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Construction, Incorporation, and Maintenance of Racism

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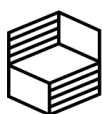
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Abstract

In this essay I present the origin of the concept of race and point out moments of its historical transformation. After a historical overview, I address Frantz Fanon, who vividly portrays his experience of lived racism on a daily basis when migrating from Martinique to France in the book "Black skin, white masks", first published in 1952. Then, I introduce the example of Brazil's independence. Finally, taking into account historical, social, and subjective processes arising from a racialized view of society, I propose the question whether it is up to Black people to fight racism.

According to Hirschman (2004)¹, the reality of race seems self-evident, since the differences in skin color, hair, and other superficial aspects among people are easily observable. Furthermore, it is assumed that races have been a source of identity and antagonism in ancient societies (Hirschman, 2004, p. 385). However, he argues that race and racism are not ancient beliefs, but have developed over the last 400 years and reached their apogee at the end of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century (Hirschman, 2004, p. 386). Hirschman (2004) mentions that the migrations of modern men, which began around 70,000 years ago, together with periods of isolation in different areas, gave rise to human diversity, with regard to its physical (phenotypic) aspects (pp. 386–387). Despite the perception of physical differences between peoples being present in antiquity, there is no record that they were a sign of inferiority or an obstacle to social integration (Hirschman, 2004, p. 389). In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Spanish intellectuals argued that the "discovered" Amerindians were less human and therefore should be enslaved (Hirschman, 2004, p. 393). However, the word "race" and comparable terms emerged only at the end of the seventeenth century, as well as precursor ideas to ideological racism. Namely, efforts to classify all flora and fauna, including humans, in a systematic framework based on morphology and complexity. In this context, the Darwinian theory emerged as a plausible account of the origins of species differentiation and found acceptance among intellectuals searching for an explanation and scientific justification for racial differences among humans. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Social Darwinism, eugenics, and scientific racism were among the leading ideas of science and popular culture (Hirschman, 2004, pp. 392–394). Racism, according to Hirschman, is a belief that humankind can be divided into a finite number of races with differing characteristics and capacities because of their genes or other inherited biological features, with certain races being inherently inferior. To races were also attributed distinct aspects of physical appearance and innate characteristics, such as temperament, predispositions, and abilities (Hirschman, 2004, p. 399).

It is important to question: why have racial theories found so much social resonance? Because it is based on observable differences, the idea of race strikes us forcibly, and we automatically assume that differences also exist below the surface, even though our genetic makeup hardly differs at all (Hirschman, 2004, p. 408). Nevertheless, other factors must be considered. Hirschman (2004) argues that racial beliefs would have arisen as a result of the enslavement of Africans in plantation economies in the New World, the spread of European colonialism, and the development of Social Darwinism (p. 389). I, on the other hand, consider that racial beliefs are not outcomes of enslavement, but precede it in form of a convenient justification for establishing and maintaining profitable exploitation structures of certain groups. Hirschman (2004) points out that the spread of popular education concomitant with imperialism was also a factor in the propagation of racial ideas, generated in Europe, but successfully entrenched in colonized and non-colonized societies (p. 396). Thus, white supremacy provided economic and psychological benefits to white people, and racial ideologies became central doctrines of the modern world (Hirschman, 2004, p. 396). In the second half of the twentieth century, racism declined as an official theory, influenced by anti-colonial movements, the Declaration

¹Hirschman (2004) cites numerous sources to support the data presented in his article and it is inconvenient for reading to cite each of the sources used by the author, so I quote Hirschman directly and recommend to consult the article for more details.

of Human Rights (1948), and a more unified effort by science to affirm that race and racial categories held little scientific meaning (Hirschman, 2004, p. 398). However, racist practices persisted and skin color and other physical attributes are still commonly used as identifiers and for the discrimination of groups (Hirschman, 2004, p. 399).

At a time when racism was supposedly on the decline, Frantz Fanon published his book "Black skin, White masks" in 1952. Fanon was born in 1925 in Martinique, a French territory in the Caribbean Sea. When going to France to fight for the French army, he was faced with his blackness as a factor mediating his experiences with others and with himself. "'Dirty nigger!' Or simply, 'Look, a Negro!'" (Fanon, 2008, p. 82). Fanon (2008) highlights that "as long as the black man is among his own, he will have no occasion, except in minor internal conflicts, to experience his being through others" (p. 82) and only when he leaves the Antilles in 1943 ("Frantz Fanon", 2022) and encounters the "white man's eyes" (Fanon, 2008, p. 83), he does begin to experience such discomfort. His skin color starts to work as a pre-established identity that brings with it stories ideated by the white men: "I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships" (Fanon, 2008, p. 84). Faced with such stereotyping, he felt objectified and imprisoned, having to deal not only with himself as an individual, but with attributes of his race and his supposed ancestors. He realizes that all expectations around him were permeated by his color, which had primacy over him as a subject. Forcefully, lacking any other form of recognition, he began to recognize himself as a Black man: "I am given no chance. I am overdetermined from without. I am the slave not of the 'idea' that others have of me but of my own appearance" (Fanon, 2008, p. 87).

