



## THE FALLACY OF COLORISM

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"What black women would be interested in, I think, is a consciously heightened awareness on the part of light black women that they are capable, often quite unconsciously, of inflicting pain upon them; and that unless the question of Colorism - in my definition, prejudicial or preferential treatment of same race people based solely on their color - is addressed in our communities and definitely in our black "sisterhoods" we cannot, as a people, progress. For colorism, like colonialism, sexism, and racism, impedes us" (Walker, 1983, p.291).

**A**s concepts travel through time and place they are often subject to adaptation, erosion, replacement, or semantic transformation. Such modifications generally reflect historical, political, and eventual epistemological revisions and their study can disclose the nature of power relations behind them, either from an ideological, political, or scientific standpoint. History has however demonstrated that almost inevitably these areas are intimately linked in patterns of interaction that determine or deter the so-called progress of humanity.

In Western social scientific scholarship this process is the basis of what Thomas Kuhn defines as paradigmatic shifts (Kuhn, 1962) as new scientific findings lead to new theories to



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explain social interactions. However, there are instances in which the shift is a mere cosmetic operation that does not really translate into the dismissal of the concept.

Unlike natural and hard sciences, where replacement of an obsolete concept denotes scientific and epistemological development, in social sciences concepts have a long-standing life regardless of how destructive its effects have proven to be on human beings and societies. In fact, the ultimate goal and object of social sciences under the Western epistemological framework is not geared to social change or the improvement of quality in human relationships but the establishment of patterns and laws of social interaction. Therefore, it is normative rather than transformative in its genesis.

This is especially the case of social constructs within ideologies of hegemony with their regulatory function in determining which are and are not acceptable human social values and behaviors, categorized and hierarchized for the purpose of defining systems of power and privilege, inclusion and exclusion.

### Racism

Racism is eventually one of the most powerful such constructs, simultaneously charged and elusive. For this reason a most critical analysis is required both of the concept itself and of its cognates, namely 'colorism', a term much *en vogue* in the academic discourse and public debate today. Used by Alice Walker in 1983 to address color hierarchies among black women, today it permeates and legitimates social and governmental policies in areas, countries, and nations subjected to colonial and imperial forms of disruption while its emphasis on in-group relations creates the illusion that we are in the presence of a different phenomenon totally alien to the original disruptive systems of the Western domination of the past over five hundred years. We can find extreme examples of it in the United States but also



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in Brazil, South Africa, and India. We even find it in modern day Israel, historically the most inconceivably potential racist nation, where the most abominable racist foundations consistent with every imperialistic ideology and policy are prompting the ethnic cleansing and genocide of the Palestinian people, in an escalating spiral of violence since the very moment of the creation of the state of Israel.

While some authors claim that the term racism was coined in 20<sup>th</sup> century Germany amidst the growing persecution of the Jewish people (Rattansi, 2007), hatred, persecution, enslavement, and oppression of peoples based on dark shades of skin color goes much further back in time.

In his study *Social Relations in the Portuguese Colonial Empire (1415-1825)* Charles Boxer emphasizes that there is no way a race can systematically enslave members of another race for over three centuries without developing a conscious or unconscious sense of racial superiority (Fonseca, 2010, pp. 58-59).

In fact, it is in the history of the Crusaders and the Reconquista of the Iberian Peninsula, Portuguese and Spanish Inquisition<sup>1</sup>, and subsequent expansionist thrust over African and the Americas that we have to look for the germs of racial prejudice as a condition of inferiority that justified enslavement with which Portugal and Spain entered the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The political, theological, and legal debates about the existence and justification of slavery of the late 13<sup>th</sup> century in Cluny and Santiago de Compostela; and the legal and

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<sup>1</sup> In Portugal and Spain, after Pope's permission to operate inquisitorial courts both at home and over their respective empires in America, Asia, and Africa, Inquisition, an ecclesiastical court whose goal was to combat heresy, was especially focused on the forced conversion of Moors and Jews, and/or their persecution and subjugation, expulsion, and annihilation in order to ensure the cohesion of the newly created countries and their survival as unified political units upon the conquest of the Moorish kingdoms in the Iberian Peninsula.



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theological debates of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century<sup>2</sup> involving Rome, Lisbon, and Madrid are testimonies of deep transformations in thought and practice that legitimized the enslavement of indigenous populations and the trade of enslaved Africans.

