critical interventions in theory and praxis

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Reconsidering Social Identification
RACE, GENDER, CLASS AND CASTE

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The term 'Indian', as applied to natives of Canada and North America, is an example of catachresis as misnomer, as it derives from the earliest explorers’ mistaken belief that in sailing across the Atlantic they had made a passage to India.

The slogan was still being used in the early 1980s, when the Parti Québécois rose to power and revived a ‘national’ consciousness in Québec.


Former Canadian prime minister John Diefenbaker said in 1961 that ‘Canada is not a melting pot in which the individuality of each element is destroyed in order to produce a new and totally different element. It is rather a garden into which have been transplanted the hardiest and brightest flowers from many lands, each retaining in its new environment the best of qualities for which it was loved and prized in its native land.’ His extended metaphor is often taken as anticipating the multiculturalism of Canada in the 21st century.

Frye writes: ‘It seems to me that Canadian sensibility has been profoundly disturbed, not so much by our famous problem of identity, important as that is, as by a series of paradoxes in what confronts that identity. It is less perplexed by the question “Who am I?” than by some such riddle as “Where is here?”’ See Frye, The Bush Garden, p. 222. In an article in Canada’s Globe and Mail of 9 December 2009, the day I left Canada for India to deliver this paper, a headline describing a ‘political stalemate...between the Mohawk community of Kahnawake and the national government’ declares: ‘In a town haunted by Oka, nobody is “Canadian”’ (A3). Oka, Québec, was the site of a 1990 violent land claim dispute between First Nations people and local, provincial and federal governments. It seems that Canadian identity, even in 2009, is still tied to Frye’s questions.

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Race in the Dialectics of Culture

LEWIS R. GORDON

The comedian Gabe Kaplan once recounted the following story from his childhood in a predominantly European Jewish neighbourhood in Brooklyn, New York. The adults in his apartment building were kvetching (the Yiddish equivalent of griping) that schwartzes (the Yiddish equivalent of ‘niggers’) were moving in.

‘The schwartzes are coming! The schwartzes are coming!’ they exclaimed.

As they lamented the expected indignities and violence that could fall upon them, the young Kaplan became terrified. On the day in which the dreaded schwartzes were to arrive, he ran to his closet, and then a baseball bat, and hurried to the front of his building, where he saw a black couple approaching. Concerned, he ran up to them and ushered them into the building, shouting, ‘Quick, get inside, the schwartzes are coming!’

There was a clear disconnection between the young Kaplan and the adults around him, although that wasn’t necessarily the case for many of his peers. His point, however, is well taken: the process of racial demonization is such that the objects of racial hatred, or perhaps better for some, fears, are hardly recognizable in the flesh. The idea of a race, when governed by racist investments, is difficult to comport with reality, unless, of course, ways of perceiving reality are themselves so affected by the force of our beliefs to the point of making us, as Kierkegaard might say, unable to see what we see.¹

A feature of racism that makes it difficult for many of us to see what we see is that racism and its accompanying anthropology of race are among the more embarrassing and persisting
concepts of modern thought. That racism is a bad thing is now nearly universally accepted, and many of the correlated pre-suppositions about race and racial difference have received their fair share of criticism to the point of its being difficult even to discuss the viability of race in most academic settings. A near-ritual of disavowal becomes necessary before the exploration of the concept at all, which suggests a neurotic atmosphere of avowed disavowal as, perversely, a condition of avowal. To talk about race, in other words, one is obligated in advance to assure disqualification of its legitimacy. For those of us who teach courses on the study of race and racism, this has led to strange situations in which students often perform what they think is expected of them, and that often involves demonstration of an appearance of thought instead of thinking. They thus often assert, without reflection, the well-known conclusion: race is a social construction. When I hear this, I often ask the students, ‘Do you believe that?’

I have asked that question at universities and colleges across the globe. The students are often taken aback, since I have yet to meet any who have been asked such a question before. Although some stick to their claim, most students actually reflect for a moment and, as they think about it, they often admit, reluctantly, that they don’t. In truth, more people believe that race is not socially constructed, although many of them do not take the view that the reality of race, or at least belief in its reality, entails a commitment to racism. They simply see a challenge to their commitment to reality.

