*Questioning "Race"**

Aníbal Quijano

The idea of "race" is surely the most efficient instrument of social domination produced in the last 500 years. Dating from the very beginning of the formation of the Americas and of capitalism (at the turn of the 16th century), in the ensuing centuries it was imposed on the population of the whole planet as an aspect of European colonial domination.[1]

Imposed as the basic criterion for social classification of the entire world's population, it was taken as the principal determinant of the world's new social and geocultural identities: on the one hand, "Indian," "black," "Asiatic" (earlier, "yellow" or "olive-skinned"), "white," and "mestizo"; on the other, "America," "Europe," "Africa," "Asia," and "Oceania." On its basis was constituted the Eurocentering of capitalist world power and the consequent global distribution of labor and trade. Also on its basis arose the various specific configurations of power, with their crucial implications for democratization and for the formation of modern nation-states.

In this way, "race," a phenomenon and an outcome of modern colonial domination, came to pervade every sphere of global capitalist power. Coloniality thus became the cornerstone of a Eurocentered world.[2] This coloniality of power has proved to be more profound

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1. On the invention of the idea of "race" and its background, see Aníbal Quijano: "'Raza', 'etnia', 'nación', cuestiones abiertas," in Roland Forgues, ed., *José Carlos Mariátegui y Europa: La Otra Cara del Descubrimiento* (Lima: Ed. Amauta, 1992). Also, Aníbal Quijano & Immanuel Wallerstein, "Americanity as a concept or the Americas in the modern world system," *International Journal of Social Sciences*, No. 134 (Paris: UNESCO, 1992).
2. On the coloniality of power and on the Eurocentered and colonial/modern pattern of world capitalism, see my articles, "Coloniality of power, Eurocentrism and Latin America," *Nepantla: Views from South*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (2000), 533–581; "Coloniality and modernity/rationality," in Goran Therborn, ed., *Globalizations and Modernities*

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and more lasting than the colonialism in which it was engendered and which it helped to impose globally.[3]

"Racism" and "race"

"Racism" in daily social relations is not, to be sure, the only manifestation of the coloniality of power, but it is certainly the most obvious and the most omnipresent. For this reason, it has remained the principal arena of conflict. As an ideology, it even prompted attempts, in the mid-19th century, to build on its basis a whole scientific theory.[4] This in turn provided the rationale, almost a century later, for the National Socialist (Nazi) project of German world domination.

The defeat of this project in World War II contributed to the delegitimation of racism – at least as a formal and explicit ideology – for a large part of the world's population. But the social practice of racism nonetheless remained globally pervasive, and in some countries, like South Africa, the ideology and practice of social domination became more intensely and explicitly racist. Still, even in these countries racist ideology has had to concede something – mainly because of struggles on the part of its victims, but also because of worldwide condemnation – to the point of allowing "black" elected leaders to take office. And in countries like Peru, the practice of racial discrimination must now be disguised – often if not always successfully – behind legal formulas referring to differences in education and income which in this country are themselves one of the clearest consequences of racist social relations.[5]

What is really noteworthy, however, is that for the overwhelming majority of the world's population, including opponents and victims of racism, "race" is not just an idea but exists as part of "nature," that is, as part of the "natural" materiality of individuals (and not only of the

(Uppsala, Sweden: FRN, 1999); and "Colonialidad del poder y clasificación social," *Journal of World-Systems Research*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2000), 342–388, Special Issue, Giovanni Arrighi and Walter L Goldfrank, eds. (www.jwsr.ucr.edu).

