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"*Blanquitud*". Considerations on racism as a specifically modern phenomenon

The general tendency throughout history – understood as a history of scarcity- is to perceive otherness as animosity. Throughout "pre-history" -as implied by Marx- all human communities perceive alterity as an open hostility towards their selfness. People who coexist in the same territory with those who are residents, need only to ground themselves firmly in their identity, in order to awaken in them a feeling of menace. The other, the "barbarian" becomes an <u>enemy</u>, some one that is hateful. Through this xenophobia or hatred of the foreign, the other appears as a <u>dangerous</u> human being, that must be kept apart, neutralized, subjugated or eventually destroyed. It would not be an exaggeration to say that all pre-modern genocides have their origin in this perception.

Otherness appears as hostility only when and where a community or collective subject chooses to understand and practice its <u>self-assertion</u> as an act of <u>self-preservation</u> or *selbsterhaltung* (as Horkheimer called it), instead of realizing it as a <u>self-opening</u> or <u>*selbstpreisgabe*</u>. To save and protect identity as an object that might disappear -instead of bringing it into play as an event that could be revitalized and strengthened it is confrontation with other identities- is of course a <u>suicidal</u> strategy; the same steps leading to self-preservation can drive as well to erosion, if <u>time</u> is kept in mind; or to decomposition, if the <u>self critical</u> consistency of identity is taken into account. Nevertheless it is a strategy that seems to be inevitable under the conditions of scarcity. Every community understands the singularity of its own selfness as the reason why the gods select it as a preferred or "<u>chosen people</u>", superior to the others.

Throughout history, the selfness and otherness of a singular or a collective individual have been detected or recognized according to many criteria, some of

them focus on animal or natural features, like bodily constitution or skin colour; some others concentate on social characteristics, like language or *éthos*, while still others combine both perspectives, the natural and the ethic. One of these combined criteria sets identity and alterity in terms of <u>race</u>.

The specific determination of selfness and otherness as a <u>race</u> emerges when human animal features begin to be perceived in a <u>consolidated</u> <u>unity</u> as the <u>signifier</u> of an ethic substance that would be its <u>signified</u>; as the visible side of an indivisible conjunction of <u>expression</u> and <u>content</u>. Thus, for instance, black bodily features (black skin, etc.) would be the necessary manifestation of a black soul, and conversely, a "black soul" would belong only to a body with black features. Consequently, a human behaviour would be <u>racist</u> behaviour when it addresses other people through the filter of a previous determination that qualifies its appearance as ethically meaningful. Racist treatment of, or engagement with other people is seldom friendly; it's mostly hostile. The threatening presence of otherness impresses a negative mark on the natural features of other people's bodies.

Universalism and racism emerge together. The racial understanding of human selfness and otherness should be considered as a specific phenomenon of proto-modern and <u>modern</u> times. Actually, it begins as a complement to the abstract universalism required of human behaviour by the mercantile circulation of products or goods, a universalism that Christian religion promoted implacably for more than thousand years in western society. The great variety of definitions of selfness and the consequently innumerable possibilities of otherness that exist spontaneously in the western world undergo the homogenizing action of a pragmatic definition of identity or selfness that comes from the everyday praxis of exchange of equivalents. According to this definition, to be a human being is contingent on association to a particular abstract community, the community of private proprietors or men engaged in the market-concurrence, each trying to overcome the others and increase his money-wealth on the basis of a higher value-productivity of the work incorporated in his products.

It is important here to remember that higher value-productivity of value of course means the capacity of work to produce more or better *goods* or "values in use", but

only if these "values in use" are bearer or <u>carrier</u> of economic value. Value-productivity as the ultimate goal of human labour *working process* and human life belongs to communities where social activity is already organised around a <u>mercantile economy</u>, a form of production and consumption that is already subject to the circulation of goods as an exchange of merchandises or <u>equi-valent</u> things.

