

Racism As We Sense It Today

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THE RESEARCH THAT I REPORTED IN *THE DARKER SIDE OF THE RENAISSANCE: LITERACY, TERRITORIALITY AND COLONIZATION* (1995)

was driven by my desire and need to understand the opening up of the Atlantic in the sixteenth century, its historical, theoretical, and political consequences. How was it that coexisting socioeconomic organizations like the Ottoman and Mughal sultanates as well as the *incanate* in the Andes and the *tlahtoanate* in the Valley of Mexico were either inferior or almost absent in the global historical picture of the time? I became aware, for example, that people in the Valley of Mexico living in the Aztec *tlahtoanate*, whether in conformity or dissenting, were compared—by the Spaniards—with the Jews. The comparison was twofold: on the one hand, the Indians and the Jews were dirty and untrustworthy people; on the other hand, the Indians in the New World may have been part of the Jewish diaspora. So, the comparison got in trouble, because Indians and Jews may have been the same people. The Jesuit priest José de Acosta, in his *Historia natural y moral de las Indias* (1589), asked whether the Indians descended from the Jews, addressing a question that was on everybody's mind. He dismissed the possibility of the connection, because the Jews had had a sophisticated writing system for a long time while the Indians were illiterate (in the Western sense of the word). Jews liked money, Acosta pointed out, while Indians were not even aware of it; and while Jews took circumcision seriously, Indians had no idea of it. Last but not least, if Indians were indeed of Jewish origin, they would not have forgotten the Messiah and their religion.

Then came the question of enslaved Africans in the New World. Early in the sixteenth century, Indians were considered vassals of the king and serfs of God. Consequently they couldn't be enslaved. This prohibition legitimized the massive enslavement of Africans. Bartolomé de Las Casas, as is well known, first supported the dictum about Indians and Africans, but then he corrected himself and condemned slavery. Indians and Africans were the object on which the external colonial difference was established: they were cast as ontologically

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inferior and epistemically disabled. Later, in the twentieth century, Jews became the targets of the internal colonial difference, not so much because of their ontological or epistemic inferiority as because they endangered the homogeneity of the nation-state. However, the state control of knowledge was the basic weapon for racial classification.

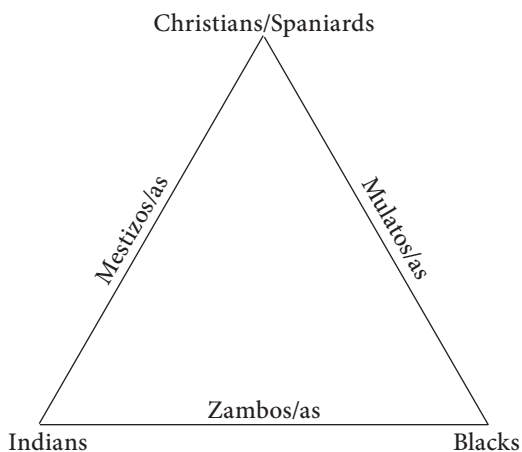
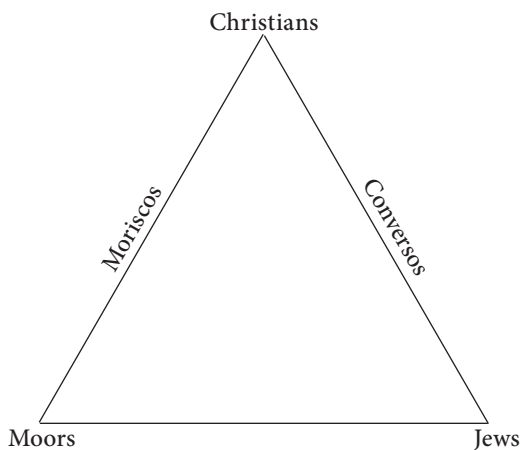
The internal and external colonial differences did not exist before the sixteenth century. Although Africa and Africans were already classified in Christian cosmology as descendants of Ham, Noah's cursed son, and although Christians and Jews were in tension since the origin of Christianity, neither difference was understood as colonial. Colonial difference was an invention of Christianity in the sixteenth century, and its consequences have been enormous. One of the meanings of *Ham* was "black." The conjunction of being cursed and being black, with the fact that Ham's descendants expanded throughout Africa and to the current Middle East, brought into the picture the blackamoor. When Elizabeth I of England launched a campaign against the brutality of Spaniards against the Indians (known today as "the black legend"), the Spanish were likened to blackamoors, which underlined the close connections between Spain and Muslims from North Africa (see Greer, Mignolo, and Quilligan). Moors and blacks were thus conflated as undesirable persons in Christian Europe and used to establish the internal imperial difference between England (a wannabe empire) and Spain (a leading imperial force).¹