After experiencing the deleterious vision of himself through the White's eyes, Fanon (2008) found refuge in the black world: "from the opposite end of the white world a magical Negro culture was hailing me" (p. 93). "Black Magic, primitive mentality, animism, animal eroticism, it all floods over me" (Fanon, 2008, p. 96), in clear contrast to the white man: "Emotion is completely Negro as reason is Greek" (Fanon, 2008, p. 96). However, at a certain moment, a white man told him: "Your properties have been exhausted by us" (Fanon, 2008, p. 98) and he saw his identity once again shattered when faced with the perspective that the stage where black people are, is a stage to be overcome by humanity. Despite having delved into the history of African civilizations and being aware that the so-called superior, civilized gentlemen were the executioners of these civilizations, he concludes that past glories cannot respond to his present demands and that the elation of Black people is also full of stereotypes attributed to and at the same time despised by the white man.

After an existential detour, Fanon (2008) realized the imprisonment of his situation: "so it is not I who make a meaning for myself, but it is the meaning that was already there, pre-existing, waiting for me" (p. 102), connected to a fallacious and universal black identity: "I am wholly what I am. I do not have to look for the universal [...]. Negro experience is not a whole, for there is not merely one Negro, there are Negroes" (pp. 103–104). Thus, he realized that he was fragmented and sought to rebuild himself, with the possibility that was denied to him when he entered the white world: the possibility of being, free of labels or expectations superimposed on his being or becoming.

In the labyrinth of a racialized world, full of stereotypes, I question: is it up to Black people to fight racism? Is it up to white? Fanon would probably say no: "there is no Negro mission; there is no white burden" (Fanon, 2008, p. 178). However, I believe he said it at the level of a subject, who should not sacrifice his existence for something predetermined. Though, considering his biography, and his engagement in anti-colonial struggles ("Frantz Fanon", 2022), I presume that Fanon also did not believe that freedom of being is all that a man needs: "I find myself suddenly in the world and I recognize that I have one right alone: That of demanding human behavior from the other. One duty alone: That of not renouncing my freedom through my choices" (Fanon, 2008, p. 179). Fanon (2008) also recognizes the social problems of the subjugation of peoples and the permanence of this

mentality in the present: “even today they [the white men] subsist, to organize this dehumanization rationally” (p. 180).

Racism was an enterprise carried out with dedication by European nations, which gave them a privileged social, economic, and ideological position in the world (Eurocentrism), as it legitimized profitable slavery, colonial and imperialist practices and endorsed the supposed white superiority. Although racial theories were dispelled in the 1950s, Apartheid persisted in South Africa from 1948 to 1994 (“Apartheid”, 2022); Human zoos were maintained in Europe until 1958 (Ventura, 2022) endorsing an exotic and animalistic vision of populations from different parts of the world and certainly, this vision still permeates the European imagination. Search the terms “exotic beauty”, “exotic woman”, “exotic man”, “exotische Dame”, “exotische menschen”, “exotisches essen” in Google Images and draw your conclusions.

Certainly, white superiority still “hacks” the minds of us, former colonized people. Discriminatory practices, even if illegal, are widely present throughout the world, not against individuals, but against entire populations in the form of structural racism², which is manifested in the form of, for example, mass incarceration of people of color in the United States (Sawyer & Wagner, 2022); or as a population of Black and miscegenated people that is at the same time the most impoverished, the most incarcerated and the one with the least access to education and employment in Brazil (Poder360, 2022; UNIT Universidade Tiradentes, 2022). Like Fanon (2008), “I do not carry innocence to the point of believing that appeals to reason or to respect for human dignity can alter reality” (p. 174). But I believe that denying racism in the 1950s was only a small step, given what had been done before to endorse racial beliefs and practices. For centuries, scientists, through eugenic theories (National Human Genome Research Institute, 2022); politicians and legislators, through racial segregation laws (see National Geographic Society, 2022, for more detail); and nations endorsed and worked for a racist world (see National Human Genome Research Institute, 2022, for more detail), so today it is necessary to work to repair the social injustices that affect the descendants of those who were enslaved and subjugated because they suffer today the consequences of centuries of slavery, exploitation, social exclusion, discrimination and lack of access to opportunities.

