

“That’s just how these people are” — Racist essentialism

In every racism, assertions are made about how *people as such* are. ¹These assertions are not about human beings in general but about specific groups. Racism assumes that everyone belongs to some alleged group, i.e. that people are “white” or “Caucasian”, “Arabic”, “Native American”, “Gipsy” etc. This enumeration is not a real description of actual groups, as there are no races; race is a nonsense category. Neither biologically nor culturally can humanity be sorted into such groups. Hence, this classification, that is the first point here, has, in reality, nothing to do with the people being classified.

That does not unsettle racists. They continue on Racist Road and add to this wrong definition of fixed human groups another mistake. ²

These groups of people are assigned certain, unchangeable attributes — a few examples from a Western racist perspective: white people allegedly are clever and a bit stiff, Arabic people backwards and fanatic, native Americans are in touch with nature and gipsies are as lazy as they are musical. These attributes are not only ascribed to the group as a whole but also to every member of the group. Each imagined member of the group is regarded as a specimen or representative of the whole group: every gipsy is considered to be lazy. These features are seen to distinguish every person of that group from every person of another group, it forms them and it shows in their very essence. ³This is the essentialisation.

Racism does not start where people are offended, humiliated, persecuted or murdered. It starts when people are sorted into biological or cultural groups and are seen to share essential characteristics — simply as alleged members of the group. ⁴

Although the groups racists create do not exist, there are certain modes of behaviour or preferences which can be widely shared in certain regions while being less prevalent or even non-existent in others. Racism declares this to be *the* behaviour of a racified group, i.e. of a so-called race. Yet, even if people living in the Northern Mediterranean gesture more, it does not mean that people from South Europe are more passionate. The logical mistake is to *interpret* such a cluster (as useful or useless for the community, or often at least as good or bad) and to link it to all members of the alleged group. While these differences exist, they are not a feature of everyone living in a certain region. Or else racism ties characteristics that *some* people might possess to *all* members for their “race”. Here, too, the racist processing of reality considers some actual difference and generalises them incorrectly. ⁵

Why certain manners are particularly widespread in some areas, can already be the result of racism: slaves in the Us for instance used to play “dumb” to avoid yet more work. ⁶

Finally, there are racist essentialisations which do not correspond at all with reality. That is, for example, the idea of some groups of people being cannibals. This is pure fiction and has no basis in facts.

In reality, these attributions are not true either in their entirety or not at all. The essentialising conclusion is wrong either way. Racism, however, homogenises and what does not fit in is mentally aligned. Existing differences in a group are ignored. Other ideological judgements are by contrast incorporated into the racist image. Gender differences play a part in racism, for example “Arab women” are seen to be submissive, “Arab men” quick-tempered.

When racists engage with something that their racist explanation does not account for, they commonly brush this aside as an “exception from the rule”. They consider their “hard-working and coldly calculating Latin American” neighbour as just as Latin American albeit her being different from the racist’s idea of “such people”. It is remarkable that this does not lead to racist ideas being given up. Instead, it is seen as a deviation from what that person as a “representative of her race” *ought to be*. Racists are rather creative when it comes to incorporating contradictions into their theory to maintain it.

Racism is often perceived as an old-style way of thinking which differs greatly from the normal, enlightened, modern way of interpreting the world. Hence, it is regularly downplayed. By extension, it seems to be a socio-psychological riddle to some: in times of enlightenment, how can anyone think that way? They must have psychological reasons.

However, the form of racism, essentialisation, is not uncommon in the everyday world. It is a wide-spread ideology to think of people being the way they are because this is their essential character rather than because they experience things, then think about them and then practice their skills. “My child is highly gifted” is that kind of judgement: she can do all these awesome things not because she wants to and tries to learn the required skills enthusiastically or because I encouraged my child. The essentialising view rather sees this to be the result of the kid’s mere being, no matter if this is ostensibly grounded in her genes or her brain. The reverse is even more widespread: that underachiever in school, well, she is just more “practically dexterous”, i.e. not very useful when it comes to abstract thinking. It is the same form of thinking as in racism, volition and awareness only express a presumed being. People are what they are: that explains their position in society and their successes and failures in the competition. The difference here with racism is that essentialising the social standing is a judgement about how individual people fare in this society whereas racism is a judgement on a whole imagined group.