The resulting historical configuration is messy: a heterogeneous historicostructural node mapping the emergence of the racial matrix, the modern-colonial world, and the foundation of capitalist economy. Capitalism, an emerging civilizational ideal in tension but not in conflict with Christianity, needs racism: first to assert its identity and to justify its will to power, second to justify its expropriation of land and exploitation of labor.² The

messy historical configuration has therefore an underlying logical structure: Christian theology was confronted with equivalent and competing religious ideas (Jewish and Muslim);³ with a diversity of people in the New World, all of whom Christians, applying Occam's razor, called Indians and declared that they lacked religion and therefore were victims of the mischievous and perverse designs of the devil; and finally with a complex population who descended from Ham and became a confusing mixture of blackamoors—that is, Moors as Muslims and simultaneously black, who could have been Muslim or not in Europe and Africa, and African blacks, who were enslaved, were transported to the New World from different African kingdoms, and varied in language, religion, and history. The Spanish Inquisition in 1505 established some order in this field; it was the first modern state-regulating institution. In retrospect, the racial matrix (and the historical foundation of racism as we know it today) is a combination of two structures, one religious and one secular. Both Christian theology and European egology (e.g., in the sense of René Descartes and Immanuel Kant) controlled and managed racial classification.⁴

Now where shall we place comparative endeavors? Who is comparing what and when? What are the purposes of comparative work? A broadly comparative perspective on the question of race may only scratch the surface of the problem, missing the underlying structure on which racial manifestations in sixteenth-century Spain and the New World differ from those in eighteenth-century France or late-nineteenth-century Japan after the Meiji Restoration. All my work on the issue is based on the following hypothesis: racism as we know it today is built on a racial matrix put in place in sixteenth-century Spain and across the Atlantic. This matrix was part of a process of classifying and diminishing the value of people to justify either their expulsion from "our territory" (Jews and

Moors) or their control and exploitation (Indians and enslaved Africans). But racism had another manifestation, internal to Europe and among empires. The black legend initiated the imperial racial difference, and the Spaniards became seen as blackmoors (Greer, Mignolo, and Quilligan). The technologies of racialization have a common denominator across time and space: the control of knowledge to impose a devaluation of the imperial adversary (e.g., the term *yellow race* was used to devalue China and Japan), of the enemy that had to be kept at bay or eliminated if necessary (e.g., communists and terrorists), and of the sector of the population that needed to be dominated. A brief illustration of the underlying logic and its geohistorical mutations follows. Let's think about two triangles:



The first triangle has Christians at the top and Muslims (Moors) and Jews at the bottom. Moriscos and conversos are the religious mestizos, the result of the mixing of Christian and Moorish blood and Christian and Jewish blood, respectively. The scheme was clear in the Iberian Peninsula, at the heart of the emerging empire. In the colonies, the situation was different. Spaniards considered Indians people who were without religion and thus in the hands of the devil, because for Christians religion was only what resembled their concept of it. Later Kant would laugh at the so-called religions of India and China. The ancient meaning of *religare* 'to reunite' (in Lactantius and Cicero) was lost; *religion* meant having one God, even if that God was the wrong one, as with the Jews and Muslims. Being Christian was supplanted by national identifications, like being Spanish or Castilian.

At the bottom of the second triangle we have Indians and blacks (Africans). Religious blood mixtures that engendered the new categories of Moriscos and conversos in the Iberian Peninsula were replaced by mestizos/as and mulatos/as in the New World. But while in the Iberian Peninsula the blood mixture between Moors and Jews was not accounted for (and probably physically not very common), in the New World the mixture of mulatos and mestizas or of mulatas and mestizos engendered a new racial category, *zambos* and *zambas*, *cafuzos* and *cafuzas*. From here on, classifications multiplied but all of them were displayed under the "purity" of Spanish/Castilian blood (Castro-Gómez).

When I convinced myself that logically and historically race was an epistemic category to legitimize *racism*⁵ and that modern-colonial racism was a Western theological construction at the confluence of the expulsion of Moors and Jews from the Iberian Peninsula and the colonization of the New World, which brought Indians and black Africans into the picture, I became aware also that my own subjectivity was formed by the history of European

immigrants in South America and the Caribbean (I was not a Creole, of Hispanic descent since colonial times, but part of a European immigration that started toward the end of the nineteenth century) and by my personal migration to the United States to become a Hispanic/Latino.⁶ I realized two things. First, given the epistemic and ontological colonial differences that structure the imaginary of the modern-colonial world, I enjoyed, as an Argentine of European descent, the privilege (from the hegemonic model of man and knowledge) of having an edge on the diversity of Indians and African descendants in South America. Second, in relation to the European and United States model of man and knowledge, I was deficient: not quite European and not quite white. My Spanish accent, although I was born and raised among Italo-Argentine families, colored me. The Spanish language was demoted as a language of groundbreaking and guiding knowledge in the eighteenth century, when French, German, and English took over the leadership of Western epistemology. Knowledge produced and framed in the Spanish language is today, in the European Union, less influential and less sustainable than knowledge produced in English, French, or German—English above all, because of the imperial role of the United States.

