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

Reflections on Racism and Public Policy

Rodolfo Stavenhagen

UNRISD
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UNRISD, Palais des Nations
1211 Geneva 10, Switzerland

Tel: (41 22) 9173020
Fax: (41 22) 9170650
E-mail: info@unrisd.org
Web: http://www.unrisd.org

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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.[1] 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

[1] 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.[2] 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.[3]

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.[4] 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.[5]

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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[2] Barkan (1992)

[3] "Article 2. Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in thisDeclaration, 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."

[4] 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."

[5] 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?[6]

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

[6] 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].[7]

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.[8]

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

[7] ICIHI (1987), Anaya (1996).
[8] 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.[9]

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

[9] The Human Development Report is published annually by the United Nations Development Program

inequalities.[10] 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?[11] 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.[12]

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