necessity of Shadow-boxing. European Modernity and Racism.

Racism is one of the words which the public discourse of European societies holds no special place for. If it appears, then it does so primarily with reference to past events, such acts of violence perpetrated by representatives of the socially disenfranchised or members of extremist political groups. Their racist sentiments are easily identifiable as pathology and can be equally unquestionably diagnosed as the effect of primitive tribal xenophobia or dearth of education. Racism is then construed as something that is born and functions outside of what is defined as normative, civilised and cultured. It is portrayed as a phantom haunting us from the most remote past, an absolute antithesis of the values that modern democratic societies are founded upon.

When inquired about racism, most people would probably mention South African apartheid, Nazi anti-Semitism or slavery and racial segregation in the South. It goes without saying that one simply cannot overvalue the importance of reminding us all of these perhaps the most dismal examples of Western racism. Remembrance is crucial not only because of the victims and their memorialisation but it also constitutes a form of warning against the casual nature of complicity – the ease with which scorn and dehumanisation of whole groups of people becomes part and parcel of the social reality we experience. Truth be told, paradigmatic examples of racism remain historically – and in some cases also geographically – removed from European modernity; however, this distance is a trigger of a false conviction that racism, as frequently repeated historical examples corroborate, is predominantly a matter of past and long overcome struggles or – at worst – an issue affecting the social and political margins.

Still, is the marginality of racism a fact? Is its presence only of residual character and is it limited solely to these social spheres that have not been so far blessed by the magnitude of the “civilizational progress”?

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The thorny issue of discussing racism begins with the fact that both the very notion of “race” and “racism” as such are highly ambiguous and defy clear-cut definitions. As late as in

the nineteenth century, the lexeme “race” did not have a specified meaning and was frequently used interchangeably with “nation”, “culture” and even “a language group”. Soon, with the rise of science – or rather, as we would call it today, pseudoscience – the word became invested with far more specific semantics, becoming an element of the so-called “scientific racism”. At that time, race started to serve both as the instrument of classification of humans and as a tool of legitimising a hierarchy among them. Resorting to the authority of science and the intellect, “scientific racism” propagated the innate inferiority of particular groups of people that, according to its principles, constituted the relics of earlier, less advanced stages in the development of humanity (or were considered the aberrant forms of the said development). The natural destiny of these groups was either to perform subordinate functions so as to satisfy the needs of the higher echelons of the human kind or to inevitably become extinct.

As the events of the twentieth century unfolded, including the Holocaust, the military emancipatory struggle in European colonies in Africa as well as the dismantling of the racial segregation in the USA, both the belief in the “natural” inferiority or superiority of certain groups of people and the category of “race” became objectionable concepts and were soon politically and ethically delegitimised. This delegitimation of “race” was endorsed by biological sciences that questioned the scientific rationale behind “racial” divisions (not questioning, however, the fact that groups of people can differ in terms of physical appearance¹). The historical entanglement of the concept of “race” in racist discourses that sanctioned oppression, exclusion and brutal domination of particular social groups over other people convinced some researchers back then to regard the very term “race” as analytically dependent on racism: perceiving people through the prism of “race” is bound, as these researchers claimed, not only to imply racism but to stem from it as well.

Taking the above into consideration, can we therefore state that – apart from racism – race does not exist as such? Some of the researchers that question the biological reality of “race” negate the connection between “race” – as a social construct – and the real-life

¹ It is worth emphasising that according to these sciences there exist differences *populations*, which do not always overlap the historically created and socially grounded “racial” classifications, not to mention hierarchies based on physical appearance or skin pigmentation. See, for instance, Alexander Alland jr, *Race in Mind: Race, IQ, and other Racisms*, New York, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2002; Jan Strzałko “Darwin jako antropolog ewolucyjny. Problem ras ludzkich”, *Kosmos. Problemy nauk biologicznych*, t. 58, no. 3-4 2009.

consequences it engenders: social, political, economic, cultural, psychological.² “Race” shapes social relations, defines the identity of individuals, privileges some and excludes others. Its *social* real-life influence can hardly be questioned despite the fact that the imagined structure of “racial” divisions transpires to be often fluid, marked by contradiction and contingent upon the specificity of concrete contexts.

The infamous genealogy of the category of “race” means that whenever one reaches for it, one willy-nilly activates – however, frequently only implicitly – the racist contexts of the term’s birth and development. It seems therefore that no attempt to identify individuals or groups on the basis of “race”, if it does not aspire to recreate racist paradigms, can do without nuanced reflection on – each single one – justification of this particular identification. In the world impacted by the atrocities brought on by the racist ideology and ensuing praxis, no gesture that labels peoples as, for instance, “Jews”, “Negroes/Blacks”, “gypsies/Romany” or “coloureds”, is informed by a priori neutrality. For that reason, particular instances of applying these labels frequently generate controversy and cast considerable doubt, which in turn bear witness to the delicate nature that each endeavour to describe human diversity is fraught with. What remains problematic is that oftentimes these attempts – whether consciously or not – replicate the hierarchies of power encoded in the dominant means of representation. In light of this, it is clear that finding non-racist ways of describing human diversity, actions and relations, is not possible without revealing and questioning the above-mentioned hierarchies. Most importantly, it is not possible to do so without empowering those who – as objects of “racial” classifications – have been for years deprived of their agency (and voices).