Fanon (2008) argues that appealing to past glories of a Negro Civilization does nothing for the present (p. 175). I agree that merely knowing the past will not repair the situation of those who are fighting for their survival today. However, the scarce or caricatural records of the Black and Amerindian people (Lei.a, 2022), before slavery, endorses narratives of “discovery of the ‘New World’”, of domination of barbarian people without any culture.

In highly miscegenated countries like Brazil, many seek to identify their origins and, at most, find records of their Italian and German ancestry³, but hardly find records of their indigenous or African ancestry, because the history of these peoples has been erased (Biblioteca Nacional Digital, n.d.). The Amerindians reside in the popular imagination as savages and the Black people landed in some port of the territory to be traded (Biblioteca Nacional Digital, n.d.) as they were mere commodities. Even today, the narrative of the “discovery” persists as a moment of glory, as a peaceful encounter between Europeans and indigenous peoples (Hermann, 2007, p. 32). However, it was a moment of violence and extermination of defenseless peoples, either through physical violence or contamination (Neiva, 2020), since they had contact with diseases brought by the colonizers for the first time. Besides the erased history, the descendants of Black people suffer from the mark of their ancestors one day having been enslaved and inherit the supposed inferiority once attributed to them.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the Brazilian government encouraged white immigration

²Free translation from Portuguese of the concept “racismo estrutural”. (Almeida, 2020, p. 43)

³The oldest records of immigrants entering Brazil, available at the National Archive, date back to 1873 (Arquivo Nacional, 2023). Considering that the last known shipment of enslaved people dates from 1872 (Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional, n.d.), it is more likely that these records refer to European immigration.

to Brazil (dos Santos, 2019), which was thought, among other things, as a strategy to whiten and civilize the population through miscegenation, as a reverse version of the American one-drop rule⁴. Unlike in the United States, miscegenation was highly encouraged in Brazil as a way of whitening the population. According to Lacerda (1911), the miscegenated population of Brazil should, within a century, have a very different appearance. Through European immigration, the “white element” of the population would be increased until finally “stifling the elements within which some traces of the black could still persist”⁵ (p. 7). Lacerda explicitly mentions sexual selection as a way of whitening the population:

Continuous sexual selection improves the race by subduing atavism and purging the descendants of mestizos of the characteristic traits of the Negro. Due to the ethnic reduction, it is logical to suppose that in the timespan of a century, the mestizos will disappear from Brazil, a fact that will coincide with the parallel extinction of the Negro race among us.⁶ (Lacerda, 1911, p. 7)

The painting “A Redenção de Cam”⁷ (Ham’s Redemption) (Figure 1), by Modesto Brocos⁸, portrays the whitening of race across generations. From left to right, a black lady, barefoot, who raises her hands and eyes to the heavens is portrayed besides a woman, probably her daughter, with a lighter skin tone, who is holding a white baby. There is also a white man to the right side. The three characters would represent the three generations necessary for Brazil to become a white country. The white man on the right, presumably the husband of the woman (in the center), looks at the boy admiringly. He is the link that allows the complete whitening of the descendants of the Black lady, possibly a slave, and thus her salvation (Roncolato, 2018). According to the author, the myth of Cam is reinterpreted by Brocos, following the theories of his time, that “redemption” of Ham’s descendants would take place through their extinction, as a result of whitening.

Brocos “makes use of a perverse mechanism when trying to attribute voluntarism to Black women as agents of whitening, as if they were celebrating this possibility”⁹ (according to Lotierzo, 2017, as cited by Roncolato, 2018). It means that the choice for a white partner is expressed as a matter of personal preference. However, the history of Brazil points to concrete actions from the government to support white immigration, as mentioned above. Thereby, if a society sees whitening as a means to improve its population, it gives to the white people a status of superiority. As an allegedly superior element, it is possible to assume that the relationship with white people gives their partner a certain status and is therefore valued and encouraged, permeating and shaping the scope of what is superficially perceived as a matter of personal choice.

⁴In early 20th century America, racial ideology was concerned with enforcement of the “one-drop rule” for persons of mixed African-European descent (whereby all persons of mixed white and black ancestry were treated as solely black), the threat posed by immigration of “inferior” races from Asia and Europe, and how to classify American Indians. (Hirschman, 2004, p. 399)

⁵Free translation from Portuguese, recording the participation of João Baptista de Lacerda in the First Universal Races Congress, in London, in 1911. According to Fernandes (n.d.), Lacerda was one of the main exponents of the thesis of whitening among Brazilians.

⁶Free translation from Portuguese.

⁷The title of the painting “A Redenção de Cam” (Ham’s Redemption) refers to the biblical myth of the curse cast by Noah on his son Ham. The story says that Noah slept inebriated and his son Ham exposed his nudity to his brothers. Upon realizing this, Noah cursed Canaan, son of Ham, to be “a servant of servants”. There are even versions that describe Canaan and the descendants of Ham as having black skin and this myth would have been used to justify the enslavement of inhabitants of the African continent, under the framework of Christianity (Roncolato, 2018) [Free translation from Portuguese].