What are critical race theorists doing, then, when our efforts produce a circumstance in which our students — and perhaps by extension also our readers — are led to avow what they do not believe? And, more pressing from a phenomenological point of view, what if that avowal takes the form of believing what they do not believe, of avowing what they disavow and disavowing what they avow, of, in other words, bad faith?²

Quite a bit of recent race theory focuses on the social constructivity of race.³ Racism, as a social process of discriminating against or in favour of groups on the basis of race, points to how values affect social phenomena. Among the effects of racism, social constructivists argue, is the production of race. Thus, if racism is social, race must be a consequence of social reality. Some critics might lay claim to individual racist beliefs as independent of the social, but the social constructivist quickly points out that no belief can be meaningful without language, which is a social phenomenon, so even at the level of seemingly individual belief is the mediated role of society. This observation holds within it a particular ontological position, namely, the importance of meaning over being. Since to mean something outside of a discourse is meaningless, then what something is beyond the discursive is also meaningless. Examining race and racism without racial and racist discourses becomes, then, a contradiction of terms. Accepting the discursive entails, however, moving into the examination of how the social world produces meaning, and the focus then becomes the richest manifestation of what it means (and is) to live in a human world, namely, culture. From social constructivity, the argument quickly moves to the cultural production of race and, as characterized well by David Theo Goldberg in his book bearing that name, racist culture.⁴

The notion of racist culture carries with it the notion of race itself as cultural along with the presupposition that there are non-racist cultures. Yet culture itself is not the way many communities see, or at least saw, themselves before unique developments from the mid-18th century onward emerged regarding the organization of human ways of life.⁵ Although each community of human beings has always been aware of others who live differently, the cultural designation, even if independent of the racial one, was certainly concomitant with the latter’s emergence. By the 19th century, these considerations took the form of a fervent debate in an area of thought known as philosophy of civilization.⁶ There, drawing upon Darwin, there was obsession at first over the meeting of biology and the social world in notions of the biologically superior producing the culturally superior. This, in the usual circular fashion, led to the demonstration of cultural superiority bringing biological superiority back in the mainstream, albeit through the back door. Thus, critics of notions of white supremacy, such as
Alexander Crummell and W. E. B. Du Bois, attempted either to provide evidence for cultural hybrids demonstrating biological superiority (for Crummell, Anglo-Saxon cultural adaptation by the ‘Negro’), or to show cultural genius as the basis of biological preservation (for example, Du Bois’s discussion of Negro spirituals and epistemic location as justification for continued Negro existence). Eventually, as the biological underpinnings of race began to lose force, the cultural assertion seems to have cut its umbilical cord, and began to circulate as a signifier on its own terms in the realm of racial ideas, to the point of dominating the discussion of race and racism from the late 20th century into the early years of the 21st. Why, then, as talk about culture dominates, to the point of racism being ascribed to views about religious groups (e.g., Muslims) and ethnic groups (e.g., Mexican-Americans), do many subscribe to race as cultural in theory but not in practice, not, that is, as a lived reality? 

The constructivity of race could benefit much from the clarification of culture in philosophical terms. Perhaps such an addition would enable more people to mean what they say, and believe what they mean, when they refer to the constructivity of race and, in so doing, also its reality.

That which Lurks beneath Culture

To some extent, a process of obfuscation and distancing seems to be a cause of the dissociation between avowed belief and actual belief. Instead of clarifying the logic of racial and racist discourses, some of us, including the most influential among us, seem to have made it more mystifying. This is clearly Bernard Boxill’s view of Du Bois’s position and its legacy, as he relates in a strikingly sober discussion of race that goes against the grain of the formulations dominant in recent philosophy across the analytical, continental, critical theoretical, and pragmatist divides.

In opposition to Dubois’s cultural definition of race, I propose a physical definition of race. This definition is, for reasons which will presently emerge, the racist’s definition. Individual differences in culture are supremely irrelevant to the way in which the racist classifies people into races. A man with blue eyes and blond hair who loves chillins and jazz is still a white man, though perhaps a depraved one. A man with black skin and nappy hair who loves Shakespeare and ballet is still a black man, though certainly one who needs putting in his place. And when the black who ‘passes’ is unmasked, it is not because he reveals a secret weakness for chillins, but because it is revealed that he has black-skinned ancestors. The racist, we observe, takes a race to be a group of people distinguished either by their physical appearance or biology, or else descended from such a group of people, and since I have adopted their conception, I propose that, insofar as black people are a race, they are people who either themselves look black — that is, have a certain kind of physical appearance — or are, at least in part, descended from such a people.

He adds, addressing a theme that has received much attack over the past 20 years:

This definition of race better supports the idea of black pride and autonomy than the cultural definition and is more useful for an understanding of racism. Consider black pride. If to be black one must share in a particular culture, how can people who have black skins or black ancestors but who do not share in that culture have black pride? The cultural definition of race is evasive. When the racist tells black people that they can accomplish nothing because of their race, he is not telling them that they cannot accomplish anything because of their culture. He is telling them that they can accomplish nothing because of their biological being. For racism is based predominantly on biology. Of course, it also maintains that black culture is degenerate. Thus, to rebut racism’s lie, to confront it directly, we must use words the way it uses words; we cannot use ‘race’ to mean a cultural group. We must use ‘race,’ as racism uses it, to mean a group defined biologically. Only in this way can ‘race pride’ mean ‘black pride’ for all the victims of racism.