3. The concept of coloniality of power was introduced in my work "Colonialidad y modernidad/racionalidad," originally published in *Perú Indígena*, Vol. 13, No. 29 (1992) and later in other Latin American journals (English version in Therborn, *Globalizations and Modernities*, note 2). See also Quijano & Wallerstein, "Americanity," note 1. On the current debate, see, among many others, Walter Mignolo, "Diferencia colonial y razón postoccidental," *Anuario Mariateguiano*, No. 10 (1998).
4. Artur de Gobineau, *Essais sur l'inegalité des races humaines* (Paris: 1853–1857).
5. On the widespread incidence of racist attitudes in Peru, see the results of a survey of university students of metropolitan Lima: Ramón León, *El País de los Extraños* (Lima: Fondo Editorial de la Universidad Ricardo Palma, 1998).

materiality of the social relations of power). In this sense it has remained virtually unquestioned since it first appeared.

In societies founded on the basis of colonial power relations, the victims fight for equality between the "races." Societies lacking such origins (at least in any direct form) may assert that relations between the "races" should be democratic, even if they are not exactly relations among equals. But if we examine the way the issue has been posed, including in countries like the USA or South Africa where the problem has been most intense, only exceptionally and very recently do we find scholars who have questioned not just racism but the very idea of "race."[6]

There is thus a profound, tenacious, and virtually universal assumption that "race" is a phenomenon of human biology which has necessary implications for the natural history of the species and hence for the history of power relations among people. This is surely what accounts for the exceptional efficiency of this modern instrument of social domination. Nonetheless, what we are dealing with here is a blatantly ideological construct, which has literally nothing to do with anything in the biological structure of the human species, and everything to do – by contrast – with the history of the power relations of Eurocentered colonial/modern global capitalism. I want to reflect here on the issues raised by this peculiar connection between real social relations and their intersubjective dimension.

Sex/"gender" and "color"/"race"?

The current crisis of the global power structure – perhaps the most profound that it has faced in its 500 years – deeply affects the way the world's population is classified socially. This classification has reflected, in various ways, all the forms of social domination and all the forms of exploitation of labor. But on a world scale its central axis

6. In Latin America, many prefer to think that there is no racism because we are all "mestizos" or because, as in Brazil, the official ideology is one of "racial democracy." A growing number of Latin Americans who have resided for a time in the USA – including students of the social sciences – return home as converts to the religion of *color consciousness*, of which they have no doubt been victims. They have become racists in spite of themselves. That is, they are convinced that "race," being defined by "color," is a natural phenomenon, and that only "racism" – not race itself – is a question of power. In some cases, this leads to confusion among categories in the debate on cultural conflict and racist ideologies, and they are drawn into making extremely childish arguments. In Peru, a bizarre example is that of Marisol de la Cadena, "El racismo silencioso y la superioridad de los intelectuales en el Perú," *Socialismo y Participación*, No. 83 (September 1998).

has been – and, although in decline, continues to be – the link between the commodification of labor power and the stratification of the world's population on the basis of "race" and "gender."[7]

This pattern of social classification has been quite durable. But the rejection of "racial" hierarchy and the resistance to ranking by "gender" have confronted it with a fundamental challenge. Since the early 1970s, the process of commodification of individual labor power appears to be declining in the technologically upper levels of the capitalist structure of accumulation, while it expands only at the lower levels in unstable and precarious ways.[8] Massive world unemployment and underemployment are the obvious consequences. In this new historical context, non-wage forms of exploitation (slavery, serfdom, reciprocity) are being revived,[9] having never completely died out during the last five centuries of capitalist hegemony. So the relationships between capital and non-capital, and between labor and capital are changing. The social re-classification of the world population is a necessary implications of those tendencies. And "race" and "gender" are in the process of redefining their places and roles in global power relations. The growing resistance to discrimination on the basis of "gender" and "race" is one of the dimensions of the crisis.

