

CONFERENCE PAPER

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**What Kind of Yarn?  
From Color Line to  
Multicolored Hammock:**

Reflections on Racism and Public Policy

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**UNRISD**

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# What Kind of Yarn?

## From Color Line to Multicolored Hammock:

### Reflections on Racism and Public Policy

Rodolfo Stavenhagen

Keynote address

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At the turn of the twentieth century, W.E.B. du Bois the pre-eminent intellectual of the African-American people presciently foretold that this would be the century of the “color line”. During the decades that followed, the world witnessed the rise and fall of Nazism and the Holocaust, the civil rights movement in the United States, the end of colonialism and apartheid, the emergence of indigenous peoples as political actors on the international scene, the renewal of racism in Europe and the horrendous spectacle of ethnic cleansings and genocides in Bosnia and Rwanda. And yet a century later, the “color line” is still with us, separating peoples and cultures, dividing the powerful from the downtrodden, even as it binds some people together in tight ethnic communities but also ties up a lot of people in conceptual knots. So the color line turned out to be a string of many features and multiple uses; perhaps like a clothes-line on which we can hang out our dreams and dreads and dramas to dry. But the color line can also be seen as an interconnected net of multi-colored yarn, strung and woven together, yet each one fiercely singular. In my part of the world hammocks are made of multicolored yarn; if you attempt to lie on each separate strand, it will break, but if you stretch your hammock and relax on it, you can rest and dream and even make love. What kind of yarn, what kind of story makes up these multicolored hammocks?

There are, of course, many kinds of racism, *diverse racisms* —it is a monster with many faces. Nothing further from reality than the widespread idea that “racial prejudice”, an irrational feeling of antipathy and rejection of some Other deemed inferior and not worthy of our respect and understanding, is a matter of individual choice at worst, and at best the result of ignorance and personal prejudice which can be overcome by logical arguments and well-intentioned educational projects. Not that prejudice and subjective attitudes of rejection do not exist; they do indeed, and they need to be dealt with, but they do not float freely in the abstract mind; they are implanted and cultivated by social and political conditions and circumstances which reflect the dynamics of complex group relationships. Unless we are able to come to grips with these issues the struggle against racism will turn out to be a bit like preaching against sin: it may allow us to take the moral high-ground but how effective will it be?

If we look back upon the last fifty-odd years since the founding of the United Nations, we see that thinking about racism has undergone some important changes.<sup>1</sup> During the first phase, *racism was identified mainly with the legacy of Nazi ideology* – the murderous, genocidal hatred instilled in the German nation against all the so-called inferior races, particularly the Jewish people, but also Gypsies, Africans, Slavs, homosexuals and others. Nazi racism was based on a carefully constructed pseudo-scientific ideology of racial purity and superiority, which has its roots in numerous strands of Western thought and found its way into the language of academic anthropology, biology, psychology and other

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<sup>1</sup> Early work on race and racism was carried under the auspices of UNESCO. See UNESCO (1956) and Kuper (1975)

disciplines. The Nazis promoted “race science” or “raciology” (*Rassenkunde*) in their universities to provide legitimacy for their perverted world-view. Today scientific racism no longer commands any academic recognition whatsoever, but can still be found under various guises in some scholarly institutions and publications.<sup>2</sup> The first activities of the UN in the struggle against racism related to eliminating this poisonous legacy from the post-war world, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 well expresses this concern.<sup>3</sup>

The next phase relates to the *struggle against colonialism* and the fight of colonised peoples everywhere for freedom and national liberation. The struggle against apartheid belongs in this phase, though it took many more decades to achieve its objective, a free, plural and democratic South Africa. The nineteen fifties and sixties saw numerous former colonies achieve independence and statehood, and also witnessed the civil rights movement in the United States. Colonial racism was formally abolished, but its effects still linger on in many parts of the world. The UN proclaimed the right to self-determination in the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples of 1960, later incorporated as article 1 of the Human Rights Covenants adopted by the General Assembly in 1966.<sup>4</sup> Racism here was considered more than a set of individual rejectionist attitudes; rather it was seen as an expression of the unequal relationship between peoples of different stock in a given historical setting. Emphasis turned from individual attitudes and structured racist ideologies to the rights of peoples and the building of a new, more equitable international order. The rise to prominence of the Third World framed the background to a new scenario of international inequities, later to be accentuated by the process of economic globalisation, which to many observers appears as a new form of global racism.

