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The narrative of guilt: a never-ending dawn? Critical considerations of the “old white man”.

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I am no linguist, but I like to think over the meaning of words and I try to grasp their profound significance, for semantic slipping is indeed frequent and dangerous. It is dangerous because nothing is more misleading than describing a fact or defining something using the wrong term, resorting to words that suggest otherwise. It is dangerous because different people use different words to talk about the same thing and because different people use the same word, while giving it different meanings. The result of all this is manifest: a society that is frustratingly (and, at times, uselessly) aggressive. And all it takes – perhaps – is to be clear on the meaning of words. Take, for example, the presence of western troops in Afghanistan, sheep mulesing in Australia and forced-swim-tests for mice in laboratories. What do they have in common?

In all three cases, we are witnessing suprematism, and I don't mean the specific art movement founded by Russian painter Kazimir Malevich within the context of Soviet avantgarde arts in the early 20th century. What I mean is an individual knowingly or unwittingly perceiving him/herself or his/her group as superior and legitimised to dictate the rules, regardless of the material or psychological damage inflicted on the subjugated third parties.

In the **first** case, the West, purveyor of preferred and refined political and constitutional systems, forces the local tribes to adopt electoral mechanisms intended for parliaments, which however are

foreign to the line of thought of peoples who have never heard of J. Locke (a philosopher who thought up the theory of the right to resistance), of British constitutionalism and, generally speaking, of French juridical rationalism.

Why impose a cultural view? There is something blatantly wrong in the images we get from Afghanistan: local people going to the polling stations, adopting a method that is defined *democratic* in the West, with all citizens casting a vote that bears equal relevance. But this is a top-down method and certain categories have not come about in that context. A written constitution was thus imposed, introducing a bicameral parliamentary system. Yet at the presidential election, held in late September, less than 25% of voters showed up at the polls. The Supreme Court consists of nine judges, but the majority of lawsuits are entrusted to the councils of elders, which take decisions based on the (respectable) tribal traditions.

Frankly, we get the impression of a forced transplant that fails to take into account the history of that people. The end goal, that of exporting democracy, is understandable. But the lack of sensitivity stands out like a sore thumb.

The **second** case entails brutal violence against animals, whereby sheep are sheared with ruthless brutality for the sake of entrepreneurial swiftness, much to the benefit of large multinational corporations that make the most from selling a certain type of wool. Why should we humiliate sentient beings and make them suffer so much?

The **third** case envisages despairing experiments, conducted in laboratories, on defenceless animals, placed in a restricted space filled with water, with the aim of testing how long the animal survives and measuring the intensity of their distress.

What is the common thread running through the statues of Christopher Columbus, the portraits of Nobel laureates for medicine and Plato's thought? All three of them gave rise to initiatives that can be defined as anti-racist.

In Buenos Aires (accidentally shortly after Bergoglio was elected in Rome), then in Los Angeles and then in other U.S. cities, the statues of Christopher Columbus were taken down, for he was deemed responsible for genocide. In New York, mayor De Blasi suggested changing the name of Columbus Circle, the square facing Central Park.

In Boston, Massachusetts, at the Bernstein Family Amphitheatre of the Brigham and Women's Hospital at Harvard Medical School, eleven portraits of winners of the Nobel prize for medicine or of the equally important Lasker Award, who had studied and taught in that university, were removed, seen as they were all white (and men). Attention is now shifting to the Yale School of Medicine, where 55 portraits of white people (only three of which are women) are displayed.

The Student Union of the London-based School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), founded in 1916, claims that Plato, Descartes and Kant should be “dropped from the curriculum” because they are white: “our minds are colonised”. And Dr. Deborah Johnston, pro-director of learning and teaching believes that “One of the great strengths of SOAS is that we have always looked at world issues from the perspective of the regions we study” (namely, Asia, Africa and the Middle East). She further underpinned the idea by saying that “...we must decolonise our courses”. In the United States, only four out of the 52 foremost universities still feature Shakespeare in the English literature course. In South Africa, as reported by *The Times*. Education Minister Angie Motshekga declared it was her intention to replace Shakespeare with African poets.

What alternative is offered, though, when it comes to Plato? That Plato whose ἀρετή (*aretè*, virtue) includes both παιδεία (*paideía*, intended as education of the human being’s conscience) and Πολιτεία (*politeia*, organisation of the State according to justice). But had the “uncritical” study of Plato been ignored, how could Aristotle have devised his *Metaphysics*?