The capitalist world is, of course, historically and structurally heterogeneous. This means that the crisis in the capitalist pattern of social classification has distinct rhythms and timetables in each part of that world. Resistance by the victims of racism advances in some regions while in others it finds not only less space but, in some cases,

7. Relations of domination grounded in sexual differences are older than the current hegemonic colonial/modern pattern of power. But this deepened them by linking them with "race" relations and by viewing both sets of relations in Eurocentric terms. The "racial" classification of the world population redefined the place of the "gender" in power relations, placing women of dominant "races" above those of dominated "races," but also above the males of the dominated "races." This led to a strengthening of both forms of domination, but above all, of that based on "race."
8. See my "El trabajo en el umbral del siglo XXI," in *Pensée sociale critique pour le XXI siècle: Mélanges en l'honneur de Samir Amin*, Bernard Founou-Tchuigoua, Sams Dine & Amady A. Dieng, comps (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003), 131–149.
9. According to UN figures, already before the end of the last century, there were more than 200 million workers in slavery worldwide. See the interview of Brazilian anthropologist Jose de Souza Martins in *Estudos Avançados*, No. 31 (São Paulo: Universidad de São Paulo, Instituto de Estudos Avançados, 1997). This is probably a conservative estimate, as it does not include the recent rapid expansion of slavery in the Amazon Basin. In March 2004, President Lula issued a decree prohibiting slavery in the Brazilian Fazendas (Haciendas), but in the conflict between landowners and landless peasants organized in the Movemento dos Sem Terra (MST), hundreds of slave workers are discovered in those fazendas almost every day.

open attempts at racism's re-legitimation. Such a juxtaposition of resistance to racism with its re-legitimation can be seen, for example, in the case of Peru under Fujimorism.[10] But this very juxtaposition at the same time makes the crisis all the more evident. As a result, we finally see called into question not just "racism" but the very idea of "race." Still, however, even the minority who are moving in this direction find it difficult to shed the old mental chains of the coloniality of power.

Thus, the feminist movement and the debate on the question of "gender" have led increasing numbers of people to admit that "gender" is a mental construct grounded in sexual differences, which expresses patriarchal relations of domination and serves to legitimate them. And some now suggest, analogously, that we should also think of "race" as a mental construct – based in this case on skin color. Thus "color" would be to "race" as sex is to "gender."

But the two links are not at all equivalent. In the first place, sex and sexual differences are real; they are a subsystem within the overall system known as the human organism – comparable to blood circulation, respiration, digestion, etc. That is, they are part of the biological dimension of the whole person.[11] Moreover, because of this, they entail differences in biological behavior between people of different sexes. Third, this differentiated biological behavior is linked above all to a vital matter: the reproduction of the species. One of the sexes fertilizes, and the other ovulates, and can conceive, gestate, give birth, and nurse the newborn.

In sum, sexual difference entails distinct biological roles and behaviors. And although this in no way exhausts – let alone legitimates – the category of "gender," it at least shows that the intersubjective construct of "gender" has a biological point of departure.

No such thing can be said of the link between "color" and "race." First of all, the whole question of using the word "color" to refer to personal traits has to be thrown wide open. The very idea of "color" in this context is a mental construct. If one speaks of political colors ("red,"

10. Shortly before Fujimori fell from power, TV reporters documented open racial/ethnic discrimination in certain nightclubs. At first they were officially penalized, but later the Supreme Court ruled that they had a legal right to discriminate!

11. It is essential to bear in mind that unless one accepts Cartesian radical dualism, the "biological" or "corporal" is just one dimension of the person, who must be viewed as an organism that knows, dreams, thinks, loves, enjoys, suffers, etc., and that all these activities occur *with and in the body*. So "body" and "biology," if implying not difference within our organism but radical separation from "reason" and "spirit," are only categories of Cartesian radical dualism as one of the founding myths of the Eurocentrist perspective of knowledge.

"white," "green"), everyone is presumably disposed to recognize this as a metaphor. But strangely enough, this is not the case when one says that someone is of the "white," "black," "red," or "yellow" "*race*"! And, more strangely still, few stop to consider that to describe a person's actual skin color by one of these labels requires a total distortion of vision – or else a kind of stupidity or, at best, a prejudice.

The history of the "color" construct in social relations has yet to be written. Nonetheless, there are ample historical grounds for affirming that the association of "race" with "color" is belated and tortuous.[12] Color antedates the idea of race; it did not originally have any "racial" connotation. The first "race" was the "Indians," and there is nothing in the historical record to suggest that the category of "Indian" was associated with skin color.