Boxill here gets at the heart of what many who believe in racial difference actually believe. They can observe that members of the same race can belong to different cultures, and also that members of the same cultures can belong to different races. There are black Americans and black Europeans. And there are white Mexicans and black Mexicans. They also know that people could hate the race connected to cultural activity
they love. There are many white anti-black racists who love rock’n’roll, jazz and hip hop. But more, there are people who understand who they are in racial terms even while despising their connection to a shared culture and even a shared race. There are whites, for instance, who see themselves as white although they don’t like white people and the cultures associated with whiteness. When referring to themselves as white, they do not mean their mode of behaviour. They mean their biological lineage. For them to say that they are white only by virtue of construction, then, requires them ultimately not to say what they mean.11

We arrive, then, at a discourse that is saturated with bad faith. By bad faith, I mean the forms of self-deception that lead, among other things, to believing what one does not believe. One way of achieving this is by the construction of labyrinthine discursive devices, that is, by creating such a great distance between one belief and another, between one social practice and another, that more pleasing conceptions of reality can be maintained.12 The hope is that complexity, for instance, would slacken the force of an otherwise recalcitrant reality. This is not to say that there aren’t details that could not be illuminated by the resources of sophisticated analysis. What it means to understand reality in terms of one’s common sense has its own limitations, as Gramsci observed in his concept of critical reflection, and it is the role of philosophers and other kinds of theorists to bring the understanding of reality offered by their theories to bear on its parts.13 Among such are considerations of philosophical anthropology, wherein the theoretical conception of the human being often collides with how human beings actually live. The tension there is paradoxical, however, as in an effort to ‘discover’ or ‘disclose’ the human being, the theorist also expands, and at times even creates, the version at hand.14

Theorizing theory, or thinking through thought on thought, then, becomes also a consideration in race theory, where theory must comport with a reality that it also affects.15 Among the instances of theory affecting reality is the problem of defining the subject. How people understand race determines how racial reality is practised. Boxill, for instance, offers two understandings of race in his critique of the cultural theory. The first emerges through racism and is an understanding of how the racist defines race. The other is an understanding of how those who are subject to racism come to see themselves in relation to each other. Both hinge upon a historical-physicalist conception of race, one that is rooted in an understanding of the body as more than a corporeal entity. The body is also, after all, a biographical entity, a being with a history linked through biological processes of birth to other bodies spanning many generations, which makes it mysterious that so many discussions of embodiment seem to treat bodies as if they were not born from other bodies.16 History without generations giving biological birth to other generations would be as the words of gods. The body is also what enables a perspective on and of reality by which a ‘here’ could emerge that enables the emergence of anywhere that could count as a ‘there’.17 It is what also enables the formulation of the self and others, and of what it means to correlate shared and diverging narratives. Yet trouble is on the horizon, if we take to heart the following observation by Jean-Paul Sartre early on in his Critique of Dialectical Reason:

Language is ambiguous in that words sometimes designate objects and sometimes concepts; and this is why materialism as such is not opposed to idealism. In fact, there is a materialist idealism which, in the last analysis, is merely a discourse on the idea of matter: the real opposite of this is realist materialism — the thought of an individual who is situated in the world, penetrated by every cosmic force, and treating the material universe as something which gradually reveals itself through a ‘situated’ praxis.18

Sartre returns to this observation more succinctly a little later: ‘Being is the negation of knowledge, and knowledge draws its being from the negation of being.’19 To know that human beings subscribe to a materialist metaphysics of racial difference by virtue of material location and develop certain psychological and sociological responses to it is but the beginning of a reflection on what such knowledge signifies. As well, if what also emerges from this is the view that human beings produce such
ways of knowing, the question emerges whether such conceptions are permanent and thus collapse into an isomorphic relationship between concept and being, wherein, as the gap closes, it simply becomes a mode of being and, hence, the negation of knowledge. The dialectical implications of such a movement bring to the fore the importance of thinking through race as a dynamic phenomenon instead of, say, one governed by positivist notions of concepts that stand outside of history, as it were. What enables contemporary processes of identification to make sense, for instance, is a constellation of relationships or rules by which they become meaningful. Such is one of the presuppositions of race theory, which, in this sense, becomes theory also about theory, about, that is, whether the theoretical apparatuses are also linked to the phenomena about which they have been developed. To illustrate, consider the following story of race through a short history of race theory, an activity, a practice as Sartre’s considerations suggest, a field governed by varieties of habitus wrought with the impositions of symbolic violence, as Pierre Bourdieu would add, since it is generated by what human beings do and through which human beings come to understand what they do, if often with a profound ignorance of its underlying grammar.20

A Short History of Race Thinking

The definition of race has a story that begins in a prototypical and then full-fledged discourse or, as Paul Taylor calls it, ‘self conscious race thinking’.21 The prototypical period refers to theories of human difference from antiquity through medieval times. The ancient narratives, whether in Africa, Asia or Europe, were not explicitly race thinking, since race had not yet evolved; but the familiar themes of an inside group that counts as the explicitly human versus a less human, outside group were well known; for instance, the Greek notions of people who were naturally slaves and barbarians being non-Greeks. These accounts of human difference found metaphysical support in a universe that was perfect and cyclical, where each cycle revealed a purposeful or teleological nature. In Aristotle’s thought, cyclical form — eternal, as understood by Plato — became an organic fusion of form and matter made concrete in the manifestations of human potential not only in the magnanimous Greek man but also in the centred group of free Greek men.

