



What is Racism?

Ramon Grosfoguel

University of California, Berkeley

grosfogu@berkeley.edu

Abstract

This article provides a definition of racism inspired in the work of Frantz Fanon, Boaventura de Sousa Santos and contemporary Caribbean Fanonian Philosophers. It discusses racism in relation to zone of being and zone of non-being. Racism is discussed as a dehumanization related to the materiality of domination used by the world-system in the zone of non-being (violence and dispossession) as opposed to the materiality of domination in the zone of being (regulation and emancipation). The approach shows how intersectionality of oppressions work differently for oppressed people in the zone of being as opposed to oppressed people in the zone of non-being. While in the zone of being oppressions are mitigated by racial privilege, in the zone of non-being oppressions are aggravated by racial oppression.

Keywords: Racism, Racialization



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Racism is a global hierarchy of superiority and inferiority along the line of the human that have been politically, culturally and economically produced and reproduced for centuries by the institutions of the “capitalist/patriarchal western-centric/Christian-centric modern/colonial world-system” (Grosfoguel, 2011). The people classified above the line of the human are recognized socially in their humanity as human beings and, thus, enjoy access to rights (human rights, civil rights, women rights and/or labor rights), material resources, and social recognition to their subjectivities, identities, epistemologies and spiritualities. The people below the line of the human are considered subhuman or non-human; that is, their humanity is questioned and, as such, negated (Fanon 1967). In the latter case, the extension of rights, material resources and the recognition of their subjectivities, identities, spiritualities and epistemologies are denied.

This definition of racism allows us to conceive of diverse forms of racism, evading the reductionisms of many existing definitions. Depending on the different colonial histories in diverse regions of the world, the hierarchy of superiority/inferiority along the lines of the human can be constructed through diverse racial markers. Racism can be marked by color, ethnicity, language, culture and/or religion.

Although since colonial times color racism has been the dominant marker of racism in most parts of the world, it is not the only or exclusive form of racist marker. On many occasions we confuse the particular/concrete social marker of racism in one region of the world with what is taken to be as the exclusive form or universal definition of racism. This has created an enormous amount of conceptual and theoretical problems. If we collapse the particular social form/marker that racism adopts in the region or country of the world we have been socialized (for example, color racism) to make it equivalent to the universal definition of racism, then we lose sight of the diverse racist markers that are not necessarily the same in other regions of the world. The problem with taking a particular racist marker as the definition of racism, leads us to adopt the false conclusion that racism does not exist in other parts of the world if the form of marking racism in one particular region or country does not coincide with the “common sense” form of marking it in one’s own country. This example forms part of the pervasive “methodological nationalism” (Wimmer and Glick-Schiller 2003; Amelina et. al. 2012) that obscures the broader and world-systemic understanding of a modern/colonial problem such as racism.

Racism is a hierarchy of superiority/inferiority along the line of the human. This hierarchy can be constructed and marked in diverse ways. Westernized elites of the Third World (African, Asian or Latin American) reproduce racist practices against ethno/racial groups where, depending on the local/colonial history, those considered “inferior” below the line of the human can be defined or marked along religious, ethnic, cultural or color lines.

In the colonial history of Ireland, the British constructed their racial superiority over the Irish, not through the marker of skin color, but rather through a religious marker (Ignatiev 2008). When the colonizer and the colonized share the same skin color, the marker of superiority/inferiority along the line of the human has to be constructed with a different marker beyond color racism. What appeared at first glance to be a religious conflict between Protestants and Catholics was in fact a racial/colonial conflict.

The same can be said of Islamophobia in Europe and in the United States today (Sayyid and Vakil 2011). Muslim religious identity today constitutes one of the most prominent markers of superiority/inferiority along the line of the human. Muslims are constructed in North America and Europe today as “barbarians,” “backward,” “uncivilized,” “violent,” “terrorist,” “abusive of children, women and gay/lesbians,” “un-adaptable to European values,” etc. I said “one of the most prominent markers” because in these two regions of the world color racism continues to be of great importance and entangles itself in complex ways with religious racism. Nonetheless, while the ethnic/racial hierarchy of superiority/inferiority is marked by the color of the skin in many regions of the world, in other regions it is marked by ethnic, linguistic, religious or cultural identity.