The idea of "race" was born with "America"; it originally referred to the differences between "Indians" and their conquerors (principally Castilian).[13] The first conquered peoples to whom future Europeans applied the idea of "color" are not, however, the "Indians." They are the slaves who were kidnapped and sold from the coasts of what is now known as Africa, and whom they called "blacks [*Negroes*]." But, surprising as this may now seem, Africans were not the first peoples to whom the idea of "race" was applied – even though the future Europeans were acquainted with them long before they arrived on the coasts of the future America.

During the Conquest, the Iberians – Portuguese and Castilian – used the term "black," a color, as shown in the documents of that period. But the Iberians of that time did not yet identify themselves as "white." This "color" was not constructed until the 18th century, among the Anglo-Americans, as they institutionalized the slave status of Africans in North America and the Antilles. Here, obviously, "white" is the constructed identity of the dominators, counterposed to "black" ("Negro" or "nigger"), the identity of the dominated, as "racial" classification is already clearly consolidated and "naturalized" for all the colonizers and even, perhaps, among some of the colonized.

Underlying this historical reality is the fact that if "color" were to "race" as sex is to "gender," then "color" would necessarily have something to do with the biology or the biologically differentiated behavior of some part of the organism. However, there is no sign or evidence

12. See the references in my "Coloniality of power, Eurocentrism and Latin America," note 2.
13. See Quijano, "'Raza', 'etnia', 'nación'," note 1.

that any of the subsystems or apparatuses of the human organism (genital or sexual, circulatory, respiratory, glandular, etc.) varies in its nature, configuration, structure, function, or role in accordance with such traits as skin color, shape of eyes, or texture of hair.[14]

To be sure, external bodily traits such as shape, size, skin color, etc. are inscribed in each person's genetic code. In this specific sense we can speak of biological phenomena. But none of this has anything to do with the biological configuration of the organism or with the functions and behaviors or roles of the whole or of any of its parts.

Finally, and in the context of everything we have said, if "color" were to "race" as sex is to "gender," then on what basis could certain "colors" be seen as "superior" to others? In the patriarchal relation between man and woman, "superiority" is attributed to one of the "genders" and not to a particular sex as such – or, if so, only by extension from the construction of "gender." Sex is not a construct in the way that gender is.

It is time to recognize that "color" is to "race" only as one construct is to another. In fact, "color" is a belated and euphemistic way of saying "race" – a usage that did not become worldwide until the end of the 19th century.

The new "western" dualism and "racism"

At the very beginnings of American history, there took root the idea that there are biological differences within the world's population that are decisively linked to the capacity for mental and cultural development. This was the central issue in the famous Valladolid debate, over whether or not "Indians" were human. The extreme position, that of Ginés de Sepúlveda, who claimed that they could not be fully human, was rejected in the papal Bull of 1513. But the idea of basic biological differences among humans was never questioned. And the prolonged colonial practice of domination/exploitation based on that assumption legitimated the idea permanently. Ever since that time, the old notions of superiority/inferiority implicit in every relationship of domination were considered to be grounded in nature; they were "naturalized" for all subsequent history.

This was certainly the initial moment of what has constituted, since the 17th century, the foundational myth of modernity, namely, the idea of an original state of nature and of a process of historical development

14. On these questions, see Jonathan Marks, *Human Biodiversity. Genes, Race and History* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1994).

going from the "primitive" (the closest to "nature," which of course included above all the "blacks" but also the "Indians") to the most "civilized" (which of course was Europe), with the "Orient" (India, China) in between.[15]

The link between this view of history and the idea of "race" was no doubt obvious at that time from the European perspective. It was implicit in the ideology and practice of colonial domination of the Americas, and was reinforced and consolidated through the global expansion of European colonialism. But it was not until the mid-19th century, with Gobineau, that this link began to be articulated theoretically.