If we want to unhinge the gateway of philosophy, so be it, but what will be the new hinge holding up the door leading to a new Logical thought? How can we understand the overturning of Platonic dualism (between mind and matter, between universal and individual, between immobility and movement) if we ignore Plato? By that stage, out of sheer coherence, dropping Aristotle from the curriculum, would in turn wipe out the cultural policy of Dominican Friars – so sensitive to the Aristotelian thought – which expressed the paramount cultural factor in Europe in the 13th century, starting from the 1350s, when the Church succeeded in conciliating logic and metaphysics through Christian dogmatics. Bottom line: once these monuments of culture have been kicked out of university curricula, because they were white, on what conceptual pillars will the society of the future rest?

On the exchequer of human psychology, the square of ‘suprematism’ is right next to the square of ‘**racism**’. Such a term requires a preliminary definition, so as to avoid the problem mentioned above, that of giving different meanings to the same word. A definition expresses the rotational axis of all forms of reasoning and it is essential, like a door hinge, without which the door will neither stand, nor turn. A definition of racism that can peacefully be taken as a benchmark is the one tweeted on 17 September 2019 by the Berlin-based foundation “Amedeu Antonio”, funded by the Federal Ministry of Family Affairs and tasked with several projects. For example, it was allocated 115 million Euro for the federal programme *Live Democracy*, and it is very active when it comes to human rights and fighting racism: “it is an ideology that belittles human beings in the face of external elements, names, culture, place of origin, religion. In Germany it mainly affects

non-white men ["...*In Deutschland betrifft das nicht-weiße Menschen*"], who might be considered aliens since they are not German.

This is food for thought: the exclusion of white people, deemed the passive subjects of racism (for they account for the vast majority of people in Germany), leads to believe, strictly following that logical thought, that in South Africa, white people cannot be racist – ontologically speaking – because they are much fewer in numbers. The definition therefore appears to be flawed and unilateral. The aforesaid, non-isolated episodes fall within a far greater mosaic of initiatives that are consistent and all aimed at delegitimising the “old white man”.

Those who like shortcuts would say: *so far, so good*. We live in an era that knows no bounds, in which the sense of guilt of the “old white man” is the key to solving all problems. That’s surely an easy path to follow. But the path becomes arduous when thoroughly analysing the definitions of racism and anti-racism.

Both types of these episodes (suprematism and declared anti-racism) are fuelled by and support the narrative of guilt. It is a **collective sense of guilt** – also due to the fact that the sense of individual guilt, or sin, has faded away.

Then again, to what extent is such narrative well-founded? The following example might clarify the problem that accountability cannot be expanded excessively: Nazism is directly accountable for the holocaust (and no historical negationism can ever stand when it comes to this unspeakable tragedy). The fire of Nazism was directly fuelled by the financial crisis of the Weimar Republic, whose roots go back to the Peace Treaty signed in 1919: yet that doesn’t mean that Lloyd George, Clemenceau, Wilson and Orlando are accountable for the extermination camps. It is worth mentioning a declaration the author Alice Hasters made on 20 October 2019 in Frankfurt, at the Buchmesse. Ms Hasters – whom we could define as a person “of colour”, although that could lead to a (groundless) indictment – uttered the following words: “white men, even if driven by the best intentions, will always be purveyors of racism[...] it is important for white people to admit they are part of a racist system[...] the best thing they can do is to admit racism and avoid trying to be an exception” [*Auch wenn sie gute Absichten haben, trotzdem Rassismen in sich tragen... es ist wichtig, daß auch weiße Personen anerkennen, daß sie Teil des rassistischen Systems sind... das beste was sie tun können, ist Rassismus anzuerkennen and nicht versuchen, die Ausnahme zu sein*"]. (The declaration was filmed by national television network *Ard* and mentioned in an *Ard-Buchmesse* tweet of 20 October 2019. The previous day, 19 October, a tweet posted on the account of Swiss newspaper *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* revealed that the German footballer (with Turkish ancestry) Mesut Özil – a first-string player of the German national side – following a disastrous

2018 World Cup campaign, where he surely didn't shine and was accordingly criticised – complained about being considered a “German” if the team won, but an “immigrant” in case of defeat. He openly complained about racial discrimination.

And that's not an isolated thought: it is part of a “line of thought” that aims to highlight “critical whiteness”.

One might wonder whether such consistent and converging initiatives really do facilitate the overcoming of all forms of racism in society. For example, Rashida Tlaib – newly elected member of the U.S. House of Representatives in Washington DC, representing the state of Michigan – following a visit to a police precinct in Detroit, said that facial recognition software for recognising the faces of African American people should be used by African Americans only.

The theories supporting the pulling down of statues, the removal of Nobel laureate portraits and the dropping of Shakespeare, Chaucer, Milton and Plato from humanistic studies follow an approach that nobody wants to challenge, for it is legitimate and well-grounded. One might wonder, though, whether such an approach ends up expressing a warped communication and how much does it actually help overcome the despicable phenomenon of racism.

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