Racialization occurs through the marking of *bodies*. Some bodies are racialized as superior and other bodies are racialized as inferior. The important point here is that those subjects located above the line of the human, as superior, live in what Afro-Caribbean philosophers following Fanon’s work called the “zone of being,” while subjects that live on the inferior side of the demarcating line live in the “zone of non-being” (Fanon, 1967, Gordon 2006, Wynter 2003 and Maldonado-Torres 2008).

Differentiated Intersectionalities/Entanglements:

Zone of Being and Zone of Non-Being

In an imperial/capitalist/colonial world-system, race constitutes the transversal dividing line that cuts across multiple power relations such as class, sexual and gender at a global scale. The “intersectionality” of race, class, sexuality and gender hierarchies, a concept developed by black feminists (Davis 1983, Crenshaw, 1991), occurs in both zones of the world that Fanon describes. However, the lived experience of the diverse oppressions and the particular way in which intersectionality is articulated is different in the zone of being as opposed to the zone of non-being. This is crucial because racism is not just a question of prejudice or stereotypes, but above all an institutional/structural hierarchy related to the materiality of domination.

On the grounds of being racialized as superior beings, there are subjects in the zone of being that live class, gender, sexual and/or national/colonial oppression. However, they do not experience racial oppression but rather racial privilege. Thus, they live all those oppressions

mitigated by racial privilege. As will be discussed below, this has fundamental implications for how class, gender, sexual or national/colonial oppressions are lived. Given that in the zone of non-being subjects are racialized as inferior, they live racial oppression instead of racial privilege. The intersectional entanglement between class, sexual, gender or national/colonial oppressions that exist in the zone of non-being are, therefore, qualitatively distinct from the way these oppressions are lived and articulated in the zone of being. In the zone of non-being, the multiple oppressions are *aggravated* by racial oppression. The issue that should be emphasized here is that there is a qualitative difference between how intersectional/entangled oppressions are articulated and lived in the zone of being as opposed to the zone of non-being in the “capitalist/patriarchal Western-centric/Christian-centric modern/colonial world-system” (Grosfoguel 2011).

Neither of these zones is homogenous. Both zones are heterogeneous spaces. Following Fanon (1967), we could say that within the zone of being continuous conflicts exist between what the Hegelian dialectic characterizes as the “I” and the “Other”. In the “I” and “Other” dialectic within the zone of being there are conflicts; but these are non-racial conflicts, as the oppressor “I” recognizes the humanity of the oppressed “Other”. The “I” in the imperialist/capitalist/patriarchal world-system are Western, heterosexual, masculine, metropolitan elites in the core and the Westernized, heterosexual, masculine elites in the peripheries. Internal colonialism exists as much in the center as in the periphery.

For Fanon, the Hegelian “Other” are the populations of the western metropolitan centers or the westernized subjects within the periphery whose humanity is recognized as such, but who at the same time live non-racial oppressions based on class, sexuality, gender or national/colonial dominations, under the hegemony of the imperial “I” in their respective regions or countries. The zone of being and zone of non-being are not a specific geographical places, but rather a position within racial structures of domination that operate at a global scale between centers and peripheries, but that are also manifested at a national and local scale against diverse groups considered as racially “inferior.”

Zones of being and zones of non-being exist at a global scale between Westernized centers and non-western peripheries (global coloniality). But zones of being and zones of non-being also exist not only inside of the metropolitan centers (internal racial/colonial subjects in urban zones, regions, ghettos, segregated communities, etc.), but also within the peripheries (internal colonialism). The zones of non-being within a metropolitan or peripheral country are the zones of internal colonialism. However, it is here that the critical decolonial sociology of Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2010) contributes to clarifying the racial difference between the zone of being and the zone of non-being. This is related to the question of the materiality of domination.