Christendom marked a fusion of the Greek and Latin worldviews with West Asian and North African eschatological conceptions of time, transforming the centred group into one legitimated by a theological naturalism, which framed the outsiders at first as those who rejected Christianity and therefore stood outside of the holy and the good. Such people needed accounting for in different terms, since the theological metaphysics made them also creations of an all-powerful and all-knowing deity. The result was a kind of argument that has continued even into an age of secularism, namely, theodicy. Theodicy involves rationalizations that make injustice and evil external to the source of all things good. Thus, in most theodicean forms of argumentation, the Supreme Being’s intentions lay beyond human comprehension; or, injustice and evil are consequences of human free will, which was a gift of divine benevolence. The lot of the outside group, then, becomes one of either conforming to an ultimately grand purpose or being at fault for their condition through misuse of their free will.22 In either formulation, their condition, at least on earth, is of the damned.

A crucial development in the evolution of race emerged in the Iberian Peninsula in the Middle Ages. Ruled by North African Muslims called the Moors from the 8th through the 15th centuries, Christians in that part of the world developed a classification for their outsiders, who were, paradoxically, given the near millennium of colonization, also insiders, and birthed the etymological foundation of the word ‘race’ in the word raza, which referred to breeds of dogs and horses and, when referring to human populations, Moors and Jews.23 The defeat of the Moors in 1492 was followed by a series of inquisitions to assess the authenticity of the remaining populations of Moors and Jews who had converted to Christianity, a process
that led to demands for demonstrations of ‘purity of blood’
(limpieza de sangre). Ancestry became relevant as the ‘truly’
Christian became a feature of individuals whose origins were
‘purely’ Christian. Since all that was natural emanated from
the theological centre, these groups stood as a prototypical
formulation of the anthropology that took a path through raza
(Italian) to the modern term race, as used by Francois Bernier
in his 1684 account, A New Division of the Earth.

A consequence of modern racial logic, however, is that it
also affects etymological practices. Thus, although this story
points back to medieval times, simply stopping at the meeting
of Arabic, Latin and Germanic languages in Andalusia appears
artificial and arbitrary. The Moors, after all, included the
Berber and other North African linguistic communities, and
within the Semitic linguistic framework was also Hebrew.24

Pushing these considerations further, there is the peculiar
connection of raza with ra’ (Arabic) and then rosh (Hebrew),
which is related to ras (Amharic), both of which refer to ‘head’
or ‘beginning’, and there are oddly many cognates in a variety
of languages ranging from Old Norse to Sanskrit. A possible link,
however, is in the Egyptian word ra, referring to the sun god,
which would suggest a conception of beginning (sunrise) and
a movement from east to west that could easily be correlated
with the foreignness of the people adumbrated by raza. For
Jews, however, the story is rendered more complicated by the
lunar significance of the Jewish organization of celestial time,
which, among other things, begins the day when the sun sets,
instead of rises. The complexity of Jewish organization of
political life in terms of overcoming or in opposition to an
Egyptian cosmological order would, then, make the reassertion
of a sun-centred metaphysics a continued assertion of Jewish
and by extension Islamic (also lunar) elsewhereess.25

The initial period of the expansion of Christendom in the
late 15th century led, however, to Christian encounters with
people who were neither Moor nor Jew. This period was marked
by a succession of realignments of received narratives with
conflicting ones, many of which also came from conflicts in
West Asia. The processes of naturalization became increasingly
affected by conceptions of knowing premised upon a shift
from (Greek) geometrical approaches to mathematical innovations such as the concept of zero, decimals, and a more efficient
numerical system. These shifts began to affect natural theology
as it was transformed through natural philosophy into modern
science, accompanied by the eradication of eternal, natural
permanence and the realization of having to account not only
for the new and the discovered, but also for the dying, and for
the real possibility of extinction. The enslavement and near genocide
of the native populations of the Americas led to Bartolomé
Las Casas’s efforts to save them through appeals to the papal
authority, and to his famous debate with Gines de Sepúlveda
on the status and suitability of the native populations for
slavery. Although there were by this point Christians, Muslims
and Jews who could be found in the interior regions of Africa
such as the Congo, a rearticulating of their status and that of
other peoples of darker hue in terms of abundance rendered
them vulnerable to the growing, global demand for labour. The
well-known result, which signalled a key moment in the emergence
of modern racism, was the Atlantic slave trade.26