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Understanding the complexity of what racism can be poses no lesser problems than the very concept of “race”. On the one hand, racism serves as a descriptor and pertains to a specific type of social relations, which are founded upon the conviction of the inborn moral, intellectual, biological – and what not – inferiority or superiority of particular groups of people. On the other hand, racism is a category burdened with normative consequences – diagnosing any stance, argumentation or praxis as racist results in stringent ethical – and sometimes legal as well – sanctions. For that very reason, organisations and individuals,

² Frequently, scholarship uses the term race in inverted commas so as to emphasise that “racial” divisions are a social construct, rather than a pre-social reality.

whose activities cannot be called anything else but racist, frequently strive to fend off the accusation of racism.

To comprehend the phenomenon of racism, one ought to be aware of the fact that it does not boil down only to discourses and practices that draw on the biologically construed idea of race; very often it does not explicitly make use of the very term “race”. It cannot be reduced exclusively to attitudes, prejudices or reactions. Instead, it constitutes a historically grounded social structure or a presently established power relation, a means of executing supremacy of one group over another. This relation may be inclusive (inclusion with a view to subjugating the Other) or exclusive; it may constitute racism of exploitation (as in the times of slavery in the South) or elimination (as in the case of Nazi anti-Semitism). In each case, the key element of racism is grounded in the steadfast conviction about the unerasable difference of a group that has been subject to domination, about the unbridgeable gap that separates the Other from the dominant group. The difference in question may be tied to biology as well as culture, ethnicity, religion and belonging to a particular class. The defining trait of racism is, on the one hand, the assumption of the “essentialist” difference that divides the dominant from the subjugated. On the other hand, however, the very fact that the said difference is constructed and accentuated so as to *justify* and *legitimise* the thesis of the inferiority of the dominated and the natural necessity to subjugate them and/or exclude is also an integral element of the definition of racism.

One of the main traps that superficial reflection on racism falls into is disregarding racist discourses and practices through the snap judgement of identifying them with xenophobia. In consequence, racism becomes a more radical, yet still undoubtedly highly destructive, form of universal tendency to show reluctance to and distance oneself from the Other. However, numerous researchers, including Zygmunt Bauman, Immanuel Wallerstein, Etienne Balibar, George M. Fredrickson and Cornel West, object to such attempts to reduce racism to xenophobia (as well as to the thesis of their alleged conceptual continuum). These writers point out that historical forms of hostility to the Other were hardly ever connected with non-negotiable group classifications, which is evident in the case of racism. The “barbarian” outsiders who did not initially belong to Grecian poleis were given a chance to “become civilised” and assimilate themselves to the culture of ancient Greece. Early anti-Jewish prejudices, before they escalated into fully-fledged anti-Semitic racism, also left the Jews an option of potential conversion. In both cases the stigma of “difference” could be

erased and the guilt of difference could be duly washed away. This means that the source of disinclination and exclusion has been annulled. Racism does not allow for such solutions.

Thus, differentiating between racism and xenophobia aims to more precisely capture the specificity of racist discourses and practices that have been existing throughout the history (and its current developments) of Western societies. All the researchers highlighting this typology ultimately arrive at the conclusion that turns out to run counter to the casual, everyday intuitions and gut instincts of the members of the societies in question, which in turn enjoy being regarded as enclaves of progress, civilisation and respect for human rights and dignity. To the above-mentioned scholars, racism, not to be mistaken for xenophobia, is an unfortunate *product* of all the processes shaping modern societies as well as forms of knowledge typical of the said societies. What this implies is as follows: racism cannot be treated as a *relic* of pre-modern history, something external – outside of institutional, cultural or economic structures of the societies in question. Instead, it ought to be perceived as a dark side of their development, an integral constituent of modernity, being – as a consequence – a challenge to the easy apology for all that is Western, European and civilised.

In this context, Cornel West states for instance that it was Cartesianism, the scientific revolution, the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fascination with antiquity, and Enlightenment narrations of progress, which contributed to the development of European racism. As he writes, “the very structure of modern discourse *at its inception* produced forms of rationality, scientificity and objectivity as well as aesthetic and cultural ideals which require the constitution of white supremacy”³ ⁴. West thus sees racism as inscribed onto the very “essence” of modern European culture and socialisation. Other authors focus primarily on political and economic factors, showing how racist definitions of non-European peoples enabled and legitimised their colonial subjection and economic exploitation. In this context, Immanuel Wallerstein and Loïc Wacquant emphasise that relations of organised economic exploitation, crucial for the development of the capitalist system, *precede* the formation of racist discourse (and that racism is in fact a *derivative* of the modern organisation of the

³ Cornel West, “A Genealogy of Modern Racism”, in: *Race Critical Theories. Text and Context*, ed. Ph. Essed, D. Th. Goldberg, Blackwell, Malden, Oxford, 2002, p. 90.