In ancient Rome, like during the European Middle Ages, as well as in the African continent slavery was legal and regulated by laws. Slaves were captives of war; those who had been kidnapped, bought, inherited, or by any other means - including the payment of a debt - made the property of a master, and kept in his total dependence. This could be a condition of oppression and humiliation but skin color was not the determinant factor for enslavement. A significant change was introduced during the vast period of religious warfare between Christians and Muslims when Western European kings, namely of the Iberian Peninsula, and the Crusaders supported by the Roman Catholic Church started a Holy War against the Moors, viewed as the *infidels*. Besides oppression and humiliation, a third and decisive condition became meanwhile necessary to legitimize enslavement: the recognition of some sort of inferiority or negative characteristic that could be attributed to someone in order to justify his/her oppression. Hence, a whole set of justifications was created that could run from differences in religion or religious practice to political infidelity. The identification of the Moors, dark skin peoples from North Africa, as the infidels that it was necessary to expel and eradicate played a major role in the 'new' attributes and justifications for their enslavement. Since the objectives of the Portuguese and Spanish expansionism in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries required precisely the acquisition of enslaved Africans or the enslavement of Amerindian populations, a condition of inferiority, based on the dark skin color and physical features of

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<sup>2</sup> See the debates between Dominican priest Bartolome de las Casas in his *Memorial de Remedios para as Indias*; the Valladolid controversy with Carlos V, king of Spain; debates on "just war" involving Jesuit priest Manuel da Nóbrega; Dominican priest, Fernão de Oliveira' s *Arte da Guerra e do Mar*; Bartolomeu dos Remédios also Dominican priest and Portuguese king D. Sebastião.



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the indigenous populations of Africa and the Americas, defined as the infidels, was established and supported by both religious and legal documents to justify their enslavement (Monteiro-Ferreira, 2013).

Also, by late 16<sup>th</sup> century, the influence of the Inquisition in Portugal and Spain, originally focusing on religious practices, began to expand this ideology of superior religious orientation that permeated almost all aspects of the Iberian society and the political, cultural, and social thought and action of the time. At the same time notions of race (*raça* in Portuguese and *raza* in Spanish)<sup>3</sup>, denoting family lineage attuned to a growing sense of civilization and superiority "for the term had come to signify continuity over generations in aristocratic and royal families" (Rattansi, p. 23, 2007) and started to gain currency. The self-defined civilized white European race had created moral and legal justifications for the enslavement and trade of enslaved dark skinned peoples.

Taken together with the newly created definitions of what was a "just war" as well as who were to be considered true and civilized "human beings", Crusades, Reconquista, and Inquisition hand-in-hand with the exponential development of the European slave trade to Europe and the so-called New World, changed the political, economic, and ideological world order with which the West moved into the modern age (Monteiro-Ferreira, 2014).

It is in the foundation of nations in South, Central, and North America (especially Brazil and the U.S.A. eventually the two largest slave economies born with Modernity) rather than in Europe, that historians can find the most blatant examples of discrimination based on skin color and physical features. In fact, these two *slavocracies* structured their nations upon

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<sup>3</sup> Terms that interpreted to mean common descent may have traveled to the Iberian Peninsula derived from the Arabic Word "ras" where they gained currency by the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century. (Solomos and Back, 2000).



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moral and legal justifications established by the 'scientific' foundations of white racial superiority of the European Enlightenment.

American colonization was part of a process of European imperialism, which in North America, like in Africa, and Central and South America took the form of oppression, genocide, and slavery. The new economic order and an extensive capitalist economy that emerged around the Atlantic platform based on a system of enslaved free labor was only possible because it was "supported by forms of racial exploitation, oppression, and legal and *de facto* segregation" (Feagin, 2006, p. 11)

Mid-twentieth century Nazi-German persecutions and massive extermination of Jewish people are but one of the aspects or after-effects of previous discriminatory ideology based on the idea of a hierarchy of races that sustained and infused colonial and imperial practices of Enlightened Europe. It was the accepted norm practiced overseas for over 300 years targeting indigenous populations that had been deemed barbarian, uncivilized, a-historical, and culturally primitive. It was also the undisputed logic and legal foundation of many provisions in the American Constitution designed to support and maintain white domination, power and privilege: protection of the slave trade, enslavement, and fugitive slave acts (Bell, 1992; Feagin, 2006).