The secular explanations that developed by the end of the
16th century, emerging out of encounters of Europeans and
North Africans with people, animals and fauna not accounted
for in the Torah, the Christian Bible or the Qur’an, stimulated a
revolution in human reflection on nature, as emerges from the
work of Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler, Bacon, Descartes, and
Newton, among others, across the succeeding three centuries.
This new science demanded explanations, as Ernst Cassirer
observed in An Essay on Man, which strained theological,
teleological causality, although much of the mythic foundations of that grammar continued, albeit in secular form. The
search for causation in the human organism turned to nature
itself. As David Hume famously declared in A Treatise
of Human Nature: Being an Attempt to Introduce the Experimental
Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects (1739–40), his goal
was to articulate for man what Newton had achieved in his
explanation of the physical world. Presaging such naturalistic
effort was the work of Carolus Linnaeus and Johann Friedrich
Blumenbach. Linnaeus’s *Systema Naturae* (1735) offered a classificatory system, premised upon hierarchies of being, sometimes referred to as ‘the great chain of being’, which serves as the basis for classifying living things well into the present, while Blumenbach devoted his classification interests to divisions within the human species, or racial divisions, correlated with the recently mapped continents of Europe, Asia, Africa, North America, and South America as they tend to be known today, including the term *Caucasians*, which he coined, to refer to Europeans. The practice of mapping regions brought to the fore the mapping of people in an ordered rationality. This rationality stimulated an anthropology that was, paradoxically, narrowing as it expanded.

The acquisition of land and the flow of labour engineering the wealth that grew along with this expanded knowledge continued to be governed by the logic of the saved and the damned. A theodicean anthropology followed, wherein the below-human category of people grew in ways that made consistent a logic of emancipatory knowledge and wealth. Rationalizations for these practices were governed, as Carole Pateman recently showed, through claims of *terra nullius* (empty land). Claims of empty territories followed a logic from the de facto absence of people to the logic of the conditions of peoplehood. These were first religious, then cultural. The path to the cultural was accompanied by shifts in the study of human beings through a movement from knowledge to its conditions of possibility, in a philosophical anthropology marked by the question of a human world as the condition of possibility not only for knowledge but also for itself, in a movement from Johann Gottfried Herder through to Immanuel Kant and G. W. F. Hegel, resulting in the challenges of culture and the problematic of history. To place a people outside of the framework of culture and history, then, meant their placement, as with theodicy, outside of the legitimately real. Given the self-reference of the thinkers posing these transcendentai considerations of culture and history, ‘no one’ became a signifier taking a path from no Christians and no Europeans to, eventually, no civilization and no whites (where white, Christian and European became one). The result was additionally ironic: as freedom became more valorized (where even culture meant the active production of human reality), slavery became repugnant only if waged against those who were considered properly human — namely, this small portion of humankind who valorized such freedom. Tagged onto the growing racial naturalism, that forbidden population became white, simply because western Europeans came to regard themselves as the only truly human population.

In the 19th century, the criteria for human status shifted from practices of mapping, cataloguing and language (given the sacred status of Latin and its impact on its cognate languages) to something radically new, the genuinely *biological* in the form of Charles Darwin’s theory of natural selection. Although Darwin’s argument rejects an overarching teleology or purpose beyond survival, since natural selection had no more significance than a species or its traits persisting over time, old notions of election were tagged onto selection in an eschatology of salvation: survival and redemption became one, but with profound anxiety, perhaps fear of the future, since redemption could be lost simply by being outlived, even by a group’s supposed inferiors.

The legacy of cultural and historical idealism along with Darwinian biology led to a new form of argumentation in race theory, one that moved away from classification and identification to their presuppositions and to a different kind of accounting, namely, the questions: how did racial divisions come about? and, how is race possible? These considerations take us, ironically, back to Du Bois, but now with a different sense of the context in which his cultural concerns took shape. There is at first the presumption that race functions as a descriptive anthropological classification. Du Bois showed, however, that there were normative presuppositions of white normality versus gradations of coloured abnormality that dominated the study of race. Implicit in the study of ‘Negro problems’, for instance, was the notion of ‘Negroes as problems’ and, a correlate of this, ‘problem Negroes’ instead of ‘people facing problems’. Research on such populations was thus affected in advance by a priori claims about them. Du Bois
argued further that there was an absence of social-scientific rigour because of the abandoning of the basic social-scientific practices of theorizing from a shared social world on the one hand, and because of the failure to interrogate the methodological presuppositions of applicability on the other.