This time-lapse was not accidental; nor was it without consequences in terms of the coloniality of power. On the basis of "America," the Atlantic basin became the new central axis of world trade during the 16th century. The peoples and the dominant groups that controlled this axis soon came to comprise a new historical region, and thus "Europe" was constituted as a new geocultural identity and as the hegemonic center of nascent global capitalism. This position made it possible for the Europeans, especially those of Western Europe, to impose the idea of "race" as the basis of the worldwide division of labor and of trade, and also in the social and geocultural classification of the world population.

It was in this framework that the pattern of global capitalist power and its corresponding intersubjective experience took shape over the next three centuries. Europe's position as the hegemonic center of the modern capitalist world-system[16] gave it at the same time full hegemony in the intellectual elaboration of that whole vast historical experience – from the mid-17th century on – and gave it the opportunity to mythologize its own supposedly self-made achievement.

Modernity, as a pattern of social, material, and subjective experience, expressed the essential character of this new global power. But its rationality reflected its European roots. That is, it expressed the Eurocentric view of the totality of the colonial/modern capitalist world.

A core aspect of this Eurocentric perspective was the adoption of a new dualism – a new version of the old dualism – as one of the bases of its worldview: the radical separation (not just differentiation) of subject/reason/soul/spirit/mind from object/body – reflecting the

15. It is extremely revealing that the only cultural category counterposed to "Occident" was "Orient." "Indians" and especially "blacks" are thus completely missing from the Eurocentric map of human culture.
16. Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System*, three volumes (New York: Academic Press, 1974–1989).

final triumph of Cartesianism over alternative approaches (principally, that of Spinoza).[17]

Virtually all known "civilizations" differentiate between "spirit" (soul, mind) and "body." The dualist view of the dimensions of the human organism is thus ancient. But in all earlier cases the two dimensions are always co-present, co-acting, never separated. Descartes is the first to perceive "body" strictly as an "object," radically separated from the activity of "reason," which is the condition of the "subject." According to Descartes, "reason" is divine, "body," although created by God, is not divine but is part of "nature." Within this framework, both categories are mystified. We confront a new and radical dualism. It is a secularization of the long evolving of medieval Christian theology that separated "soul" and "body," precisely in the same terms. And this is what dominates all Eurocentric thought up to our own day.[18]

Without taking into account this new dualism, it is not possible to understand the Eurocentric elaboration of the ideas of "gender" and "race." Both forms of domination are older than Cartesianism, but the latter is the point of departure for their systematic elaboration. In the cognitive perspective grounded in Cartesian radical dualism, "body" is "nature," ergo "sex." The role of woman, of the "feminine gender," is thus more closely linked to "sex," to "the body." This makes woman an "inferior gender." "Race," for its part, is also a "natural" phenomenon, and some "races" are closer to "nature" than others and are therefore "inferior" to those which have managed to distance themselves as much as possible from the state of nature.

Against this backdrop, we can insist that without rejecting the shackles of the Eurocentric worldview – i.e. of the dualism between "body" and non-"body" – we will not get very far in the struggle to free ourselves decisively from the idea of "race" and of "racism," nor from that other form of the coloniality of power, the relations of domination between "genders." The decolonization of power, in whatever frame of reference, signifies from the outset the decolonization of all dimensions of consciousness. "Race" and "racism" are situated, more than any other element of modern capitalist power relations, at this decisive juncture.

Translated by Victor Wallis

17. This is clearly the position established in René Decartes, *Discours de la Méthode* (1637) and *Traité des passions de l'âme* (1650). A good discussion of this rupture is Paul Bousquier, *Le Corps, cet inconnu* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997). See also Henri Michel, *Philosophie et phenomenologie: Le Corps* (Paris: PUF, 1965).
18. On these questions, see my article, "Coloniality of power and its institutions," Symposium on Coloniality of Power and Its Spaces, Binghamton University, April 1999 (published text forthcoming).

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