The "colonizer's model of the world"<sup>4</sup> and the 'fabricated' idea of a superior European culture, religion, society, and political organization resulted in a predatory ethics that conferred Europeans the alleged right to kill, displace, persecute, enslave, and/or exterminate the so-called savage, uncivilized, non-Christian, and therefore non-human beings like the

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<sup>4</sup> After Blaut, J. M. (1993). *The Colonizer's Model of the World: Geographical Diffusionism and Eurocentric History*.



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native populations of America and Africa; and simultaneously trade and enslave Africans as animals or tools, with "no rights that a white man was bound to respect"<sup>5</sup>.

In the U.S.A., this was the foundational ideology of the new nation: the racialized character, structure, and development of society and institutions at the expenses of the oppression of the Native peoples of the American and African continents. According to Feagin (Feagin and Vera, 1995; Feagin, 2006), racism in the American society is a material, social, and ideological reality that is entrenched at a much deeper level than the mere racial prejudice or individual bigotry. It is institutional and systemic, anchored in a system of white supremacy that affects all interconnected aspects of life and, grounded in a racist ideology, expresses itself in racist attitudes, racist emotions, racist habits, racist laws, and racist institutions.

However, because over time racism came to be "regarded as a manifestation of profound moral inadequacy [and A]s a result (...) has become a term of abuse (...) racism is understood as intrinsically evil, [and] charges of racism can be deployed as an unchallengeable moralistic sledgehammer" (Ballard, 2002, p. 2) concepts such as ethnic and cultural differences and colorism gained popularity in public and academic discourse as politically correct ways and means to muffle markers of social hierarchies produced by a self-assigned right to exercise domination and power and gain privilege by an alleged white superior race over and owing to purported black inferiority, barbarism, and primitivism.

In North America, by the last half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century the concept of "white" to denote European Americans (instead of Christians) resulted from the need to unify and strengthen the control of Europeans, regardless of the religion they professed (Catholics or Protestants) over Africans and Native Americans. It symbolized "ownership of the earth" and a civilizational status through which Europeans defined their entitlement to certain privileges

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. *Dred Scott Vs. Sandford: A Brief History with Documents*.



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and established boundaries to separate them from those whose exploitation and vulnerability made them an easy target of violence justified because they were not white (Kivel, 1996, p. 142). The concept soon evolved into the establishment of laws designed to classify who was and was not white: color-line dividing society, granting or denying access to power and privilege (Plessy vs Ferguson).

The geneses of racist ideologies, as explained above, have deeper implications and their roots in the moral and legal debates took on the scientific and philosophical explanations with 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century European scientists and thinkers to become the powerhouse of the Modern European civilization thought and practice.

From Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of the Species* (1859) to the *Extinction of Human Races* (1838) by J. C. Prichard, followed by the works of many influential anthropologists, philosophers, and social scientists like Winwood Reade and Herbert Spencer, theories of race and justifications of Europeans' racial superiority were 'scientifically' provided. The 'natural' and 'inevitable' extermination of the 'savage races' could not be prevented. It was the law of nature (Lindqvist, 1996) as predicted by Social Darwinism and could be devotedly advanced through eugenic policies. These were quickly adopted in both the U.S.A. and Brazil. It was a concerted effort on the part of governments to breed "better" human beings by encouraging the reproduction of people with "good" genes and discouraging those with "bad" genes. It developed after Comte de Gobineau's theories of superior and inferior races and on the dangers of race-mixing on his *Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races* (*Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines*) published in several volumes between 1853 and 1855. Gobineau's theories and Social Darwinism are the pseudo-scientific foundations of the colonial and imperial ideologies of the European project of modernity. If its impact on the African and the American continents gained visibility and immediacy with the holocaust of slave trade and the



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genocide of Amerindian and African descent peoples, the global movement of peoples displaced by force or forced to move from their cultural and historical bases by the impact of European colonial practices, has forced the ideology and practice of control by race/color all over the world, wherever Europeans extended their colonial and imperial practices.

### **Colorism**

In the USA, in-group discrimination based on what W. B. E. DuBois classified as the lowest class of Negroes in "On Being Ashamed of Oneself" was identified as a terrible class rift that separated dark-skin from lighter-skinned African descents in America; it was also evident in the way lighter-skinned African American members of NAACP and DuBois himself used skin color qualifications to attack the very dark-skin Marcus Garvey in very derogatory ways, and was finally identified by Alice Walker as "colorism" or the "prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color" that impeded the black community to progress (Walker, 1983, p. 291).