Mercantile identity refunctionalizes traditional, archaic identities to such a degree that they become unrecognizable to previous generations. It is an abstract identity, apparently inclusive and open to all humans, that goes beyond all other identities and according to which no one has to be an "other", unless he refuses the "invitation" to belong to the abstract community of private proprietors. Then it is evident that a <u>new</u> <u>sort</u> <u>of</u> <u>otherness</u> has emerged, a specifically "<u>racial</u> <u>otherness</u>", the otherness of people that are no non-functional to the subordination of traditional selfness to the new mercantile identity. It is an ethic otherness that becomes distinguishable in the appearence or aspect that comes with the refusal of the effects of mercantile refunctionalization on the corporeal (animal) features of human beings. Thus mercantile behaviour necessarily requires an appearance of its own, a specific "mercantile appearance" that is not only a manifestation of value-productivity, but already one of its components.

A radical <u>change</u> has taken place: a <u>re-definition</u> of selfness and otherness. People belonging to "an other race" are now considered not only as <u>barbarians</u> (dissimilar to the people of the own community and unfamiliar with their language and customs), but as probably <u>non-human</u> beings, as aliens, people blind or insensitive to the specifically "human" goal: that of value-productivity.

However, this it is a change that public opinion systematically denies. The new definition of identity as opposed to alterity is misconceived and interpreted simply as a more civilized and therefore almost harmless version of the archaic definition of the proper as opposed to the strange or the civilized to the barbarian. Mostly "hidden" in the "Third world", the devastating actual realization of modern racist definition of the other is not acknowledged and treated as a genocidal practice. Modern racism is eclipsed by remainings of the old hatred to foreigners. The KKK lynching of blacks in the US as well as the systematic mass elimination of jews and gypsies in nazi Europe are some of the recycled modern <u>relapses</u> of the old type of

genocides or archaic practices of <u>aggressive</u> xenophobia. Yesterday and today anti-black and anti-Jewish actions, enacted by the "culture industry" of capitalist modernity as spectacular negative feats or "prowesses", contribute in our time to hide, conceal and forget the silent but very effective genocidal activity of specific modern racism, to minimize the "natural" or structural racist practices of every-day social behaviour and of established politics in the capitalistic modernity.

The first historical appearing of specifically modern racism can be found in Spain's XVIth Century. An open and conceptually very rich anthropologic-theological discussion about the question of whether Indians had a soul, whether they were complete or only partially humans, accompanied the enterprise of the Conquista. It is not difficult to notice that a self-justifying intention is at work beneath the discursive level of this discussion. The "new man", the modern man, is trying to found or ground his devastating presence in America on a demonstration of the disfunctionality of indigenous people regarding a re-construction of the world that is manifestly supported by God. Contrary to what the Franciscan evangelizers or pater Las Casas may think, an Indian cannot become fully Christian, cannot be transformed into a "new", modern Christian, into a man of action, a man who <u>belongs</u> <u>to</u> <u>his</u> <u>own</u> enterprise, like Cortés or Pizarro. And he cannot, although he may behave as an exemplary Christian, because ultimately a new Christian can only be a modification or a new version of an "old Christian", a "*cristiano castizo*", "*de casta*" or "*de sangre*", that is to say a <u>Spanish</u> Christian. For the first time in history, in the Spain of the *Conquistadores,* Christian *entrepreneurial* ethics and European "blood purity" are linked together. This may be considered the first appearance of a new modern perception of selfness and otherness, which is the basis of modern racism.

However, specifically modern racism reaches its maturity only two centuries later, when, after the Industrial Revolution, mercantile social life had become a specific <u>capitalistic</u>-mercantile social life or, like Fernand Braudel says, when capitalism had overflowed the sphere of circulation of the economy and had invaded its sphere of production. Karl Marx interprets this fact of economic history using his theory of "formal" and "real subsumption" of the natural reproductions-process of social wealth and of society itself under the abstract economic reproductions-

process of capital. Subsumption means subordination, dependence, and Marx explains how different it is for social life, when the subordination to capitals self-reproduction affects only "formally" the labour-process or when it has already become a "real" subordination. In fact, "formal subsumption" means that the behaviour of the economy is compelled only from outside of the productions-process, by market dynamics, to follow the rules that derive from the pursuit of the goal of capital accumulation. In contrast, "real subsumption" means that the action of these compelling force, objectivated in the technical consistency of the production-process, comes from within itself; that the capitalist goal, the valorization (*verwertung*) of economic value, has substituted the concrete goals of the natural reproduction process of social wealth.