During the seventies and eighties racism re-emerged in a new guise, this time in the industrial heartlands of the North, involving mainly *migrant laborers* from the periphery, refugees and former colonial subjects. Incidents of racist violence, including riots, increased in the urban neighborhoods of Western Europe, whose principal victims were Africans, Asians, Muslims and Caribbeans. Racial discrimination was reported in the areas of education, housing, employment, health services and the criminal justice system, in which the youth of racial minorities have been particularly singled out through a process of “criminalisation”. Besides Blacks, Latinos have been prominent victims of racial profiling and discrimination in the United States.<sup>5</sup>

A number of states began to see *racism* not as a series of isolated incidents, but rather as a *patterned and structured social problem*, and soon government action and international attention were brought to bear on the topic. Massive trans-national migration flows provoked widespread political debates about the perceived dangers of too many foreign migrants, the need for demographic “balance”, the control of borders and so forth. Latent racism became manifest once again, and politicians thrived by playing the “immigrant-racial” card. The emergence and voter appeal of extreme right-wing political parties raised the issue to new levels. From Enoch Powell to Le Pen to Haider, the new right saw in foreign immigration ---meaning racially distinct migrants from Third World countries or former colonies--- the specter of an endangered national identity being swamped by alien hordes of inferior stock. Some states enacted anti-discrimination legislation and new immigration laws, others set up commissions to study racial issues, and the European Parliament prepared reports and passed resolutions on the topic. Racism in Europe had once more become an international issue of concern.

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<sup>2</sup> Barkan (1992)

<sup>3</sup> “Article 2. Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.”

<sup>4</sup> Paragraph 2: “All peoples have the right to self-determination, by virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.”

<sup>5</sup> After the terrorist attack on the US in September 2001, Arabs have also become the target of racial profiling.

The nature of the debate was changing, however. Few people openly advocated racial discrimination of the phenotypical variety, and in the new global environment, the very concepts of race and racial relations were undergoing transformation. As immigrant communities mushroomed in the industrial states, perceived biological distinctions meshed with recognized cultural differences. In some countries, “race relations” became a code word for relations between culturally differentiated communities. Human rights defenders were now no longer advocating just general equality (which seemed to many to be unattainable), but a new concept: *the right to be different*. States were expected to become less assimilationist and more pluralistic. Cultural differences were not to be abolished, but respected and celebrated. The always elusive melting-pot was to be replaced by a spicy multi-cultural salad bowl.

The debate now shifted to *culture*. The extreme right pounced on the concept of the right to be different and appropriated it. Indeed, they said, if everybody else has a right to be different, so do we: the authentic national element, the true bearers of national identity. And so, successively, the right to be different has become an argument for closing borders, forcing assimilation, eliminating bilingual education, excluding the “undesirable”, the “unassimilable” from the truly national. Taken to its extreme, this argument leads to ethnic cleansing, the current face of genocide. Ethnicity has now replaced racialism, and ethnic discrimination is the new face of racism in today’s globalised multicultural world.

In a more subtle vein ethnic discrimination finds intellectual support in liberal arguments concerning *democracy and development*. While it is no longer respectable to blame so-called inferior races for their own misfortunes, some academics, harking back to fashionable theories of the nineteen forties and fifties, have rediscovered culture as the real culprit of economic backwardness and authoritarian political regimes. Forget the legacy of slavery and colonialism and the functioning of the international capitalist system. It now turns out, we are told [by Harvard Professor Samuel Huntington and his colleagues], that the value systems of certain cultures and civilisations are favorable to progress and democracy as understood in the West, whereas other cultures (in Africa, the Arab world, Latin America and some Asian countries) contain value systems that are decidedly inimical to progress and democracy. Therefore, if there is to be any development here at all, these peoples will have to change their value systems, or “we”, meaning the West, will have to do it for them. Is there much difference in this approach from the “civilising” mission that colonialism attributed to itself a century or so ago?<sup>6</sup>

Colonialism –like racism—is a creature of many faces, and even though we are now said to live in a post-colonial era, and have developed post-colonial languages and discourses to account for this transition, a closer look at the contested spaces of those imagined communities we like to call nations, reveals patterns of domination and exploitation, often accompanied by multiple forms of racism, which we may refer to as internal colonialism. Indeed, the perennial victims of internal colonialism in many parts of the world have been the indigenous peoples, and their assertive emergence in recent decades expresses their accumulated hurts and frustrations, as well as their age-old aspirations and dreams. The rights of indigenous peoples are central to the latest developments in the international struggle against racism, having received increasing attention in an emerging field of international law, as documented in current United Nations covenants, declarations and resolutions.