The social-scientific study of populations in the late 19th century through the early 20th century presupposed the legitimacy of Herbert Spencer's social Darwinian bio-sociology, where human populations were placed on a hierarchy of ‘fitness’ according to who dominated and who was dominated. In the European context, different schemas had emerged such as the class analysis of Karl Marx, the typification models of social rationalization offered by Max Weber and the examination of sacred symbols and social meaning in the work of Emile Durkheim. By way of methods, the expectations from positivism, emerging out of the thought of August de Comte, and the general environment of the expected advancement of natural science, suggested that the scientific method offered much for the development of sociology and, as the followers of Spencer believed, for the overall grounding of the study and classification of human populations according to the prevailing scientific models. From Darwin forward, as we have seen, the dominating scientific influence was biology. Du Bois noticed, however, that race seemed to function in conjunction with other disciplinary outlooks and also on its own terms. He noticed that the study of race presupposed indulgence in the particular at the expense of studying the universal ‘man’. The prejudices, however, centred the categories of universal man in terms of particularities that excluded racialized people and related ethnic typographies, with the result that a particular kind of man became the presumption of man. The continued relevance of Du Bois’s sociological work, which has outlived the Spencerians of his day, is because of the centrality it accorded race, which is a continuing sociological thematic and ‘problem’ not only of American social life but also of much of the globe, giving continued support to his prophetic claim that the 20th century was going to be governed by the problem of the colour line, as contemporary studies of global racism attest.31

Finally, a crucial dimension of Du Bois’s early reflections on sociological theory was his putting the problem of formulating social problems to the fore. That task required understanding the role of social institutions and of pressing social concepts, which later structural anthropologists would call ‘symbols’, through which race appears and is understood.

The Du Boisian shift to social analysis inaugurated an attack on the biological understanding of race that led to the contemporary circumstance of which, as we have seen, Bernard Boxill posed important criticisms. Recall that Darwinism became a sociological theory through a misreading by social Darwinists, especially through the socio-biological theories of Herbert Spencer and, ironically, of Darwin himself. In addition to Du Bois, the famed anthropologist Franz Boas offered a powerful critique of such a turn.32 What the social Darwinians misunderstood about natural selection, argued Boas, was that Darwin was not, or at least should not have been, arguing that human beings evolved out of chimpanzees (human beings closest living biological relatives), but that both species were, from the standpoint of natural selection, equally evolved. Given the argument about survival, every species sharing a particular moment in history is evolved by virtue of the coordination with its environment that enables its survival. It can, in principle, be unsuitable for another environmental development, but that circumstance would have to come about for the process of selection to be tested. The misreading of natural selection presumed that there was an inherent progress to evolution, a teleology, which meant that some groups within a species could be interpreted as living at an earlier stage of development while another was at a later stage. Thus, the appeal to racial hierarchies took the form of asserting the primitiveness (earlier stage) of one group versus the more developed stage of another racial group. Boas argued that culture, which the social Darwinists treated as bearing an isomorphic relation to biology, was independent of biology.33 In other words, any human being could be raised in another cultural context in which he or she would express the language and other exemplars of the material conditions of that culture. Boas’s work, in addition to that of other
anthropologists, both physical and cultural, played a central role in the eventual development of the genetic disputation of race as expressed in the UNESCO Statement on Race authored by the famed geneticist and anthropologist Ashley Montagu. A revised and embellished version of the UNESCO document was adopted and published in 1996 as an official position of the American Association of Physical Anthropologists under the title ‘AAPA Statement on Biological Aspects of Race’.

Concluding: The Intersectional and the Interdimensional

A result of the undermining of biological bases for the concept of race has been the domination of the social sciences and humanities as the main sites of work in race theory, although biologists and physicalists continue to do their research, and race continues to be a powerful conceptual tool in the medical profession in cases that are not necessarily pernicious, such as admission of the differential behaviour of diseases across social groupings premised upon race.

The rejection of the biological then, although not a closed issue, is the basis for the recurring significance of culture in the analysis of race. Although the Boxill critique points to the biological, the obvious consideration, as we saw with the Sartrean challenge, is to question the conclusive nature of such a criticism. In other words, must the relationship be the primarily physical versus the primarily cultural? Could not a both-and logic, one that is phenomenological and dialectically self-reflective, be at work in understanding how the bio-physical acquires social meaning? Cassirer offers some insights in the following remarks:

The functional circle of man is not only quantitatively enlarged; it has also undergone a qualitative change. Man has, as it were, discovered a new method of adapting himself to his environment. Between the receptor system and the effector system, which are to be found in all animal species, we find in man a third link which we may describe as the symbolic system. This new acquisition transforms the whole of human life. As compared with the other animals man lives not merely in a broader reality; he lives, so to speak, in a new dimension of reality.

A characteristic feature of debates over the physical versus the cultural that limits understanding is the failure to see that both are radically different modes of being. Whereas the former is governed, for instance, by laws that would make intersections more geometrical, which would lead to some of the kinds of symbolic violence of which Bourdieu has written by virtue of a battle for ontological space, the latter moves beyond such realms and functions according to differences that are, as Cassirer states, dimensional. To move into a different dimension means to be ‘inside’ in a way that is not necessarily spatial and hence not even intersecting. The human world, from a physicalist standpoint (if such a notion carries any coherence), does not exist, and its notions of convergence are mutitudinous because of not adding, ex nihilo, as with miracles, the physically new. There are no more nor less a total of physical things in the universe. But from within the symbolic system of culture, there is a proliferation of meanings and things in an endless series of possibilities. Race, from this perspective, is, then, about meaning, what reality means in human terms.