When the capitalist behaviour is "real" and not merely "formal", when it is effectually a mode of production, it rebuilds not only the means of production and their technical consistency, but also the subject of production. It does this according to its own capitalist "project", that is, a project that pursues the total subordination of social life under the never satisfied demand of economic value, to increase its magnitude. The capitalist mode of production fashions or pieces together a peculiar type of human being, according to its needs of suitable caretakers of capitalist wealth; this is a human being characterized mainly by a way of life founded on a productivistic self-repression (*entsagung, opfer*), who has completely interiorized the mercantile trend to surplus-value productivity. For him living in capitalism and living for capitalism are the same. The *homo capitalisticus* is the human being that has followed the imperative demanding or "calling" coming from capital; that has subordinated himself to the gravitation of capital on the human subject of the reproduction-process, precisely that gravitation identified by Max Weber as the "spirit of capitalism" (*der geist vom kapitalismus*).

If there is no alternative to the capitalist form of modern life, if civilization and capitalist civilization are the same, and living in capitalism means living for capitalism, then Max Weber is right: modern man is the human being that obeys the calling of the "spirit of capitalism" and who, therefore, in order to do so, develops a peculiar *éthos*, a down to earth or "realistic" *éthos* that establishes some

sort of harmony – Nietzsche would say a "nihilistic" harmony- between himself and the world's capitalist structure. For him the "protestant ethics" is the Christian practical manifestation of this *éthos*.

But Max Weber can be wrong. In fact, for many modern human beings, to live in capitalism –something that is inevitable <u>in</u> capitalistic modernity- has not been necessarily the same as to live for capitalism; for this modern people capitalism does not represent "the best of all possible modernities". There are other *éthe*, other strategies of behaviour, other ways to live in the capitalist modern world that develop themselves in the praxis under the presumption that some other mode of production, different from the capitalist mode of production, may sustain a better form of modern life. "Romantic", "baroque", even enlightet (*aufklärerisch)* or "neoclassical" *éthe* –to use elegant terminology- emerge in the most different situations throughout the history of modernity. From the margins of normal life, subtly dysfunctional in relation to it, all of them, in one way or another, contest the monopolistic position of the "realistic" or "protestant" *éthos* in the capitalist modernity; all of them assert themselves as self-critical alternative proposals of a way of life within the boundaries of capitalist modernity.

Max Weber's description of the modern type of man becomes plausible only in a situation where the subsumtion or subordination of "natural" or concrete human life under the capitalist self-increasing process of economic value has been completed; when, like in our days, even "nature" can be replaced by a near perfect substitute, created by capital itself.

The capitalist mode of production achieves this total subordination only with the "americanisation" –the "<u>nord-</u>americanisation"- of modernity. The project of a capitalist modernity that was born in Europe came to fruition only in (north-) America. It could not be completed in Europe because of the strong and multiple resistances to it coming mainly from other pre-existing civilising projects.

The concrete <u>historical</u> <u>experience</u> that the "protestant or realistic *éthos*" had to withstand during its growth and expansion in northern Europe <u>consolidated</u> in a strong affinity and preference for the ethnic and ethic features of people living in that geographical region. Thus, in our times, after that historical experience, the

disposition of a person to be "realistic" or to live for capitalism, can only be effective if, in addition, she partakes to some extent of those ethnic and ethical features in one way or another. Only if she, or he, belongs or is bound in some measure to a peculiar race, the "whitey" race: if she partakes of the "*blanquitud*", the "whiteyness".