The plight of *indigenous peoples*, often thought to be mainly an issue in North and Latin America, is in fact a worldwide phenomenon. Whereas in the past the genocide of indigenous populations together with the slavery of Africans has most poignantly expressed the most revolting aspects of the legacy of colonialism –and let me add right away that neither the indigenous nor the

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<sup>6</sup> Harrison & Huntington (2000)

Sub-Saharan Africans were the only victimised peoples, though perhaps the most widely known—in the current debates on human rights, democracy and development, the indigenous peoples around the world have established an agenda for the fulfillment of their human rights and the attainment of justice and well-being that includes the struggle against various forms of discrimination, exclusion, marginalisation and racism [which characterizes their situation and mars their chances for decent and dignified conditions of life].<sup>7</sup>

As we contemplate the achievements of the last three decades of the combat against racism and look at the tasks ahead, and as we witness the current controversies and difficulties in finding common ground on which to join forces in the future, we need to recognise the challenges that the various forms of racism –the various racisms—present both at the analytical and theoretical levels as well as at that of policy and praxis. Indeed, one of the lessons learned during the twentieth century is that there is no easy fix on racism—the various features require different kinds of understanding and action. And this necessarily means a reassessment of the conceptual framework involving the usage of the term race.

There is now widespread consensus that the concept of race –its general usage to the contrary notwithstanding—is of little or no scientific value and does not rest on any hard facts. Scientists talk of human populations that are more or less genetically related. [In fact we as humans share most of our genes with a number of primates and other animals, and almost all of our genes with other human beings]. The genetic make-up which may make some of us different from other humans –and which has often been used to justify the use of the term “race”—is absolutely minimal compared to the total human genome. The small number of physical traits that biologists in the nineteenth century used to identify the world’s so-called major races are of no particular relevance to human social behavior. The concept of race became important as an instrument in the construction of explanations concerning the perceived differences between human populations that fascinated European travelers ever since the age of discovery, and later became an essential ingredient in the elaboration of theories designed to support ideas relating to the purported superiority of some peoples over others. It was perhaps inevitable that the principal use of the term “race” served to justify the domination of one human group over the racially stigmatised Others. And just as inevitably, the concept of race has become a weapon in the struggle for liberation, dignity and human rights by those so stigmatised. *Race, then, became a socially, culturally and politically constructed signifier in a contextually determined system of “race relations”.* Under what circumstances and how do social relations become “racialised”? Much research has been carried out on these questions, and some of it will be discussed at this Seminar.

As recent studies in Europe have shown, racism as a social phenomenon –not only an individual attitude—feeds on *racialised interpersonal relations* and weaves the constructed concept of “race” into its various ideological expressions. This is not only a Western phenomenon because it occurs wherever ethnically distinct peoples encounter each other in a patterned system of unequal and asymmetrical relationships. By ethnically distinct, I mean of course not only physically visible features but cultural group identities as well. Nor should we forget the phenomenon of counter-racism and reverse discrimination that we encounter in post-colonial societies and which complicate the tasks of building pluralistic democratic polities.<sup>8</sup>

To deal with these issues in more than a perfunctory manner it is useful to examine the various levels at which racism is shaped, expressed and experienced. The media and public opinion often tend to reduce racial discrimination to its *subjective interpersonal expressions*. To concentrate on individual

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<sup>7</sup> ICIHI (1987), Anaya (1996).

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Blackstone et al. (1998)

racial attitudes and prejudice is to look at motivations, beliefs, stereotypes and values that may lead to discriminatory behavior patterns which sometimes include racist violence. Such prejudice involves complex mind-sets that under different circumstances may produce ethnocentrism, xenophobia, religious intolerance, and other attitudes often associated with insecurity, low self-esteem, suspicion, paranoia and a penchant for authoritarianism.

