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Race, Modernity and the Challenge of Democracy

Iain Chambers

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The automatic assumption that European history will be told best and most powerfully when it is made to coincide with the fixed borders of its national states will also have to be disposed of.

Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?*[1]

Everyday racism, encountered on the streets, in the bus queues, the shops and the neighbourhood, cuts into the political and cultural fabric of modern life. Taking account of the experiential realisation of its violence and divisive logics, tracking its multiple expressions, its media amplifications, and mapping an affective cultural economy of fear and hatred are some of the tasks to be undertaken in countering it. The immediate goal, however, cannot be a political solution. Perhaps racism is itself a direct offspring of the precise construction of existing political formations and what we call the 'public sphere'. For these are spaces that are never simply open. They have consistently been constituted through inclusions and exclusions, through possibilities of access, control and negation; and, above all, through the shifting political, cultural and historical orchestration of what passes for 'identity' and 'belonging' (national, civic, cultural, historical).[2] This is perhaps why, ultimately, illiberalism is constitutive of liberalism. In the end, such freedoms, both local and planetary, have been structurally dependent on the lack, even negation, of the freedom of others.

It is also perhaps here that a crucial distinction begins to open up between ideas of future democracy and the premises of multiculturalism.[3] Recognising and registering cultural difference does not automatically produce more democracy; it can even lead to a retrenchment of rights throughout the public sphere as each constituency forcefully insists on its own particular ethnic and cultural claims. It is rather, as Seyla Benhabib argues, through embracing the creolising processes and hybridising practices of ongoing cultural formations that a dynamic democracy becomes possible.

To pose the question of illiberal practices in contemporary Europe is very much about taking democracy and its liberal rhetoric seriously:

1. Paul Gilroy, *After Empire. Melancholia or Convivial Culture?*, Routledge, London and New York, 2004, p 164

2. At one time, for example, in the United States, Irish and Italians were not considered 'white', now they are; women were until recently excluded from the political and public sphere in all Western democracies.

3. Seyla Benhabib, *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2002

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pushing it to the edge, exposing its limits. It is also about taking its particular historical and cultural formation seriously. This means to confront the structural authority exercised in the unilateral violence of the modern state. This violence is not simply physical and repressive, but, above all, linguistic and legal. These days this is most sharply in evidence around questions of immigration and the subsequent negation of human rights, notwithstanding the centrality of migratory process to the making of modernity since 1500. As the Italian sociologist Alessandro Dal Lago tellingly puts it: the state today does not recognise human rights, only the rights of its citizens.[4] By way of Homeland Security, the UK Border Agency, and the generalised criminalisation of immigration in the First World, the modern state explicitly rejects Article 13 of the 1948 United Nations Declaration on Human Rights that endorses the right of movement in and between states. So, in the words of the sociologist Mehdi Alioua, how are we to rethink migration as a freedom? How is it possible to attain that 'freedom' which was exercised for many centuries by the West in its appropriation of the planet? The contemporary denial of the right to movement and migration produces the dramatic theatre of modern political and geographical power: South and North; Africa, Asia and Latin America to one side, Europe and North America to the other.

The political problem perhaps lies in the increasing impossibility of appealing to such Declarations and associated rights; otherwise Mr Blair would have by now been arrested for crimes against humanity, and much of the present-day Israeli administration and armed forces indicted for war crimes. Further complicating and extending the question is the prison house of identity, invariably tied to the conquest of the state by the nation.[5] The possible heterogeneity of a state has increasingly been held hostage to the homogeneity required by modern nationalisms and *their* narration of modernity. Multiplicity is governed in the name of the singular, the unique; it is governed in the name of that pulsating abstraction of the nation where the mythical securities of blood and soil still continue to reverberate.

