

Race and racism in France

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The Musée de l'Homme in Paris, has chosen for his first big temporary exhibition after re-opening in October 2015, to address the question of racism. The exhibition is entitled: *Us and them – from prejudices to racism* (<http://nousestlesautres.museedelhomme.fr/en>). I am the scientific commissioner with my colleague Carole Reynaud-Paligot, an historian. What is racism? Why does it exist? Are all humans racist?

In recent years, social psychologists, geneticists and researchers in the humanities and social sciences have explored issues relating to alterity and racism. This exhibition draws on their research and more, from France and throughout the world to produce an original analysis of the phenomena of racialization, both in the past and today, which emphasizes not only the widely known facts but also how these phenomena were constructed.

Before answering the questions raised by Alan Goodman, it is important to situate racism in France. French racism is not limited to biological-racism i.e. racism based on the idea of races defined by biological criteria. Indeed, biological-racism is one of the different forms of racisms that exist. This goes back at least to XXth century history: after the second world war, Anglo-Saxon countries (primarily the UK and USA) focused on the question of discriminations in relation to skin color, while in France anti-racism was mostly taken care of by different associations who have been created to fight anti-Semitism (see the work of Bleich, 2003). So that when we talk about racism, it is not limited to biological-racism, but includes racisms based on culture or religion that are also “essentialized”.

Therefore we have chosen the following definition for racism: “being racist is to regard the differences between individuals, be they physical, cultural or moral, as hereditary, immutable and “natural”. Racism establishes a hierarchy of categories of human beings, and this can lead to practices ranging from discrimination through to extermination.” This definition encompasses different form of racisms either based on a biological or a cultural criterion. Our definition is based on three key components: categorization, hierarchization and essentialization.

Categorization is a mental operation that simplifies the world. People classify individuals based on their appearance, their religion, their geographical origin, etc. The criteria used to differentiate people vary according to the particular society and period. Such “categories” are neither natural nor fixed. Hierarchization involves a value judgment based on regarding one group or category of individuals as being superior or inferior to another. Essentialization is a process by which individuals are reduced to moral characteristics, intellectual faculties or psychological traits alleged to be an immutable and inherited feature of that particular group.

Having presented the stage for France, the following directly address the questions posed by Alan Goodman.

How is race - both the concept and the word itself - used in science today?

As researchers working in the fields of Anthropological Genetics, we do not use the term

race. We use the term population. To our point of view, population genetics studies have demonstrated that races are not appropriate to describe the genetic diversity. Contrary to races in domesticated animals where there is selection for a phenotype and no (or controlled) migration between groups, such processes do not exist in Human. There have always been migrations among different human groups, so that the level of population genetic differentiation is low and it follows a geographical gradient. On this subject we identified two paradoxes for the public that need to be explained: if there is such a low level of population genetic differentiation why are there such phenotypic differences among individuals?

Since the pattern of genetic diversity is geographically continuous what is the meaning of the groups that we are able to detect with clustering approaches? Put it another way: can genetics be used to categorize human beings?

We also feel that it is important to show to the public what our DNA says about us. Modern genetics is able to explain certain variations in physical characteristics like skin color, eyes color or other phenotypic features. However, it tells us little or nothing about the psychological traits that characterize individuals like generosity or egoism.

How is race used in legal documents and legal proceedings?

Freedom of thought is a fundamental right in France. To guarantee it, prior censorship is forbidden by law. The law does, however, criminalize racist and anti-Semitic remarks constituting an abuse of free speech, and there are severe penalties should such remarks be made in public.

The Law on the Freedom of the Press of 29 July 1881, amended in 1972, defines several offences such as insult, defamation, incitement to defamation, hatred or racist violence, and denying war crimes and crimes against humanity.

The Law of 13 July 1990 made it an offence to question the existence of crimes against humanity.

In the case of acts, rather than simply words, French criminal law punishes racism or anti-Semitism when these ideologies incite people to

commit criminal acts. Racist or anti-Semitic factors are considered an aggravating circumstance in these crimes. Discrimination and incitement to discrimination are also violations of the law.

The term race is mentioned in the first article of the French constitution of 4 October 1958:

Article I: France shall be an indivisible, secular, democratic and social Republic. It shall ensure the equality of all citizens before the law, without distinction of origin, race or religion. It shall respect all beliefs. It shall be organized on a decentralized basis.

Statutes shall promote equal access by women and men to elective offices and posts as well as to professional and social positions.