While such psychological factors may be present in many instances of inter-racial and inter-ethnic behavioral patterns at the personal level, it will not do, as some would have it, to reduce this level of racism to some sort of psycho-social dysfunction or label it as simply irrational. However, having been described too often as a malady to be cured, we should not take such approaches to racism lightly. Efforts to eradicate racist stereotypes, prejudices and attitudes must be continued at all levels, from personal counseling to group awareness-building procedures to educational activities to media campaigns. Much can be achieved at this level but only if the other levels of racism and discrimination are considered as well.

*Institutional racism* is surely at the present time the most widely debated expression of racial discrimination, xenophobia and intolerance. It refers to institutional practices that tend to place the victimised group in continuous disadvantage with respect to a majority or dominant group in society in a number of areas such as education, employment, career opportunities, housing, health care and other social services or societal goods or benefits that are thus unequally distributed along racial and/or ethnic lines. Institutional racism may not be the result of any personal racist motivation by people in positions of power, but it clearly affects the outcomes: biased recruitment patterns in jobs, unequal access to health care, limited career opportunities, lower quality of education and delivery of other social services, ghettoisation, and multiple other forms of segregation and exclusion. Whether it is Blacks and Latinos in the United States, Caribbean youth in the United Kingdom, Arabs and Africans in France, Turks in Germany, indigenous peoples from Argentina to Alaska to Australia, Burakumin in Japan, Dalits in India, Berbers in North Africa, the *patterns of institutional racism* tend to be similar the world over. They are frequently not even formally considered as racist, and may appear under the mask of social and economic disadvantages simply suffered by lower income sectors. This is the debate surrounding the issue of descent-based and work-based discrimination among Asia's untouchable castes.

Disaggregated national development statistics often present such an undifferentiated picture: the underprivileged are a lower percentile, that is all. The United Nations Development Report has begun to correct this unsatisfactory vision: the breakdown of national welfare and development indicators by ethnic and racial groups shows a vastly different side of the story, as any serious research on these issues also demonstrates.<sup>9</sup>

Very often the underprivileged groups (a loaded term, no doubt) are blamed for their own misfortunes: it is said that they are not ambitious enough, their family structures are dysfunctional, their cultural values are traditional, their motivations are misplaced, their world outlook is inadequate. In the standard language of our times, the victims are at fault, not the system. We hear arguments that in a liberal democratic state racial and ethnic discrimination is an aberration and should not happen at all. If discrimination is now outlawed in most democratic states and the legal system establishes that every one is equal under the law, then surely, if it still occurs, as is often claimed, the victims are partly to blame. There is much debate in the West about whether "equality of opportunity" should lead to "equality of outcomes". Some recent scholarship holds that development actually means more freedom of choice based on enhanced capabilities of the individual. A just society would allow all individuals equal opportunity to increase their capabilities, and therefore overcome traditional

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<sup>9</sup> The Human Development Report is published annually by the United Nations Development Program

inequalities.<sup>10</sup> But what if inequalities are persistent over decades and centuries and related to community, religion, ethnicity, culture or racial distinctions and to a history of oppression and exploitation?<sup>11</sup> Equality of opportunity, as we know, is not universally enjoyed, not even when the legal system is open and basically fair. Too often racial and ethnic discrimination occurs in the functioning of legal institutions, in the realm of the administration of justice, and particularly in the criminal justice system.

As considerable amounts of research have shown over the last few decades, in racially and ethnically divided societies social, economic and political institutions can be highly biased and produce slanted results. Much attention has been paid to the identification and implementation of public policies designed to eliminate racial and ethnic –and also gender–discrimination in institutional performance of all kinds. If racism is considered to be a social problem, as in so many immigrant countries, then social services –such as health, education and housing principally– must be made to work equally well for all citizens and denizens. Perhaps special efforts will have to be made to improve the situation for the most disadvantaged, the socially excluded, the especially vulnerable (such as the undocumented migrant worker or refugee, the untouchable caste, the marginalised indigenous community, the inner-city ghetto youth etc.)