According to Hall, colorism is manifested in discriminatory references to skin color (Hall, 2013) and literature review has shown it to be a practice of exclusion from social acceptance and value crossing national borders and continents (Everett, 2008; Mines and Lamb, 2002; Burton, Bonila-Silva et al., 2010; Hunter, 2007; Adeni, 2014). It can be seen in Indian and Asian women's preference to marry white men, in the "whitening" policies that in Brazil encouraged marriage with a white spouse, or the popular saying in Angola that a "good womb" generates a light-skin child. However, the extension into and adoption of this manifestation of one of the most powerful strongholds of Western imperialistic ideology, the pursuit of human value through racial purity expressed by light skin color, by the African American community did not start in the twentieth century. It was carried onboard slave ships



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from African shores to American plantations by European slave traders with the stigma of Africans' inferiority. On the plantation, the ideology was not only reinforced on a daily basis by the religious, linguistic, and cultural apparatus of the dominant structures; it was forced upon the enslaved populations by both physical and psychological coercion; and reproduced in the social stratification created by slave-owners within the enslaved community: house slaves or first rate slaves, most often than not sons of enslaved women abused by their slave masters, were physically and ideologically separated from field slaves by differences that would go from access to privileges denied to field slaves, to bequeathed "poisonous" power to punish and control the hand fields. Often these lighter-skin tone house slaves were made to believe in their superior condition as "trusted" slaves to carry on overseeing tasks upon field slaves on behalf of their masters.

After Reconstruction, racism in the American society, segregation, and discrimination against the very dark-skin population created a social structure in the black community defined by "some who were ideologically connected to the House negro syndrome" (Asante and Hall, 2011, p. 39) as a system of color stratification that required the "brown-paper-bag-test" as a condition for admission to various social events and/or organizations (ib., p.40). Access to the privilege of living closer to the white master translated for the light-skinned person in the right to "claim the myths of superiority, intelligence, and civilization" that defined the benefits of whiteness (Asante and Hall, 2011, 31).

Apocrypha as it is, *The Willie Lynch Letter* true value is precisely that of clearly demonstrating the mechanisms through which the ideology of white supremacy was hammered into the psyches of colonized and enslaved populations. The effects of its set of prescriptions on "how to make a slave" are only to be compared at the psychological level with the consequences of the system of indirect rule applied by the British government in all



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their colonies worldwide: the training of a chosen local elite in the "best" values of the colonial power to rule their colonized peoples on behalf of the colonizer.

Racism in the American society, segregation, and discrimination against the very dark-skin population created a social structure in the black community defined by "some who were ideologically connected to the House negro syndrome" (ib., p. 39) as a system of color stratification that required the "brown-paper-bag-test" as a condition for admission to various social events and/or organizations (ib., p.40).

This "relinquished" power is one of the many faces and modus operandi of the racist power structure ideology. In practical terms it is its ultimate function to "racialize" the world by extending into the members of racialized groups the idea that they have been invested with some sort of superiority. From the slave master to the house slave; from the British colonizer to the native citizen "indirect" ruler of the British colony; down to the intellectual or the professor who believes in the "inalienable and indisputable truth" of pseudo-scientific explanations that connect external, physical features to differences in intellectual abilities, personality traits, intelligence, and character. Precisely because it operates on every system of life as well as every structure, from physical, to social, to psychological, does it have the inherent potential to serve as an ideological but fundamentally behavioral template to all those who believe themselves invested by any superior "right" over any individual within the group or over other groups.

Colorism is among the colonized, the site of the mystification. It is the in-group adoption of the theories and tools of oppression and exclusion with which the oppressed peoples have been subjugated, controlled, and deprived of their freedom, and equality. It is the internalization of this racialized structure of meritocracy based on skin tones, disguised in a kind of "class" that can confuse segments of the group. It is a worldwide uncritical



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acceptance of "whiteness" as a value system adopted in Zimbabwe as well as in China, in Australia as well as in Mexico, Cuba, Indonesia, Turkey, Egypt, Germany, or Norway. It can lead darker-skin people into seeking to step outside stigmas of race and procure social acceptance, opportunity, and mobility through white validation, favor, and privilege even if their power is limited by the larger macro structure that controls, defines, includes or excludes them. It is the long-lasting, systemic, and transgenerationally transmitted effect within oppressed groups as the doll test<sup>6</sup> revealed as much as racism is endemic, systemic, and institutionalized in a post-colonial globalized world.

