'A racism without races': An interview with Étienne Balibar

By Clement Petitjean / 15 April 2014

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Professor emeritus at the Université Paris X, the philosopher Étienne Balibar has made the question of racism and its new forms of expression an important theme of his political philosophy, notably in his critique of capitalism and of liberal society. He is the author, among others, of *Citoyen Sujet et autres essais d'anthropologie philosophique* (2010) and *La proposition de l'égaliberté* (2011), published by Presses Universitaires de France. Passing through Montreal last November, he was keen to answer our questions.

Relations: **Given the predominance of the question of human rights in our societies, as well as the official condemnation of racism, one might think that racism is a relic of ages past. Yet this is not the case. To what extent is it still a central – indeed, structural – phenomenon, particularly in the era of capitalist globalisation? In other words, what does it say about our societies?**

Étienne Balibar: certainly, it tells us that our society is ill – but what society isn't? I believe that it is important to begin by freeing ourselves of any idealist images, by understanding that it is utopian to imagine a society without any pathologies. But utopias do have a role: they allow us to imagine alternatives and ways of cracking down on unbearable forms of exploitation, domination or hatred.

But let us get back to the problem of racism, because that is what we are here concerned with analysing and neutralising as completely as is possible. What you call the 'predominance of human rights' is an ideological phenomenon that certainly is of symptomatic value, but is not enough to change social structures. There are even ways of using it that hide the varieties of racism that are now developing, paradoxically by way of a 'humanitarian' or 'philanthropic' discourse that serves to keep populations or categories of individuals in the condition of recipients of help rather than as bearers of equal rights. Differences or incapacities are presented as essential properties, though they are in fact the result of historical conditions and of relations of domination.

The official condemnation of racism is a very important historical phenomenon. It coincided – at the end of the Second World War – with the dawn of Black Americans' great Civil Rights campaigns and the development of more and more irresistible anti-colonial liberation movements, with the awareness that there was an 'ideological form' common to all the persecution and discrimination founded on 'origins' or 'heredity'. There was at that time a tendency to consider this ideological form as related to pseudo-scientific myths (see the founding documents of UNESCO and the 1950-51 Declarations on Race). Such a representation of racism was evidently strengthened by Nazism's use of biological racial doctrines, eugenics and the social Darwinism that was, moreover, also present in the discourse of other institutional racisms. But today we can see that this explanation was too intellectual. That is why even if the UNESCO doctrine and the human rights philosophy that inspired it were right to insist on the important role of education in the struggle against racism, they were too quick to assume that knowledge, or even the capacity for knowledge, would alone provide the key to solving this problem. They were also too linked to a given historical conjuncture and a certain spirit of civilisation. But, alas, no civilisation has a monopoly on racism. And, besides, as the history of the uses of the word 'race' and related words like caste or lineage in fact demonstrates, racism both preceded biological ideologies and has survived them. The anthropological red thread of which I am making use consists of studying the discriminatory uses and the metamorphoses of the 'genealogical schema', that is, the idea that generation after generation children inherit the 'qualities' – or, conversely, collective 'defects' – of their parents, be they physical, moral or

intellectual… Naturally different societies give such an idea different content, and not all make use of it in an equally violent fashion. A current example of great significance would be the way in which our liberal societies, which preach individualism and equal opportunities, trap the descendants of immigrants within a 'foreign identity' for two or three generations, even when they are societies formed by the mixing of populations and the contributions of immigrants, as is the case in North America and in certain European countries such as France.

Does capitalist globalisation, structurally speaking, tend to reinforce discriminatory uses of the genealogical schema and the reappearance of racism in new forms? Yes, of course, above all in the neoliberal form which is today dominant across the world. After all, this does not only entail, as Immanuel Wallerstein in particular has emphasised, a global hierarchisation of the workforce for the sake of its exploitation, meaning that it is differentiated and divided or even that some groups of workers are set against others: men and women, people from the North or the South, workers from different cultures and nationalities… Rather, it also entails a systematic 'disaffiliation' of individuals (an expression that I in this case owe to Robert Castel) detaching them from their traditional solidarities, or those that had been reconstructed by way of social struggles, and can even lead to deracination and nomadism, pauperisation, the loss of social rights and, more profoundly still, the loss of the social recognition attached to one's work. These phenomena, which are today being exacerbated, are justified by a whole individualist and utilitarian discourse that can very well present itself as humanist: as a reaction they engender a powerful need for community, which can easily become exclusivist and spontaneously linked to the idea of genealogy, whereby individuals seek a guarantee against total abandonment.

Is there a continuity or rupture between the racism of times past, and that which has banned the word 'race'?