This is what “equal opportunity” in employment or any number of *affirmative action policies*, preferential politics, special development efforts and other public policy measures have set out to do. How effective are they? The report card comes up with mixed grades. In some cases affirmative action has indeed produced important results, in others it has become entangled in bureaucratic quagmires. Frequently it is accused for being a code word for *reverse discrimination*, and in the U.S., for example, it is now being dismantled by the courts.<sup>12</sup>

The *argument against affirmative action* goes somewhat like this: it creates more dependency among the underprivileged minority vis-à-vis the state, it does not benefit the poorest majority but rather the minority elites, it lowers the quality of education, it denies the principle of individual equality, it runs counter the basic values of a free, individualistic meritocracy, it violates human rights.... To hear some people say it, affirmative action turns out to be more discriminatory than the historical discrimination it was intended to redress. Minorities who benefit from affirmative action are rightly worried that the gains obtained over the past decades will quickly be eroded and that the indicators revealing unequal access by disadvantaged minorities to social benefits will rise once more.

The term affirmative action covers a variety of possible policy measures. These may not work under all circumstances, they can surely be improved upon, but they may be hugely successful in other cases. Certainly affirmative action policies must be used –and intensively so– to redress historical injustices that ethnic and racial groups have suffered, including colonised majorities as in South Africa. The reversal of affirmative action in the United States and elsewhere is not a policy that helps combat racism, but rather tends to entrench it.

In other situations, such as that of *indigenous peoples* in Latin America and elsewhere, *compensatory measures* for age-old discrimination take on other forms. Here the issue is not so much the possibility of individuals obtaining better access to the collective goods of society through existing institutions, but rather the design of institutions that will improve the life-chances and levels of welfare of disadvantaged communities and collectivities. In many parts of the world indigenous peoples have been deprived over the years of their homelands, their land and resources and the major requirements

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<sup>10</sup> Sen (1999)

<sup>11</sup> Tilly (1998)

<sup>12</sup> Appelt (2000), Curry (1996)

for their subsistence as peasant societies or as hunters and gatherers or pastoral nomads in fragile ecosystems. Here legal and institutional remedies to perennial discrimination include the *restitution, demarcation and protection of traditional territories and homelands*, agrarian reforms, investments in infrastructure, local and regional development projects of all kinds. In some countries special government agencies for indigenous affairs deal with these issues, but they are often accused of being too bureaucratic and paternalistic, when not downright authoritarian.<sup>13</sup>

Increasingly, ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples are demanding some sort of regional, political or cultural *autonomy*. While there are many different forms of autonomic relations between a state and existing minorities, these are complex issues that often involve rethinking the traditional nationalistic concept of territorial sovereignty, and not many states are willing to relinquish what they consider an essential element of their power and legitimacy. Indigenous peoples, for example, have insisted in the United Nations –and at the World Conference Against Racism held in South Africa in September 1991—that they must be recognized *qua* peoples and that their *right to self-determination* (including autonomy) be respected. Some governments disagree on this issue, and that is why the draft UN Declaration on Indigenous Rights has been stalled in a working group of the Commission on Human Rights. Indigenous organizations have interpreted this resistance as yet another form of racism.<sup>14</sup>

*Reparations and compensation* for past injustices are the most recent issues on the negotiating table. Can centuries of genocide, ethnocide, colonial exploitation, slavery, debt peonage and oppression ever be repaid? There should surely be no question about the justice of such claims in principle, but putting them into practice is another matter. Who will be the direct beneficiaries of these claims, who should be deemed directly responsible for them, how would the process of adjudication work? Is any existing national or international legal system capable of handling such a process? What might the time limits, if any, be? A point of reference has been the restitution accorded by some European states to the survivors and the heirs of victims of the Holocaust or the claims of “Comfort Women” in Japanese occupied territory during the Second World War. Can equally clear claims be made in the name of the enslaved or exterminated peoples of Africa and the Americas? Who will pay for the damages wrought upon the people of South Africa by decades of apartheid? Besides punishing some of the culprits under recent statutes in international criminal law, how can the horrors and the pain of contemporary genocides and ethnic cleansings in the Balkans and the African Lakes region ever be compensated for, not to speak of the politicides in Cambodia and the Soviet Union in earlier years, among others? These are some of the more recent challenges facing human rights policies and institutions in the world.

