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Racism and the Signifier

“If the peoples knew each other better, they would hate each other more”.

Ennio Flaiano[1]

1.

In Italy in recent times we have been swamped with standard explanations on the causes of racism and xenophobia. On a popular science TV show a neuroscientist declared “our brain is racist”. Since as children we are inclined to mistrust strangers outside our family unit, whoever is perceived as external causes suspicion and fear in toddlers. Practical solution: to prevent racism we need to live in a world of mixed races, so that people with different skin colours or who dress differently from us will be perceived from childhood as “familiar”.

Psychoanalysts too, even Lacanian ones – who ought to be vaccinated against such explanations – harp on reproducing the same interpretations: whoever we perceive as *different* for whatever reason, in particular for physical ones, ipso facto comes across as despicable or hostile, or both. Such accounts are simplistic because they ignore what a certain psychoanalysis introduced as a fundamental element: *the power of the signifier*. That is, the largely *arbitrary* character of differences that are seen as relevant (a signifier is distinguished from a symbol precisely because of its arbitrariness).

The main proof that racism is not based on a visual (or olfactory) diversity is the Holocaust. During the period in Germany that Jews were easily identifiable – long beards, kippah, black hair, star of David, and so on – there was never a strong anti-Semitism. The countries with a higher anti-Semitic risk were instead France, Poland and Russia, not Germany. Anti-Semitic fury in Germany was unleashed in the 1930s, when Jews had already become indistinguishable from “Aryans”, even in their facial features. Nazi and fascist propaganda insisted on the physical differences of the Jews – following well-known physiognomic stereotypes – precisely to give a visual trace to a difference that was merely one of the signifier, *Aryan* versus *Jew*. The idea of race was a biologising imaginary cover for a symbolic opposition, hence an arbitrary one. The physical difference between Jews and “Aryans” was not *given*, but was *sought in order* to give a shape to the semiotic difference.

After all, the Jews, together with the left, had been accused of stabbing the German army in the back during the First World War, causing the country’s defeat. They were therefore considered internal enemies, devious and inconspicuous. A little like in those sci-fi films where at the end we find out that a human being in every way similar to us all was actually a robot or alien in disguise.

American racists such as the Ku Klux Klan, for example, are usually anti-black and anti-Semitic, even though a black person is immediately recognisable and a Jew is not. And we know full well how deep-rooted hatred opposes extremely close peoples or ethnicities; I would actually say that ethnic hatred often feeds on non-physical differences (psychoanalysis speaks about a narcissism of small differences).

If we think back to the civil wars that followed the disaggregation of Yugoslavia, we saw bloody fighting between, for example, Serbs and Croats, who share the same language (but not the same script) and that the only real difference between them is their religion (the Croats being Catholic and the Serbs Orthodox), and also between Muslim Bosnians and Serbian Bosnians, proudly opposed for religious distinctions that were quite insignificant to the actual lives of the people who lived in those regions. Not to mention the conflicts between the Irish and the English, or the English and the Scots, people who speak a same language, even if Eire is bilingual and Scottish Gaelic has been an official language of Scotland since 2006.

That ethnic and racial conflicts have *solid bases*, i.e. undeniable physiological or economic differences, is also a prejudice among intellectuals. Instead these conflicts are arbitrary, i.e. semiotic.

2.

A theory of racism that seems far more artful is one that explains it not in terms of an instinctive mistrust of “the different” but rather in economic terms, arguing that the basis of xenophobia is competition between the poor or a generic economic rivalry. Though it’s not always true that xenophobia only hits poor minorities and groups. Anti-Semitism, for example, makes victims of both poor and wealthy Jews.

There is however a kernel of truth in thinking that xenophobia and racism are a form of *aporophobia*: hostility towards the poor. For many, even those who proclaim themselves Christians, poverty like a moral blemish, serves as the sign of an ethical malfunction. In fact, if a wealthy black American purchases a nice cottage in Tuscany, he is unlikely to suffer any racial discrimination: his economic wellbeing will make the colour of his skin irrelevant. Whilst a Senegalese who goes round Tuscany selling paper tissues is likely to fall victim to racial scorn. Basically, even though xenophobic hatred can strike groups with wealthy elements within them, what comes across as most alien among all of someone’s alien characteristics is their poverty. I’m not aware, for example, of the Italian anti-immigration leader Matteo Salvini launching any campaigns against affluent foreign citizens who reside in Milan or Rome and work as journalists, designers, artists or entrepreneurs... Those who are spurned are the poor wretches who reach the country on migrant boats after risking their lives.

This is why I find the successful slogan “Black Lives Matter” a little misleading. George Floyd was a poor man. Why not “Poor Black Lives Matter”?

Why do we ultimately hate the destitute? Perhaps one answer has been provided by the writers of the serial *Game of Thrones*, which takes place in an imaginary Middle Ages. Highborn characters in the TV series also wonder why fear of and contempt for the poorest is so common among the people. And one of them replies: “Because the poor reflect our own image minus all the ornaments and complements of well-being”. As if the poor represented the very truth of human beings, the mirror of humanity stripped to the bone...