Thus it is as a South American of European descent (identified as a Hispanic in the United States) and as someone trained in semiotics, discourse analysis, and literary theory that I approach racism in the modern-colonial and imperial-colonial worlds.⁷ I am starting not from an academic discipline to understand an imperial management of human subjectivities through racism but from the subjective feelings of my history and of those who are not immigrants in South America but dissenting Creoles of Spanish descent or mestizos and mestizas. That is, I joined forces with those who instead of using their privileges in South America, being of European descent (one way or another—that

is, Creoles, mestizos, or immigrants), join the struggle carried on by progressive Indians and progressive African and Caribbean Americans. I am not representing or speaking for Indians and African descendants; they have been speaking for themselves for centuries. And no Jews or Muslims will accuse me of representing or speaking for them. I use semiotics, discourse analysis, and literary theory as tools to deal with racism. Nor is semiotics a method to dissect racism as something outside myself, an object of disciplinary study. In other words, I make no pretense of scientific objectivity, as if my discipline were unaffected by the modern racial matrix or by the epistemic formations outside it.

I invert the process, and this inversion is my methodology: there is no way to hide from infection by the racial matrix in any discipline (semiotics, sociology, political science, biology, biotechnology) and pretend that racism, human being, or humanity can be described and explained from the uncontaminated eyes of God (theology) or scientific reason (egology).⁸ Disciplines are a surrogate for religious and ethnic identities. Although disciplinary identities are formed on the principle of objectivity, neutrality, reason without passion, mind without interference of affects, and so on, formed on the basis of beliefs posited as detached from individual experiences and subjective configurations, they are no less identities than religious or ethnic ones.

In sum, from the sixteenth century on, the technology of racism was always supported by the imperial control of knowledge. The success of racism to devalue human beings who did not conform to the norm and model of humanity, that place at the top of the pyramid, serves as a point of reference to trace the many variations of the chain of being. The consequences have been and continue to be devastating for society at large: the economic and legal-political dispensability of human lives. At the level of the state and economy today, the technologies of racism

may operate differently but are essentially the same. The racialization of China and Russia, at the global level, is no less “racial” than that of immigrants in Europe and the United States, at the national level. Although China is now a serious competitor in the capitalist economy, the Chinese are still—in the global unconscious—yellow. There is a racist underpinning in all Western critique of China. Racism has always been and still is epistemic: the control of knowledge and the media is put to good use in devaluating the humanity of competitors, enemies, those who offer low-cost labor, and those who for whatever reason are no longer needed by us and are disturbing our projects for progress and development.

NOTES

1. Bartels writes, “In 1596, Queen Elizabeth issued an ‘open letter’ to the Lord Mayor of London, announcing that ‘there are of late divers blackmoores brought into this realm, of which kind of people there are already here to manie,’ and ordering that they be deported from the country. One week later, she reiterated her ‘good pleasure to have those kind of people sent out of the land’ and commissioned the merchant Casper van Senden to ‘take up’ certain ‘blackamoors here in this realm and to transport them into Spain and Portugall.’ Finally, in 1601, she complained again about the ‘great numbers of Negars and Blackamoors which (as she is informed) are crept into this realm,’ defamed them as ‘infidels, having no understanding of Christ or his Gospel,’ and, one last time, authorized their deportation” (305).

2. Racism as an epistemological and ontological construction of imperial knowledge (Christian theology and secular egology [i.e., secular philosophy and secular science]) has been argued in several places after Anibal Quijano’s seminal works on “coloniality of power.” Racism has been construed as an epistemic colonial difference by devaluing knowledge beyond Greek, Latin, Christian theology, and secular ecology (see Mignolo, *Local Histories* and “Geopolitics”) and as an ontological colonial difference (Maldonado-Torres) by devaluing non-Western people in relation to the human ideal both in the European Renaissance and European Enlightenment (e.g., the declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen).

3. Although Jews, like Indians and blacks, were classified through colonial difference (internal for Jews), Mus-

lims were classified according to the external imperial difference: no Christian was unaware of the ancient Islamic caliphate and the present Ottoman sultanate. Think of China and Japan today: no Westerner is unaware that they may be yellow according to the Linnaeus and Kantian classification but are not at the same level as Indians, blacks, and Jews. For a recent case in point, see Stephens.

4. I introduce the term *egology* in “Delinking.” As *theology* refers to a conceptual frame (-ology) centered around God (*theo-*), a discursive frame that was hegemonic during the European Renaissance, *egology* can refer to a conceptual frame (-ology) centered on the person or individual (*ego-*, the Cartesian “I think, therefore I am”).

5. This idea is further developed in Greer, Mignolo, and Quilligan.

6. I deal with the connections between Islamophobia and Hispanophobia in “Islamophobia.”

7. By *modern-colonial*, I refer to the philosophical and political European concept of modernity, countered by dissenting histories that place coloniality as the missing half of the story; by *imperial-colonial*, I refer to both sides of the equation between imperial and colonial. Although modern imperialism (i.e., Western capitalist empires) without colonies have been in place since the nineteenth century (e.g., England in South America and England and the United States in China since the Opium War), there is no capitalist Western empire without coloniality. Thus, by *imperial-colonial* I mean imperially-coloniality.

8. Racism is basically a construction of a dominant (imperial) discourse. What happens when the racialized person disengages from the will to be racially true? Frantz Fanon’s concept of the sociogenic principle is expanded by Sylvia Wynter.

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