To go yet a step further, perennial racism and ethnic discrimination are deeply entrenched in the functioning of social institutions because differences, inequalities and hierarchies among peoples are firmly rooted in the overall dynamics of the world system: economically, politically, socially and culturally, to use a simple classification. There is no doubt that personal identification, a sense of belonging, collective identity, ethnocentrism, group bonding and similar phenomena condition the relationship between the **us** and the **other**, between the **we** and the **they**. But whether, if and when these identifications become competitive, confrontational or cooperative will depend on the wider framework, and in today’s world this means not only power relationships within the nation-state structure but also the *global economy* and its multiple implications.

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<sup>13</sup> Daes (2001)

<sup>14</sup> Statement by Rigoberta Menchu Tum at the World Conference Against Racism, Durban, South Africa, September 2001

We need not belabour the point that the global economy not only draws peoples closer together in a certain sense, but also generates new differences and inequalities. As Seattle and Genova have signaled so clearly there are new global post-colonial mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion afoot, which become particularly relevant during times of economic recession and retrenchment as is now the case. But regardless of cyclical phenomena, the globalisation process itself continuously generates poverty, marginalisation and exclusion, even as it tends to raise productivity, output and profits. At a safe historical distance, we can now recognise that Mr. Marx's prognostications were not so far off the mark after all.

The issue that brings us together here is the realisation that the polarising mechanisms of globalisation have racial, ethnic and cultural implications. Far from being random phenomena, inclusion and exclusion are linked to the historically generated processes of ethnic and racial construction and differentiation, and the globally excluded, the persistently poor, the hungry, the sick (over half the world's population by United Nations estimates), are also the victims of discrimination on ethnic, racial and cultural grounds. Is not the poverty in the South amidst a world of plenty in the North (and these differential labels can coexist within a national space) a form of racism? Is not the destruction of viable and vibrant local communities and ecosystems due to the needs of capitalist accumulation a particularly severe form of discrimination? Is not the creation of fortresses of prosperity surrounded by worlds of misery and despair an extreme instance of intolerance and exclusion? Indeed, *structural racism* is the overall framework on which other expressions of racist and ethnic discrimination hang.

Is there a way out? Perhaps if we didn't think so, we would not be gathered here today. Let me just say that I do not believe –as should be clear from the preceding remarks-- that we can act against racism and racial discrimination as if they were isolated, self-contained phenomena. Public policies regarding racism have tended to be reactive rather than proactive, remedial rather than preventive. In Western Europe, for example, state responses to racist violence have waxed and waned according to what some observers have identified as repeated waves of violence related to factors such as immigration and the political fortunes of extreme right wing parties at election time. Affirmative action policies, particularly in the educational field, may become popular when the social mobilisation of discriminated minorities rises, and will be discarded or diminished at low levels of mobilisation. Legislation on indigenous rights was introduced in Latin America in the eighties and nineties after the political emergence of new indigenous movements. Unless the pressure is kept up, such legislation will have little effect on the daily conditions of life of millions of indigenous. While formal apartheid has been abolished, the new global apartheid continues to affect the life-chances of millions of people the world over.<sup>15</sup>

As economic and social transactions between distinct communities and groups continue to be “racialised” in so many societies, the concept of race becomes socially relevant and racism is to be seen as part of a system of power relations between racialised actors, including not only individuals, but also institutions, the state and the global economy.

Blaming the “system” in the abstract, however, is not a very constructive way of dealing with the issues; it leads to the old rather ineffective approach of saying “we cannot do anything unless the system changes”, but who will change the system and how? We've been through this before. As far as racism and racial discrimination is concerned, the locus of action has usually been the nation-state or even lower-level units. While global approaches are necessary –and the World Conference against Racism is an example of this—national and local level policies continue to be essential. Here we encounter a number of alternative approaches.

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<sup>15</sup> Witte (1996), Stavenhagen (1998)

At the basic level of individual human rights, the struggle for equality has been a driving force throughout history. Wherever individual members of a discriminated group are disadvantaged through unequal treatment before the law or unequal access to opportunity and services of all kinds, or are politically, socially and culturally excluded from effective participation in violation of the basic principles of international human rights law, then any and all measures designed to overcome such disadvantages must be pursued. Experience shows, however, that simply removing legal barriers and proclaiming formal equality is never enough.