Fanon's Zones and De Sousa Santos' Abyssal Line

According to de Sousa Santos (2007; 2010), modernity is characterized by an abyssal line between the inhabitants above and below the line. The abyssal line is the line that demarcates the zones where codes of law are recognized among European empires and the lawless zones where violence is the rule. The zones of law correspond to Europeans or the superior race while the lawless zones to the colonial territory. De Sousa Santos refers here to the 1494 treaty of Tordesillas between Portuguese and Spanish empires. The Treaty of Tordesillas was made to clarify the confusion created between the two empires by the newly claimed colonial territories in the New World.

If we translate the “abyssal line” as equivalent to the Fanonian “line of the human” and we consider those that live above the abyssal line are in the zone of being, while those that live below the line the zone of non-being, then we can establish a dialogue between the work of de Sousa Santos and Fanon that could enrich our understanding of modernity and the capitalist/imperial/patriarchal/racial/colonial world-system that we inhabit. The difference between the two zones is related to the materiality of domination in racial hierarchies. For de Sousa Santos (2006), the way conflicts are managed in the zone of being (above the abyssal line) is through what he calls mechanisms of regulation and emancipation.

“Regulation” refers to civil/human/women/labor rights and legal codes, relations of civility, spaces of political negotiation and action that are recognized for the oppressed “Other” in their conflict with the oppressor “I” within the zone of being. “Emancipation” refers to discourses of liberty, autonomy, and equality that form part of the discourses and institutions used for the management of conflicts in the zone of being. Due to the fact that the oppressor “I” recognizes the humanity of the oppressed “Other” in the zone of being, the latter lives class, gender, sexual and national/colonial oppressions *mitigated* by the racial privilege of having as the materiality of domination methods of “regulation” and “emancipation.” As a trend, conflicts in the zone of being are regulated through non-violent means. Violence is always an exception, used only in exceptional moments. Moments of violence exist in the zone of being, but they exist more as an exception than as a rule.

On the contrary, as de Sousa Santos (2007; 2010) affirms, in the zone of non-being—below the abyssal line—where people are dehumanized in the sense of being considered below the line of the human as non-humans/sub-humans, the methods used by the imperial/capitalist/masculine/heterosexual “I” and its institutional system for the management and administration of the conflicts, is by means of violence and by overt appropriation/dispossession. As a trend, conflicts in the zone of non-being are managed through perpetual violence, with only exceptional moments where methods of emancipation and regulation are used. This is the inversion of the way conflicts are managed in the zone of being. The racist violence and dispossession used

as materiality of domination in the zone of non-being *aggravates* the lived experience of class, gender, sexual and national/colonial oppressions.

Since the humanity of the people classified into the zone of non-being is not recognized, and given that they are treated as non-human or subhuman, that is, without norms of rights or civility, then acts of violence, rape and appropriation are permitted that would otherwise be unacceptable in the zone of being. For de Sousa Santos, both zones are constitutive of each other and form part of the project of colonial modernity. On the other hand, for Fanon, the dialectic of mutual recognition of the “I” and the “Other” that exists in the zone of being collapses in the zone of non-being where there is no recognition of the humanity of the other. The latter has important implications such as those described by de Sousa Santos.

To summarize: the conflicts in the zone of being are administered through perpetual peace with exceptional moments of war; in the zone of non-being we have perpetual war with exceptional moments of peace. The class, gender and sexual oppression lived within the zone of being and within the zone of non-being are not the same. Since conflicts with the dominant elites and ruling classes within the zone of being are non-racial, we have it that in the conflicts of class, gender and sexuality the “Other Being” shares in the privileges of the imperial codes of law and rights, the emancipation discourses of the Enlightenment and their peaceful processes of negotiation and resolution of conflicts. In contrast, since in the zone of non-being conflicts of class, gender, and sexuality are at the same time articulated with racial oppression, the conflicts are managed and administered with violent methods and constant appropriation/dispossession. Class, gender and sexual oppression as lived by the “Non-Being Other” are aggravated due to the joint articulation of such oppressions with racial oppression.

About the Author

Ramon Grosfoguel is Associate Professor in the Department of Ethnic Studies at UC-Berkeley. He has published extensively on Decolonizing Knowledge and Power, Political-Economy of the World-System and International Migration.

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