⁸Modesto Brocos (1852–1936), was a Spanish painter who lived in Brazil for more than forty years (Roncolato, 2018) [Free translation from Portuguese].

⁹Free translation from Portuguese.

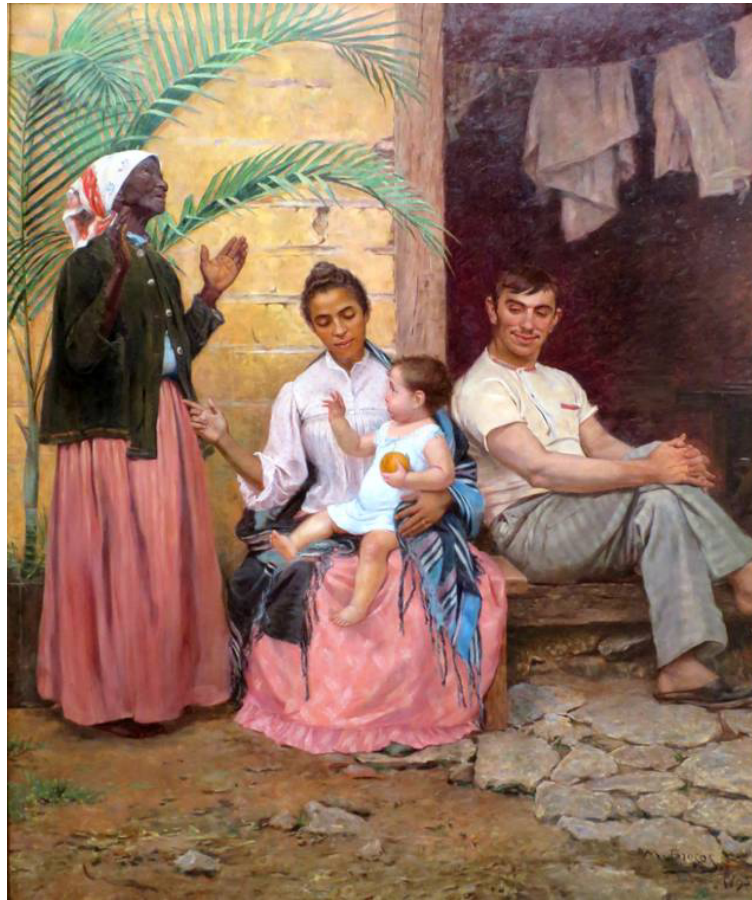


Figure 1: Modesto Brocos. *A Redenção de Cam* (1895). Oil on canvas, 199 x 166cm. Rio de Janeiro: Museu Nacional de Belas Artes. Reprinted from “Contornos do (in)visível: A redenção de Cam, racismo e estética na pintura brasileira do último Oitocentos” [Master’s Thesis, Universidade de São Paulo], by T. H. P. Lotierzo, 2013, *Biblioteca Digital de Teses e Dissertações da USP*, p. 19 (<https://teses.usp.br/teses/disponiveis/8/8134/tde-18122013-134956/pt-br.php>). Copyright 2013 by Tatiana H. P. Lotierzo.

Nowadays, the mentality of racial superiority still persists in Brazil as a form of alienation in which part of the population strives to recognize themselves as being white. Some people only perceive themselves as not white abroad, for example, when they visit the USA and are called “Latinos”, or are discriminated against in Europe. In Brazil, the issue of race is not binary like in the USA but is dealt with in a palette of innumerable gradations of colors from white to black and that also dictates the level of prejudice suffered according to your dose of melanin, your surname, and your social position. There, the white superiority mentality remains, as a dose of alienation about our origins; a naive conception of our history, as a peaceful reunion of diverse peoples; and persists as a denial of the racist structures present in our society.

Will we someday reach a point where racism is no longer a problem in our society? I do not know. With the example of Brazil, I tried to illustrate how much a former colony, even with a highly miscegenated population, still acts in the present based on a conception of racial superiority, conceived in Europe, based on works, at the time, considered scientific and spread through popular education around the world. These ideas have not yet been sufficiently rejected. The depth of their pseudo-scientific character and the interests behind them have not yet been sufficiently exposed and

spread. I believe that an education that reveals the origins of racism is relevant to enable people to question the structure of our society and how it subjugates subjects, nations or entire ethnicities. I also believe that affirmative policies are effective measures for the present, as they offer people real opportunities to access education and work, in order to not have their destiny confined to the contingencies that structural racism reserves for the discriminated populations. It is a struggle that requires the union of many forces, even though I defend an extra effort by the nations that most profited from this social breakdown.

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