To remedy this situation, numerous countries have adopted some form of affirmative action or preferential treatment for members of discriminated groups and such measures have proven to be fairly successful as far as they go, though they have also led to counter-measures and challenges from groups who fear for their privileges.

The thrust for equality does little to address major group differences between ethnic and racial communities however, a question that has bedeviled debates on the relationship between the state and such collectivities, particularly when the latter are clearly in a subordinate position. States may face these issues by adopting various long-term strategies:

*Segregation* of the subordinate groups. The patent failure of this policy is clear in the history of race relations in the United States and South Africa.

*Assimilation* of the subordinate groups into the dominant society involving their disappearance as distinct cultural or ethnic peoples, a policy that has been implemented the world over in such disparate settings as indigenous Latin America, Berbers in North Africa, Moluccans in Indonesia and Kurds in western Asia, among others. Observers have described cases of forced assimilation as forms of cultural genocide or ethnocide. This policy may be successful at times but usually entails a high social cost and major violations of human rights<sup>16</sup>.

A somewhat different situation prevails in countries that have important contingents of immigrants, where assimilation is said to be not only in the “national interest” but also in the best interests of the immigrant groups themselves. While assimilation is often presented as a solution to the tensions and confrontations that accompany the settlement of immigrant groups, including refugees and asylum-seekers, it can also be said that the policy itself generates tensions and confrontations.

A softer position –to label it some way—involves *integration* of subordinate groups into the dominant society, which really means incorporation into the dominant model of the nation state (which is often an ethnocratic state), at the same time respecting certain features of their collective identities (maybe the use of language, freedom of religion, local forms of social organisation etc.).

Much more contentious is the recent emphasis on *multiculturalism*. As a consequence of what some have called an “ethnic revival”, partly resulting from the universalisation of the discourse of human rights, partly as an answer to the weakening of the nation-state, in part as a substitute for the decline of overarching social and political ideologies, the recognition and celebration of diversity leads to a new awareness concerning the role of culture in shaping social communities and conditioning individual behaviour. Some countries –such as Canada—have adopted active policies of multiculturalism meaning the official recognition of numerous communal identities (Native Americans, linguistic communities, immigrant minorities) which has led to the adaptation of the legal system to the requirements of culturally differentiated collectivities within the federal state structure. Thus it represents a respect for the collective rights of ethnic groups, particularly those that for historical reasons occupy subordinate positions in the wider society. Within the framework of a

renewed debate on the meaning of citizenship, the notion of multicultural citizenship has taken hold of public discourse and is being considered in many different contexts. To the extent that the denial of cultural identities is a form of racism, multicultural citizenship rights may be considered as an effective way of combating racism, discrimination and exclusion at the societal level. To be sure, it requires rethinking the idea of the nation-state itself. This is indeed the challenge facing a number of states in the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, where the long cherished idea of the multinational polity was violently destroyed during the nationalist conflicts of the nineties.<sup>17</sup>

To the extent that the reification of cultural differences may also become a form of exclusion and even racism, multiculturalism as an objective of public policy is receiving a good deal of criticism lately. It has other problems as well, such as the possibility of setting up conglomerates of legally fixed communal identities in a sort of corporate structure that may run counter the current world tendency towards democratic liberalism. Moreover, insofar as ethnic community structures may impinge upon the individual human rights of their own members (for example, by demanding strict religious conformity or adherence to traditional marriage customs) legally sanctioned multiculturalism (in the form of autonomy, for example) may be at odds, according to some writers, with the idea of universal human rights.

Increasingly there is talk of *interculturality* rather than multiculturalism per se. This would not deny cultural diversity among groups but rather strengthen it through flexible structures of governance and socialisation, within the context of state structures that are not culturally bound to any particular model of the “nation-state”. How the idea of interculturality would play out in the fields of education, communication, social control, cultural creativity, administration of justice, political representation and so forth is still an open question. But the debate has begun.

Identity and identification, dignity and diversity, power and politics, rights and resources: these are some of the contested spaces in the struggle against discrimination and racism in our post-colonial, globalised world. How well we will be able to deal with them is one of the major challenges of our beginning century. Du Bois’ color line has become a multi-colored hammock of interconnected yarn. Each thread contributes to the strength of the net. Let us make sure that the colors hold fast and the hammock does not break.

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<sup>17</sup> Kymlicka (1994)

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