### **CONCLUSION**

In ancient Rome, the condition of inferiority attributed to slaves was the same extended to foreigners who were deemed barbarian and uncivilized. In Medieval Europe and Africa there were laws to protect slaves and skin color was not the determinant factor for enslavement. It is with the Crusades during Reconquista that the religious dimension, reinforced with Inquisition, gained the determinant dehumanizing factor of defining the condition of inferiority to the level of sub-human denoted by skin color. Based on pseudo-scientific explanations mostly European scientists and thinkers, opinion-makers of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, created an ideology of white supremacy, power, and privilege based on this newly created sociological construct of meritocracy erected upon biological differentiations to which they called races. Racism requires three fundamental conditions: (1) the belief that human beings' external differences (phenotypes) represent different human species or races;

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<sup>6</sup> In the 1940s Kenneth and Mamie Clark, both psychologists, conducted studies on 6-9 year old black children's perceptions of race – inferiority vs. superiority – by using a black and a white doll. Black children consistently identified positive values with the white doll and negative images, values, concepts with the black doll. The test was replicated in 2005 by a high school student, Kiri Davis, with the same devastating results.



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(2) that these external differences are indicative of different stages of human development that place human beings in a hierarchical scale varying between two poles: White European male at the top and the Black African at the bottom; (3) the need to convey legal existence to unusually harsh exploitation of labor, segregation, and differential access to power and prestige. These three conditions sustained by purported scientific findings of human evolution and complementary to the colonial and imperial ruling philosophies of European modernity, are the germs of racism and foundational postulations of racist ideologies. The construction of an ideology of a white European supremacy, based on Engels' evolutionary theories of social Darwinism and eugenics of French followers like Gobineau condemned all human beings outside of the Anglo-Saxon and/or pure Arian fair-skin-blond-hair-blue-eyed northern Europeans to the state of inferiors that must be subdued, eventually eliminated for the sake of the preservation of race purity. Racism is, therefore, the most important weapon of domination born with modernity and with the political, economic, and ideological systems that created it. It is not only its moral and legal justification; it is a weapon of psychological disruption and domination. In its all encompassing and global destructive dimension, this system of racism/white supremacy is in Welsing's words (2005)<sup>7</sup> "the local and global power system and dynamic, structured and maintained by persons who classify themselves as white, whether consciously or subconsciously determined, which consists of patterns of perception, logic, symbol formation, thought, speech, action and emotional response, as conducted simultaneously in all areas of people activity (economics, education, entertainment, labor, law, politics, religion, sex and war), for the ultimate purpose of white genetic survival and to prevent white genetic annihilation on planet Earth - a planet upon which the vast majority of

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<sup>7</sup> *500 Years Later*, 2005 directed by Owen 'Alik Shahadah over screenplay by M. K. Asante. Frances Cress Welsing quoting from her 1991 book *Isis Papers*.



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people are classified as nonwhite (black, brown, red and yellow) by white skinned people, and all of the nonwhite people are genetically dominant (in terms of skin coloration) compared to the genetic recessive white skin people".

This is a powerful ideological weapon of control, especially by its ability to play simultaneously with individual and group vulnerabilities internalized by those who have been its targets through a system of punishment and reward that at the same time divides and victimizes them. The interconnected political, economic, moral, and ideological factors of European colonial and imperial practices of race relations produced experiences in Europe substantially different from the ones in Africa, the Americas, and Asia. In Europe, race relations are framed by certain pre-existent structural conditions such as the existence of frontiers and notions of nationhood. Though in some Western European nations like 16<sup>th</sup> century Portugal and Spain African slaves were a common lot, there were no slave economies in Europe and the social structure in European countries was not racially determined. The creation of a concept of Europe, however, implied the existence of independent countries defined by national boundaries, by occupational segregation, by nationhood. Dissonance comes from migrant labor when it is attached to stigmatized roles. Such practices, defined in apparently less charged terms like xenophobia, chauvinism, and nationalism, carry the same germs of racism: white supremacy, hegemonic power, and privilege and can, unfortunately, be embraced by anyone who finds himself/herself in a position of power, be it real or virtual. Racism may show different faces and is often disguised under euphemistic forms. It is, nonetheless, the embedded practice and ideology of political and cultural colonial and imperial domination that, for the colonized, can only be defeated by 'killing' the colonizer inside (Fanon, 1963).



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