The "*blanquitud*", not the *blancura,* of a person (singular as well as collective), that is, not her whiteness, but her "whiteyness" (to borrow the title of Fassbinder's film), consists on his or her surplusvalue-productivitistic capacity, but only when it is intertwined with or tightly linked to a diffuse or sublimated set of ethnic-ethic features, originally belonging to north European peoples. Puritan Christian behaviour, that is, productivistic self-repression alone, or ethnic-white identity marks alone are not enough to characterize "whiteyness", because it is a subtle combination of both. The "whithey identity" is an abstract-universal identity, characterized by its functionality to the capitalistic mode of reproduction, but whose recognition marks in the concrete world are nevertheless borrowed from a particular ethnic-ethic identity. The abstract, only light particularized universalism of whiteyness has been an unimprovable recourse of the expansionistic trend of capital accumulation. The totalitarian society that post-liberal capitalism builds in our days in substitution of the traditional liberal society has done already a considerable step with the instalment of whithey race in the role of "human race".

The practice of modern racism is usually hybrid; it is modern and at the same time archaic. The open and brutal hate to the other as a barbarian works as a disguise of the hidden and discreet hate to the other as a non-whitey person. That is what happened in nazi Germany and its paradigmatic practice of modern racism. The "genuine" private proprietor in European western society modern explains this way his modern hate of the other: "The Jews cheat", he means. "They hide or disguise communal property (in the form of mutual help) as private property; they protect or preserve the nerve of their own "*heimat*", the life in community, precisely there where "*heimatlosigkeit*", the absence of community, must be the rule. They are hateful because they profit from these deception and explain this profit as a gods gift or mercy to them for being his chosen people." Against all evidence, all the success of jewish people in modern, mercantile life, nazi politics

doesn't acknowledge any whiteyness to the Jews. Springing to another, pre-modern sort of argumentation, the Nazis pretend to show and prove why the jews are hatefull, by arguing that they are a volk, the jewish people, and as such they have done great damage to the german volk. The extermination (*ausrottung*) of the jews would be so only a justified retaliation (*rache*) of the offended german people against a barbarian enemy. The old hate of the foreign as instrument of the new, the hate of the non-whitey or non-human.

Modern racism attends to the difference between, on the one hand, those who are evidently "realists", those who accept and interiorize the destiny of the *homo capitalisticus*, and on the other, the undeniable "dysfunctionals" that can not, or refuse to accept that destiny: between evidently "born winners" and undeniably "losers by birth". Whereas, in critical situations, the "non-whiteys" may become a dispensable population ("*ballastgewicht*", as the Nazis used tu say), subjects of a "final solution" (*endlösung)* or a merciful "*triage"* (to use a word of R. Rorty).

The racism defined in relation to whiteyness, the modern racism, becomes real in normal life of modern society through a discriminating practice whose hate to the other, the non-whitey, remains generally in the stage of scorn or contempt, of distrust and suspicious fear. Apparently harmless, this radical discrimination condemn as no-human (as *un-menschen*) everyone who has not found the way to success and to the correct appearance of success. And "non-human" means dispensable, ready to be eliminated if the circumstances require. It is therefore understandable that in the affluent society of neo-liberal and globalized capitalism, when success seemed to be a reachable goal, many non-whiteys, many "born losers", both in the first and in the third world, from America to China, tried with considerable results to adopt the whithey race, as we kann see it now especially in the USA.

In a world determined by the planetarian functioning of productive forces, and "globalized" by the accumulations-process of capital, it is necessary to develop a transnational perspective of social and historical problems, and in this perspective, the data available allow to speak of a peculiar "ordinary genocide" that is implied in this modern discriminating practice. As Carl Amery wrote about "Hitler as a precursor" he had in mind not only the spectacular killing of hundreds of

thousands (like in Rwanda in1994), but also this new, discreet every day mass-killing that take place in our times, mostly in the Third world, like, for instance, the killing of migrant Mexican and latin workers on the borderline between the USA and Mexico.

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