⁴ It is perhaps only evident against this backdrop why the authors of the most racist statements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries include the most eminent philosophers of the age, such as David Hume, Voltaire, or Immanuel Kant. See, for instance, Andrew Valls (ed.) *Race and Racism in Modern Philosophy*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, London 2005.

economic system).⁵ As shown by Etienne Balibar (or, in a more accessible form, by Edwin Black), this does not just concern colonial contexts, but also class relations within Western societies.⁶ In these societies, the racialisation of lower social classes (evident in these classes being defined as “essentially” distinct and worse from the rest of society) appears a way of stabilising social hierarchies and blocking bottom-up emancipatory aspirations.⁷ Zygmunt Bauman in turn sees racism as stemming from a “gardening-medical” notion of society as an organism, whose health and development necessitates the removal of weeds or tissues considered degenerate. This reasoning was the cornerstone of a typically modern process of rationalising and perfecting society, which led to a number of diverse twentieth-century eugenic problems. According to Bauman, the modernity of racism results not only from its inherent links with the development of modern science or capitalism, but also from its role in the functioning of nation states. It is within nation states that it becomes an ideology and a socio-political project, often implemented by the state.⁸

The type of diagnoses concerning the genealogies of Western racism which has been outlined above highlights the fact that this racism appears in the context of the developing ideas of emancipation and egalitarianism, as well as processes which led to an increased social mobility, formal equality of rights, and the crumbling of old cultural forms in the modernising European societies. The striking historical parallel of the development of the most brutal racist doctrines on the one hand, and of the liberal-democratic political projects, rooted in the ideals of the universal human rights, on the other, may seem puzzling at first sight. It is, however, not difficult to explain. A solution is hinted at in the words of Zygmunt Bauman: “an era that declared achievement to be the only measure of human worth needed a theory of ascription to redeem boundary-drawing and boundary-guarding concerns under new conditions which made boundary-crossing easier than ever before”.⁹ According to Bauman,

⁵ See Immanuel Wallerstein, “The Ideological Tensions of Capitalism: Universalism versus Racism and Sexism”, in: Etienne Balibar, Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class. Ambiguous Identities*, Verso, London–New York 1991. Loic Wacquant, “From Slavery to Mass Incarceration. Rethinking the ‘race question’ in the USA”, *New Left Review* 13 Jan/Feb 2002.

⁶ See Etienne Balibar “Class Racism”, in: Etienne Balibar, Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class. Ambiguous Identities*, Verso, London–New York 1991, and Edwin Black *Wojna przeciw słabym. Eugenika i amerykańska kampania na rzecz stworzenia rasy panów*, Warszawskie Wydawnictwo Literackie MUZA SA, Warszawa 2004.

⁷ See, for instance, my article on the subject Monika Bobako “Konstruowanie odmierności klasowej jako urasawianie. Przypadek polski po 1989 roku” in: *Podziały klasowe i nierówności społeczne. Refleksje socjologiczne po dwóch dekadach realnego kapitalizmu w Polsce*, Oficyna Naukowa, Warszawa 2010.

⁸ See Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2005.

⁹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2005, p. 61-62.

the racialisation of various social groups by essentialising, and sometimes biologising, their difference (distinctness), is thus a way to re-enact and stabilise the boundaries and hierarchies in a world which has increasingly seen them questioned.

Explicating the stated paradox, it must also be noted that the universalist ideals of human subjectivity, equal justice under law, and individual autonomy were formed in societies which were deeply unequal and based upon various forms of exploitation, both new and old. The discourse of the racial inferiority of some groups thus appeared as a tool legitimising inequalities and exploitation wherever these inequalities became uncomfortable in the first place due to the humanitarian-egalitarian ideals being propagated. This is noted by Gunnar Myrdal who, writing on American history, states that before these ideals were born, racist discourse might well not have developed at all: “A nation less fervently committed to democracy could, probably, live happily in a caste system with a somewhat less intensive belief in the biological inferiority of the subordinate group”¹⁰.

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In light of the above insight, racism appears to be an indelible shadow of Western modernity rather than its polar opposite or an antithesis that has been toppled. In this context, one should not be surprised by the displacement of the problem of racism and its subsequent relocation onto the very margins of public discourse as well as by the real-life presence of racist practices and modes of thinking in contemporary Europe. The most up-to-date evidence of the above dual existence of racism is corroborated by the issue of stigmatising, scornful and frequently openly hostile European attitudes to refugees, immigrants and their successors. Through education, programmes of integration and cooperation, as well as through drawing on empathy and solidarity, these attitudes can be to an extent rectified. Undoubtedly, they defy permanent uprooting without an in-depth revision of basis identity categories and institutions that are funded by European societies. As long as the said societies rely on the entrenched imaginary of an ethnically “pure” nation, Christian supremacy, exclusivist Europeaness, and as long as they are founded upon the principle of unlimited accumulation of capital, racism will remain an integral element of their everyday existence – an element that is all the more omnipresent, the less it is addressed.

¹⁰ Gunnar Myrdal “Racial Beliefs in America”, in: *Theories of Race and Racism. A Reader*, ed. L. Back, J. Solomos, Routledge, London, New York 2000, p. 91.

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