We may then ask: is there something in particular that makes poverty distasteful, even provocative, for the middle classes? This leads to an even more fundamental issue: where does this human need to find and oppose other beings that are despicable, dangerous, or both, originate? Why, as Carl Schmitt said, is politics entirely founded on a distinction between friend and enemy? From where does this deep need for enemies either inside or outside of a society arise? I think that even on this point psychoanalytical theory can offer some important elements. But this is something that would require a separate essay.

Aporophobia seems to support the theory that xenophobia is a rivalry among the poor with objective causes: immigrants, who are willing to take on humble jobs, steal these jobs from natives who would be resigned to taking them on. By accepting extremely low wages, immigrants effectively reduce wages for local workers in low-pay employment. Italian domestic workers, for example, often complain that foreign cleaners have caused their hourly rates to drop.

But this economic explanation is unconvincing too. It tends to rationalize – and therefore almost justify – racism and xenophobia. Some paternalistically say: “We left-wingers are so angry at the xenophobia of the poor, but we fail to consider that they feel economically damaged by immigrants!” If this were the correct explanation, then people would hate the poorer members of society in general, not only foreign ones.

Whether this reserve army of labour (as Marx called it) is made up of fellow nationals or immigrants, of whites or blacks, is inconsequential. Economic theory teaches that a full employment regime coincides with high wages, whilst in a regime of high unemployment wages go down. But this should lead us to hope that all immigrants will find work: the more of them are employed, the more average wages will rise.

It’s true that in a globalised world the reserve army of labour covers the entire planet, the destitute from the various continents. Therefore the alternative to immigration is the delocalisation of industries from our wealthy countries to poorer countries where the cost of labour is much lower: something which damages the workers of wealthier countries far more than immigration.

Italians, particularly those of the lower social classes, have always loathed the Romani people. A famous scene from an Italian suburb in 2019 shows a woman trampling on sandwiches destined for disadvantaged Romanians. People like this woman protest because they perceive that gypsies receive more aid than non-Romani Italian citizens. They argue that the local authorities assign available social housing to the gypsies and not to Italians who have regularly applied.

Now, to allocate public housing the authorities usually follow objective criteria: the neediest families are placed at the top of the waiting lists and will be the first to be granted apartments as they become available. It turns out that the families in the most deprived conditions are often Romany and they are given priority as a consequence. This is interpreted as proof that Romanians are favoured over Italians. But even if there’s an admission that there is no deliberate favouritism, the complaint is that gypsies are poor and their condition damages the slightly less poor Italians. In both cases, Romanians are detrimental, insofar as they are *too poor*.

Now, it is evident that what’s at work here is the signifier “Romany” itself. If the neediest who benefit from the allocation of popular housing had no label, no other connotation apart from their being poor, no racial problems would arise: the question of *who* is poorest would be irrelevant. But when it is observed that among the poorest there are lots of Romanians – or lots of Nigerians, or lots of Senegalese – that’s when xenophobic rage sets in. It is no longer the fact that Romanians are poor and compete with those who are a little less poor: what really counts is the fact that these ‘poorest of the poor’ fall under the signifier *Romany*. What’s important is that Romanians *are recognisable* against those who are not – the very definition of signifier, according to Ferdinand de Saussure, is what distinguishes it from all other signifiers. It’s not economic competition that creates racism, it’s racism that gives a racial sense to an economic competition that would exist in any case, even if there were no Romanians and only Italian families of the purest kind. It’s the signifying difference that brings votes to Salvini and to neo-fascists.

Some may say: there must be a visible difference, however minimal, between Romanians and other Italians to sustain this xenophobic difference. In actual fact we are all bearers of difference; for example, some of us have blond hair, others brown or black hair... but these chromatic differences are not signifying because they do not belong to a system of political oppositions. But we could still imagine a demagogue with jet-black hair (or blond hair dyed black) founding a Black Hair party against blonds and blondes.... In this way the differences in hair colour, having become signifying, could lead to riots, violent political conflicts, to a civil war... When it enters a system of oppositions, any difference becomes signifying.

This would not just be a weird mental experiment. For example, in the Cambodia of the Khmer Rouge regime and Pol Pot (between 1975 and 1979) people with eye glasses were persecuted and often killed because wearing glasses was considered a sign of “being an intellectual”, and according to the rulers intellectuals were counter-revolutionaries...

Another model we could take is allegiances in sport. What opposes Lazio and Roma supporters in football? Nothing, except the fact that two football teams exist that call themselves Roman. And in which the vast majority of players are of course not Roman... It's this purely signifying distinction – within the system of Italian football teams – that can even lead to violent football hooliganism. Then of course some could fill this purely signifying distinction with signifieds. For example, I once heard a Roma fan say that “Lazio supporters are ignorant bumpkins”.

When will the lethal power of the signifier, even when unconscious, be acknowledged?

In the meantime, I suggest watching the film [The Wave](#) (*Die Welle*) by Dennis Gansel, or even reading the novel of the same name by Todd Strasser on which the film is based. It's the story of a pedagogic game based on a real experiment, that of *The Third Wave* in California in 1967. I think the film and the book explain more effectively than I have here the concept of “power of the signifier”.

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Note:

[1] E. Flaiano, *Opere*, Bompiani, Milano, 2001, p. 438.

Bio:

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