Here we discover a new angle on Sartre’s remark about knowledge drawing its being from the negation of being. So, too, does culture. But this paradox, of being through the negation of being, consists in how, in the production of meaning, culture is also the production of new forms of life. Race, in this sense, is thus not the bodies designated by the words ‘black’, ‘red’, ‘brown’, ‘yellow’, or ‘white’, but about the bodies, about how they are brought into a logos, about how they are catalogued, and about the story that brings meaning, across time, through the same mechanisms by which culture, in framing history, also brings human reflection to bear on reality. Put differently, race, culturally understood, collapses meaning and being: its rejection is possible only through a de-linking of culture from its own history. In race, then, is not simply a story of anthropology manqué, but an understanding of thought itself, human thought, as incapable of overcoming its own contradictions.
because the human being exceeds, in an active way, the theoretical models forced onto human reality. In Du Bois’s thought, this was the problematic resistance to disciplinary encasement (attempting to squeeze races into disciplines instead of realizing how race troubles disciplines); in Sartre’s, this was metastability; in Bourdieu’s, it is what symbolic practices are about. The yoking of race to a singular discipline, the disciplining of race, is the misguided anthropology by which race continues to leave researchers vexed.

Frantz Fanon in 1952 saw some of these contradictions, which he characterized as productive failures, in the introduction to his classic first book, *Black Skin, White Masks*. There, he challenged phylogenetic and ontogenetic positions in the study of human difference and pointed to the additional element of social reality, which, he argued, as a generator of meaning, also produces the identities by which and through which people live. He articulated an important distinction between race and ethnic identities—the latter could be chosen and transformed by individuals within a group, but racial identities are a function of an imposition on a group, a position he later formulated in *L’an v de la révolution algérienne* (1959), available in English as *A Dying Colonialism*; by way of example: whites created the Negro, but it is the Negro who created Negritude. Fanon argued that social reality required human agency for its existence, which means that it could also be transformed by human agency. But transformation required the negotiation of symbolic and material structures of culture ranging from language, the psychoanalytical organization of power and constitutional organizations of psychic life. All these fail in the colonial context, which Fanon regarded, in stream with the narrative I have offered in this chapter, as quintessential for the construction of racial ordering, in an asymmetrical semiosis of race: the white constructed the black, but the black did not construct the white. The white functioned as agent in both accounts, and in similar kind to other categories of colour. With regard to blacks, however, the racial designation had an additional effect. The slide from racial difference to *racism* pushed the black into a nether-realm of sub-humanness, the result of which was a disruption of self-other ethical dialectics and dysfunction even at methodological levels. The outcome was a structural model of whites and some coloured categories in a relationship of self and others. Below that schema, however, was another set who were neither the self nor others except in a unique set of differing relations in the sub-schema. The self-other dialectic functioned between individuals in this sub-schema from below, but the asymmetry of the relationship meant that those above stood as others in relation to the self or selves from below.

This structure is a semiotic rearticulation of Du Bois’s double consciousness thesis. The blacks can see themselves as seen through the eyes of whites, which means the positing of the white perspective as a possibility. The realization is that it is not a reciprocal relationship—the white does not see the self as conditioned by the black but as a point of reference looking onto the black looking back onto the white as a white perspective. In other words, the black, as a genuine point of view, is eliminated in the relationship. This means that double consciousness pointed to more than a problem of positioning. It pointed, as the earlier quotation of Cassirer suggests, to *dimensional shifts*. In other words, within the symbolic realm of culture, an impact on space emerges in which, although people could be in spatial proximity, they could be in different *places*. Since place can mean different things, any effort to render a restricted relationship between space and place leads to a situation in which those who are not so restricted are able to see, in a word, what is often not seen. This aspect of racial thought, attuned to the transdisciplinarity of race, calls for decolonizing practices at methodological levels.

The move from double consciousness to what Paget Henry has called *potentiated double consciousness* takes this form. As a phenomenological and dialectically expanding notion, it enables groups to live through multiple dimensions in a single spatial or temporal configuration. Returning to the white/black dialectic (often referred to as “binary” precisely because of the spatial logic, where only one element can occupy a space), this
means that blacks live the realization of multiple dimensional configurations, doubled doubling, through which race is a governing, expanding reality. To live and understand race is to realize that culture proliferates categories through which different groups of people live in different worlds, wherein symbolic violence handicaps perceptual capacities in the form of an avowed universality that fails to see its particularity, as opposed to a presumed particularity that embodies a universalizing practice by virtue of its constant, lived engagement with contradictions. Transcending such dehumanizing impasses, then, requires an understanding of more than spatial intersections, as I have been arguing, and an understanding of intersubjective possibilities as also interdimensional ones. This expanded dimensionality, being linked to political locations, brings to the fore the relationship of culture and race beyond questions of the reducibility of one to the other, and on to the understanding of what they mean in the terms through which human beings actually live.