So we have to dig deeper into this argument. We are forced to acknowledge that the present response of government to extra-European immigration is not merely a political reply to immediate xenophobia fuelled by economic and social crises. Beyond repressive legislation there is a structural violence inherited in particular modalities of reason that have historically emerged in the persistent gap between European humanism, its moral philosophy, and the practices of the West both at home and abroad. To think of the crucial interrelationship between colonialism, citizenship and democracy in the realisation of Occidental modernity is to register a historical violence both in the colonial cut and the subsequent postcolonial wound that bleeds into all accountings of the past and the present. Today, this troubled and unruly inheritance is augmented by the fact that the controlling distance of a colonial 'abroad' is no longer available: Algeria, the Caribbean, Somalia, India, all are 'here' amongst us. Such proximities are the often unwelcome social (and political) side of globalisation. It is precisely these proximities, met with as much in the cities, streets and cultures of the so-called First World as elsewhere, that dramatically accentuate the planetary scale of the cruel interval between justice and the law.[6]

To reference present-day racisms is to register the extremities of such powers as they continually overstep the seemingly liberal agenda of

4. Alessandro Dal Lago, *Non-Persons: The Exclusion of Migrants in a Global Society*, Marie Orton, trans, IPOC, Milan, 2009

5. See Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Schocken, New York, 2004.

6. See Achille Mbembe, 'What is postcolonial thinking? An interview with Achille Mbembe', *Eurozine*: http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2008-01-09-mbembe-en.html

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community and the bland superficialities of 'multiculturalism' to impose their law on those bodies considered external to its institutions; such bodies are understood as a 'problem': potential disturbers and saboteurs to its authority and the management of consensus. Unregistered, hence 'illegal', immigrants employed in 'dirty work' by capital in the grey areas of the economy are perpetually exposed to legal authority. If they refuse to remain inert they are destined to be invested with the might of the law, further abetted by the violence of popular sentiment and the instantaneous framings provided by the news 'values' of the mass media. In other words, there is very little interest in the immigrant as a human and social question, only in power – social, cultural, historical, political and, above all, economic – *over* the immigrant, whatever his or her actual legal status. Through such practices, so-called 'foreign' bodies are estranged and externalised, rendered both anonymous and silent by the very laws and procedures that the liberal state elaborates to sustain its legitimacy. Whatever else you are, you have already been named and fixed: you cannot escape the fact of 'blackness'.[7]

To challenge racism, then, is ultimately to challenge a political and cultural formation that continues to benefit from its existence and exercise. This is to consider what Eyal Weizman refers to as 'lawfare', those mobile nets of legality that can be extended and withdrawn by a punitive political will: from the open-air prison of the Gaza Strip to patrolling the Mediterranean and transforming immigration into an illegal condition.[8] In other words, injustice is sustained in a net of legal technologies. Injustice is sustained by the law. Power is legally sanctioned, and institutional racism and an unflinching unilateralism is held up in the courts; in the end, as the last decade has clearly taught us, all injustices and atrocities can be legally justified. To step beyond the law, in order to reaffirm law and authority, has structurally diverted our attention from ideas of the exceptional state to the mundane absorption of the quotidian techniques and functionings of a mesh of laws, dispositions, decrees, routines, practices and institutional know-how as they are applied, pursued and perfected: this is the 'banality of evil'. Proudly announced on British trains transporting passengers to and fro between Gatwick and Heathrow airports, the UK Border Agency lists its successes, aided by the latest technologies and the booming industry of surveillance, in tracking down illegal immigration and keeping 'our' borders safe. These borders are certainly not safe for human beings, in fact they are increasingly dangerous and life-threatening; they are only relatively safe for those who can claim British and European citizenship.

The modern establishment of the rule of law was accompanied by the simultaneous realisation of the ghetto, plantation slavery (probably the largest industrial enterprise in the West in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries), indentured labour, the concentration camp and contemporary transfer centres for illegal immigrants. All of these practices and associated technologies exist outside the time and space of the nation. They are located in that no-man's land which sustains the legal separation and political policing of catalogued bodies according to hierarchies of cultural worth beneficial to existing relations of power.[9] This is why, although the comparison is invariably rejected, the distance between the institutions of racist slavery of the eighteenth century that shadowed the birth of modern Atlantic economies and their political democracies,

7. See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Pluto, London, 2008.

8. Eyal Weizman, 'Lawfare in Gaza: legislative attack', on the Open Democracy website: http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/legislative-attack

9. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Daniel Heller-Roazen, trans, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1998, p 181