It has been debated to withdraw the word "race" from the constitution in 2013 and in 2015 but this change has not been voted.

What are the current political and cultural points of tension, or "hot spots," with regard to race and racism?

Although genetic can tell us about the diversity of our species, and can remind us that the level of genetic differentiation among populations in our species is low, Racism, or anti-racism, is based on the ethical or ideological value certain people ascribe to this genetic diversity. Whereas racism assumes that these differences form the basis for a hierarchy, it makes no scientific sense to attribute a moral value to these differences.

Regarding the situation in France, the French state has stepped up its efforts to combat racism since the 1970s. Although social scientists have shown that diversity is generally tolerated by the majority population, and that second-generation immigrants have integrated well, certain minority groups still suffer noticeably from unequal treatment and discrimination.

Research in the social sciences has established a picture of racist behaviour in French society.

We focus on three points.

- 1) Integration or communitarianism. A recent study that followed 22000 individuals who

have at least one parent that is an immigrant describes several statistics on this question (Trajectoires et Origines (TeO) survey, 2015). People's choice of partner is an indicator of how much openness there is between different groups – from the majority population towards minorities, and minorities towards each other and towards the majority. The number of mixed marriages becomes noteworthy in the second generation, although this varies according to origin, religion and sex. Nearly two in three (65%) of second-generation immigrants, both men and women, have formed couples with a person from the majority population. For comparison, 17% of Afro-American formed a couple with individual from the demographic-majoritarian population in the US. This average low level of communitarianism does not exclude that it can exist in some places. Regarding identity, second-generation immigrants of all origins feel an even stronger sense of belonging in France. Indeed, 93% of second-generation immigrants feel French, and there is no contradiction between French national identity and their attachment to their parents' country of origin, but rather the emergence of multiple identities.

- 2) Discrimination: despite this high level of social fluidity among different categories based on geographical origin, discrimination according to geographical origin exists in France. As an example, discrimination for work has been extensively studied. Indeed comparing answer to job application based on individual patronym, it has been shown that individuals with a patronym of Maghreb origin has 3.6 fold reduced chance to receive a positive answer to his application.
- 3) Every year the National Consultative Commission on Human Rights (CNCDH) gives a report on the level of tolerance and racism in France according to different categories. Globally it shows an increase in the level of tolerance in France despite the several suicide attacks that occurred recently. The category that receives the highest level of tolerance is Jews, followed by black-people, Magrhebin,

Muslim and Roma. Indeed in France the category that is the least tolerated and that is the most victim of racism are Romas. The Level of anti-Roma racism is high.

Although these statistics show a good level of social integration, racism makes often the headlines and political parties based on national identity are growing, all this is giving the impression that racism rises in society, in contradiction with these studies. There are several non exclusive explanations. It could be that racism is now more audible so that extremism feels free to express their feelings; racism can be strong but only in a minority of people and last but not the least, it could be that the French society is in the "Tocqueville paradox" regarding racism: the closer you get to your "perfect society" in this case a society without racism, the less you tolerate any deviation from this goal..

Has progress been made in improving the study and understanding of human variation?

I can cite several progressive efforts that have been made in the last 10-20 years in genetics. These include the following.

- Our species has a low level of genetic diversity: on average two humans differ by 0.1% of their DNA (insertion/deletion excluded)
- the level of genetic diversity is evaluated at 5% among different human populations. This is to be compared with a level of 30% among Gorilla and among Pongo, 25% among Chimps. This level in non-human Primate is high enough to define sub-species.
- We now know that the categories of skin color are the consequences of a variation in less than 10 genes; ie in a very small part of our genome.
- Consequently, studies in Afro-American show that the correlation between skin-color and % of the genome of African origin is not 100% so that people who have a dark skin color phenotype have on average

a higher % of gene pool from Africa, but individuals who have a dark skin can also have a low level of gene pool from Africa. This means that skin color in Afro-American is a bad predictor of % of African gene pool, it is not a predictor good enough to be used as a proxy in ethnic-medicine

- Ancient DNA have proven what was expected: first Europeans that entered the continent after out of Africa were dark skin individuals

I want also to stress that other scientific discipline have made progresses in improving understanding of racism. This is especially the case of social psychology.

Conclusion

The take home message from our exhibition is that we should try to do our best to push forward the concept of “equality in diversity”.

Regarding the French government, it has made the fight against Racism one of his priority and has created an agency called DILCRAH (Délégation Interministérielle à la lutte contre le racisme, l'antisémitisme et la haine anti-LGBT) in 2012.

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