Notes

1. This was the case with Dr Louis Agassiz, the famed Swiss zoologist at Harvard University in the 19th century, who was an anti-racist until spending time in Philadelphia, where he actually met blacks in the flesh, who were the staff in the hotel at which he stayed. He was revolted by their skin, their physical presence, and changed his tune. See Stephen Jay Gould, The Mismeasure of Man (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981). For the Kierkegaardian reference, see Søren Kierkegaard, Works of Love, trans. Howard Hong (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).

2. For a developed discussion of race and racism through and their relation to this phenomenon, see Lewis R. Gordon, Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities International Press, 1995).


6. In addition to the texts in note 5, see Lewis R. Gordon, An Introduction to Africana Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), especially ch. 3.


11. There are many studies of those dimensions of whiteness, but see, e.g., George Yancy, ed., What White Looks Like: African-American Philosophers on the Whiteness Question (New York: Routledge, 2004). See also Jane Anna Gordon and Lewis R. Gordon, Of Divine Warning: Reading Disaster in the Modern Age (Boulder, CO:
Paradigm Publishers, 2009), ch. 4, which looks at a form of anti-black racism that is manifested in a white performance that suggests blacks are not only bad at being white but also bad at being black.

12. See Gordon, Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism, part I.


14. For more discussion of this dimension of theoretical work on social reality, see Lewis R. Gordon, Fanon and the Crisis of European Man: An Essay on Philosophy and the Human Sciences (New York: Routledge, 1995), ch. 3.

15. This is a disciplinary point that applies as well to history and the formation of disciplines across the human sciences. For discussion, see part II of Susan Buck-Morss, Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009), and Lewis R. Gordon, Disciplinary Decadence: Living Thought in Tiring Times (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2006).

16. This is not an error of the existential phenomenological tradition, as Simone de Beauvoir’s classic Second Sex attests, but it is a glaring absence in many recent post-structural discussions of the body. On these matters, see, e.g., Gail Weiss, Refiguring the Ordinary (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), and Oyêrôǹκé Owówùmí, The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997). For de Beauvoir, see The Second Sex, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Knopf, 2010). Cf. also Gail Weiss, Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality (New York: Routledge, 1998).

17. This formulation of the body and location is a phenomenological one that rejects the notion of disembodied consciousness. See, e.g., Gordon, Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism, ch. 7, “The Body in Bad Faith”.


19. Ibid., p. 35.


22. African-American religious thought and theology have been engaged in a robust debate on this topic since the publication in 1973 of William R. Jones’s Is God a White Racist? A Preamble to Black Theology, with a new preface and afterward (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), a book in which I devoted considerable attention in part IV of Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism. For the most influential recent engagements with the problematic of Jones’s text and the problem of theodicy in the context of black American liberation struggles, see Anthony Pinn, Why Lord? Suffering and Evil in Black Theology (New York: Continuum, 1999); and, from the Afro-Muslim perspective, Sherman A. Jackson, Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).


29. Sarah Daynes and Orville Lee have offered a similar account leading to these two questions in the context of sociological theory, with the shared observation that many social constructivists
conflate racial difference with physical difference, so that they are led to believing that the rejection of race must bring with it also the rejection of physical difference. See their extraordinary study, Desire for Race (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).


31. See, e.g., Fluhr-Lobban, Race and Racism, and the quantitative data offered by various articles in the University of Michigan journal African American Research Perspectives.


33. For discussion, see, e.g., Fluhr-Lobban, Race and Racism, p. 15.


35. See Jamie D. Brooks and Meredith King Ledford, 'Geneticizing Disease: Implications for Racial Health Disparities', Centre for American Progress, http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2008/01/geneticizing_disease.html (created on 15 January 2008, accessed on 29 April 2011). The use of race in medical research, diagnosis and therapy is hotly debated. Among the questions raised is that of genetic versus gross difference. Genes associated with one race could emerge in members of another race. A response by physicians who use race in their diagnoses and treatments, however, is that such cases simply prove that there are members of some races with ancestry in other races. Second, some critics could argue that race in medicine is never a claim about all members of each racial group but most. As a human science, medicine will always have its exceptions. Brooks and Ledford are careful to point out that disease, at least in racial terms, is 'a combination of nature and nurture', which, at least, reminds us that nurture alone cannot account for the phenomenon and, by implication, the same applies to nature by itself. For racial eliminativists, even this concession is objectionable (see, e.g., Gilroy, Against Race, pp. 19–20).