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and today's so-called 'illegal' immigration, is far closer than the intervening two centuries might suggest. It is precisely this black hole at the centre of Occidental culture that is most sharply underlined by Sybille Fischer when she rightly argues, against Jürgen Habermas, that modernity is not an unfinished or incomplete project but rather the site of an ongoing, complex and contested constellation of powers in which the violence and barbarism that is intrinsic to its founding and realisation is rarely recognised or registered:

> . . . the modernity that took shape in the Western Hemisphere (in theoretical discourse as well as in cultural and social institutions) in the course of the nineteenth century contains, as a crucial element, the suppression of a struggle whose aim was to give racial equality and racial liberation the same weight as those political goals that came to dominate nineteenth-century politics and thought – most particularly, those relating to nation and national sovereignty. Unless we submit the concept of modernity to a radical critique, our emancipatory goals and strategies will continue to reproduce the biases that came to shape modern thought in the Age of Revolution.[10]

Many years ago, in the spring of 1976, Michel Foucault suggested that we were in a bottleneck. To contest the racist and racialising practices of disciplinary powers that articulate the cultural protocols of a historical formation – the human and social sciences of occidental modernity – we turn paradoxically to the very laws whose historical formation sustains the sovereignty of the modern state. Confronted with the declared neutrality of 'science' (notwithstanding its long history of racial and racist pronouncements), we are increasingly forced to explore its ubiquitous powers precisely in order to excavate the cancellation of an ethical, open and democratic sense of the political. This clearly does not simply involve contesting the existing neoliberal state and its delegation of economic and, above all, social, powers and decisions to the abstract laws of the 'market'. It is also, and most precisely, about radically reconsidering the historical and cultural formations that have created this state of affairs. Foucault himself suggested that we should be looking for a new set of rights that are both anti-disciplinary and 'emancipated from the principle of sovereignty'.[11]

Hence the very definitions of 'race', cultural 'identity' and historical belonging are not simply contested fields where common sense has to be challenged. They are also, and most pointedly, critical nodes around which a very different sense of political configurations needs to be constructed. What precisely does existing politics and its associated doxa seek to obscure and disqualify? To answer this question is not merely to register the repression that accompanies hegemonic representations, it is also to engage with the stuff and textures of a quotidian experience; it is to move in the folds of an affective cultural economy in which histories and cultures are reflected, inflected and deflected: all is susceptible to the transit and transformation that accompanies critical translation, that is, interpretation. The prevalent bio-politics that has identified in racial typologies and national identities a sovereign power to be exercised in the public pursuit of its legitimacy is, as Foucault pointed out, a juridical edifice of legal rights that exercises command and subjugation.[12] This, however, need not be the only manner in which to acknowledge a

10. Sybille Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina and London, 2004, pp 273–4

11. Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, David Macey, trans, Penguin, London, 2004, p 40

12. Ibid, p 25

differentiated and planetary modernity. In claiming a modernity that is otherwise, we need to identify an 'insurrection of subjugated knowledges' that promote a diverse archaeology of the present.[13]

The latter produces a very different archive and, with it, a very different sense of the historical composition of modernity and of future scenarios that might invest contemporary understanding. Such a disturbance in the routinised field of vision scratches the lens of Occidental hegemony. Epidermal distinctions and hierarchies are set adrift, crossed and contested by sounds, signs and silences off-screen, outside the frame. In such counter-histories the assumed continuity of sovereignty breaks down into separate tempos and experiences: the history of the victors, or of the defeated, is no longer the history of all. It becomes a critical space – we could call it History or Modernity – that is now differentiated and heterogenous.[14] The sense of this constellation can no longer be considered unilateral, or the mere accumulation of 'progress', or the simple reflection of a 'universal' form: capital, modernity, the West.