There are, necessarily, essential continuities, first of all because ways of thinking and of representation that are rooted in feeling of belonging and the image of community only evolve very slowly; but above all, because – contrary to what my previous remarks might lead you to think – racism is not simply a psychological phenomenon: it always has an institutional racism. It has even occurred to me to say that every racism is a 'state racism': but perhaps that is bending the stick too far in the other direction. When I thought that I was considering the development in France of the ideology of 'national preference' using which the far right have adjusted part of their discourse and their voter base; but all the same I think that every racism is inscribed in institutions and in 'pathological effects', of greater or lesser intensity, connected to their functioning.

Historically, racism has had three great institutional anchors, though they are clearly not completely independent of one another – and when the state takes charge of 'totalising' them and making them 'official', it can lead to terrifying results. The first is what Michel Foucault called the 'biopolitics' of industrial societies, which treats 'human material' as an exploitable resource, which implies selecting, evaluating and eventually eliminating it (what Bertrand Ogilvie called the 'production of the disposable man'). The second is xenophobia, or what I called – in the book I wrote together with [Wallerstein](), [*Race, nation, class. Ambiguous Identities*]() – the 'interior supplement' of nationalism. It is a question of representing a certain 'identity' or a certain biological, cultural or religious 'purity', as a necessary cement for the preservation of national unity and its protection against internal or external enemies (above all, perhaps, the internal ones…). Finally, the third form is the representation of the variety of groups of humans on the Earth's surface in terms of a competition between masters and slaves, or simply between 'incompatible' civilisations. This representation, which was considerably developed by colonialism, has also been reproduced in the post-colonial period, in the world of the new global relations of force. We could call it a sort of 'inverse cosmopolitanism', in opposition to the cosmopolitanism that emerged from the tradition of the Enlightenment. Since what flows from it is no longer mutual recognition and the

consciousness that we belong to one same humanity, but, instead, an intensification of intolerance and falling back on identities.

So I think that none of these great institutional anchoring points of racism has disappeared in today's world, but also that it is very important to analyse how they vary. Capitalism's biopolitics changes, just as do inequalities, population flows, the ruling powers at the global scale and even the functions and tendencies of nationalism, which is itself dependent on national situations. This is why the idea of 'race' can be recomposed, and even become invisible: for example in what has been called 'differentialist' or 'culturalist' racism, and what I myself some years ago called a 'racism without races'.

How can we collectively oppose racism and xenophobia? What forms of anti-racist struggle ought to be given priority?

There is no simple recipe for answering this question. I am tempted to say three things. Firstly, in order to reinforce the idea that this question is of fundamental importance for all our societies, I would say that the development of racism in its various forms is inversely proportional to the vitality of democratic citizenship. That is why I insist so much on the institutional dimension. Citizenship is not automatically democratic, egalitarian or the synonym of equal freedom, even if the Western tradition (and no doubt also others) does draw a symbolic link between the idea of the common good and that of the participation of 'anyone and everyone' in public affairs, as Jacques Rancière has put it. There is a constant oscillation in the rise and fall of discrimination: one should neither believe in guaranteed progress nor become fatalist about it. Next, the anti-racist struggle necessarily has an ethical as much as a political dimension: it is not very useful to repeat commonplaces like 'all of us are racists' but it is important to emphasise that if the struggle is a collective one then it also progresses by way of a transformation of our own selves, and thus also through an effort to imagine other social relations, other figures of the Other, and building a new identity for ourselves. The 'genealogical question' is a very complicated one, but it is crucial, here: what does it mean to belong to a tradition, a culture or a group in a way that is not exclusive, and thus does not exclude others? What does it mean to be oneself?

To finish, I would say that the anti-racist struggle cannot progress simply by way of humanist preaching, whether that be secular or religious: we need a political struggle to transform the structures that produce the conditions for racism and 'make use of them' for their own reproduction – meaning capitalism, nationalism, imperialism and their latest avatars. In this sense, the anti-racist struggle does not necessarily mean constantly having the word 'racism' on our lips; it is a struggle for social welfare, equal rights, education, and moral and religious tolerance.

However, these direct and indirect efforts must be inscribed within a horizon that allows us to explain their meaning. There is just one word for this: I for my part very much cling onto the idea of 'cosmopolitanism', because racism in the era of globalisation could be described as an 'inverse cosmopolitanism', to reuse the expression I have just mentioned. We must try to reverse this reversal, not only by administrative measures or state cultural policies, but from below, through practices of resistance and solidarity, which are also local practices, because 'the whole world' is today present in every neighbourhood and, in a certain sense comes to seek us out in our own homes. We can then speak of a practical cosmopolitanism, a cosmopolitanism from below in our neighbourhoods and daily lives, which can become the substance of a rebuilt citizenship.

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