Even though the idea to take perceived attributes of certain people and with these explain their position in society has increased in modern times, it is nothing new. In other authoritarian pre-capitalist societies, some people exercised power, appropriated the social surplus product and claimed that their essential characteristics called them to such a noble deed. The others were called to serve — that, too, due to their being. In the classical or feudal mode of production, reasons given to justify the hierarchy were noble blood, descent, kinship with gods or at least a divine decision. But because god was in play, the hierarchies were not as rigid — feats and piety could have an effect. With the transition to modern society, nature comes into play as the explanation — and you cannot argue with nature, it means inescapable fate.

Racist essentialisation means that features or modes of behaviour, which can be changed, are presented as unalterable, and people are sorted into groups which are ascribed with these as core characteristics. Real differences are levelled out or are considered marginal, i.e. racism homogenises. Racism does not have its root in the given examples nor the perception of people. Instead, the particular racist judgements are just illustrations or expressions of ideological notions. The image of the gypsy, for instance, as musical, work-shy and living off the expenses of the community is the counter-image to the demand against all members of a capitalist, successful

collective. You can be musical, that is ok, but what really counts is success in competition, on the job market, for which every worker has to be willing, useful and available. Only thus can an income be earned, only thus can everyone contribute something to the community (e.g. taxes) without “freeloading”.

This demand re-appears as a mirror-image of the negative racist attributes given to other groups: the racist attributions to others are an inverted expression of the demand against everyone in the alleged in-group on how they are supposed to behave. For that reason, it is not just the negative attributions which are a problem. That “white people” allegedly think better, is a harsh judgement on all “white people” who are not perceived to be clever. It certainly is a demand against the in-group to apply their “cleverness”.

Despite all the randomness in how the racist images came about and which people are sorted into what groups and then which characteristics each group is ascribed with, they all have a lot to do with the constitution of capitalist societies and the demands against members of the national collectives. These demands do not need to be made from above; racism survives despite the ending of colonialism as a state-orchestrated programme of direct domination and subordination, to which the racist ideology was the ideal accompaniment and justification.

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1. For this issue, we planned to include a longer piece on racism in general. Timing interfered, so it did not get finished. Hence, we are just publishing the excerpt on essentialisation. This short text does not claim to explain racism. It describes and critiques the general mistake of essentialising which is the form of any racism. ↵
 2. We separate the logical steps of ideology, which is an analytical distinction. To a racist, these logical steps do not appear as separate steps, they think them all together. ↵
 3. So far, nothing has been said about the content of these judgements. In this piece, it will be shown how racist judgements are applied to people, who have already been sorted into racist groups. There will be more about the content of these judgements in a later edition. ↵
 4. Essentialism is also the form of sexism: on the basis of a few, in many regards rather unimportant differences between people, sexists claim a myriad of social attributes. These are seen to be self-evident. Then, there is biologism in a more general sense, where people are ascribed with characteristics that are, in fact, either socially produced or else not even existent in everyone. “Man is a wolf to man.” is an example for such thinking. It claims this is how all people as such are and abstracts social conditions away. ↵
 5. This can come about on a subjective level: somebody sees gipsies — or whoever is considered to be one — making music and concludes in a racist way that gipsies “just have music running through their veins”. (Whenever it is a case of social characteristics, the essentialising generalisation from some to all members of any group is always wrong because they are changeable.) This is not a claim that racism comes into being by a “naive” conclusion and a wrong generalisation. People who judge like that already have a racist concept in their head. They think that “these people just are like this and that” and with such a thought, they go into the world and “find” corresponding characteristics. Racism might be reproduced that way but only on the basis of already racist thinking. ↵

6. This behaviour was so minting that is has grown into a collective self-image. Some people with a darker skin colour started to think of themselves as not being able to do certain things, like abstract thinking, well. [↵](#)