In this insurrectionary perspective, race is never given. It names a dynamic, an array of possibilities and powers, in which the unacknowledged enigma is whiteness and its bio-political hegemony. The colonisation of bodies by colour (Fanon) is an 'event', rather than a constant; it operates with shifting boundaries and temporalities. It acquires an intensity, an affect, in certain situations and conditions, and becomes a differentiating, political device. It draws on something that matters; this is matter – skin pigmentation, cultural difference, historical distinctions – that establishes something else: political power, cultural hegemony. It is a dynamic assemblage, rather than a simple state or identity.[15] For race is not simply about bodies and prejudices, it is inscribed in the distribution of social and urban space; it produces the form and content of the modern city; it sustains the present ranking of political and cultural power, together with its experienced materialities. Race is an arrangement of powers.[16] It is the articulation of 'race' through bodies, epidermal traits, religion, cultural markers, social distinctions, that produces the overdetermined interpretive grid of the Muslim and the 'mugger', the 'terrone' and the 'terrorist'.[17]

What matters here is never a neutral verdict but rather the expression of a certain constellation of powers, a specific hegemonic formation. In other words, 'race' as a discursive force, together with a material set of practices and institutions, is produced by a particular aggregation of power, and is employed to ensure its reproduction. Race is itself the materialisation of the hierarchies of power that produce it as a category. The history of racism in the formation of occidental modernity over the last five centuries is precisely the largely unacknowledged, but highly visible, exposure of that mechanism; its 'heart of darkness' embodied in the education and legislation of its social bodies. Race, and the colonial narration of the violent geographies of the world that produced modernity, is still very much an active script. While the rest of the world is composed of diverse hues of black and brown, whites are just human. Without race, and the accompanying repertoire of racisms, white hegemony, no longer able to project itself through subordinate others, would falter. Its mechanisms of power, now historically specified, culturally located and deprived of universal legitimacy, would collapse in on themselves. The increasingly vicious turn in present-day racism, together

13. Ibid, p 7

14. Ibid, p 70

15. Arun Saldanha, *Psychedelic White: Goa Trance and the Viscosity of Race*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2007

16. Daniel Swanton, 'The force of race', on the darkmatter website: http://www.darkmatter101.org/site

17. 'Terrone': of the earth, peasant, uncouth; the term of abuse that Northern Italians give to those coming from the Italian South.

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with a mounting xenophobia, is perhaps the displaced recognition of this emerging scenario. Being white now becomes an anxious, even 'nervous' condition, as Frantz Fanon remarks.

All of which propels us to consider what is the economic, cultural and social 'work' achieved by 'race' in producing an affective political landscape? Here, 'race' becomes the marker for identifying disturbance and the refusal of an existing state of affairs when, for example, underpaid migrant workers refuse their inhuman conditions of employment, or when there is no longer a unique religious custom that commands but is now diversified and multiplied: minarets in the heart of Christendom.

Such contested proximities draw us into heart of the global labour market where the coordinates of exploitation in the modern metropolis are being redrawn. The spatial division of both labour and the globe has been radically reconfigured in the heteronomy of increasingly shared spaces. So, and returning to those minarets, questions of religion as signals of cultural difference become part of the construction of social, historical, cultural and political matters. Here 'private' concerns of belief are incorporated in bodies, signs and sites; they constitute social and symbolic spaces that are deeply inscribed with racialising premises, ethnicising protocols and racist agendas, which include those of the profoundly Christian formation of 'secular' Europe.

As a language, a concept, a practice and a contingent event, racism cannot be resolved. It is part of a far wider state of affairs whose powers and authority constitute the very horizon of contemporary political, cultural and economic power and their associated sense. This particular world is not about to relinquish its powers; it is, on the contrary, further buttressing them in increasingly contorted legal strictures and structures. Racism, and its centrality to the making of the modern world, as an organising principle of hegemony, can, however, be exposed and lived differently. In proposing a different take, and becoming 'other', racism takes us beyond race into the altogether more vulnerable understanding of a modernity that has neither been made nor authorised simply by 'us'. This is to wrench race away from immediate political agendas, and to disseminate the powers of a counter-discourse, a pedagogic imperative, in which it becomes essential to recognise and negotiate, rather than merely impose, structural inequality and the planetary ubiquity of social and historical injustice.

This article is the basis of a talk given in April 2010 at the Centro de Cultura Contenporánea de Barcelona, in the context of a conference entitled 'Living with Diversity: For a Politics of Hope in Europe'. For further details on this Europe-wide antiracist initiative, see the Forum of Concerned Citizens of Europe: http://forum-europa.org

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