

*Christian Geulen (Dept. of History, University of Koblenz, Germany)*

## **Racism and History**

A Statement for the CDADI-Workshop “How to Eradicate Racism?” (in compensation for the author’s non-participation)

*A short note on the term “eradicating”*

Eradiation is a term usually used in the sense of eliminating diseases, pathogens or undesired species. Thus, there are several historical examples of racism employing the term ‘eradiation’ in order to call for violent actions against certain groups. But is such a violent action itself something to be eradicated? Isn’t the term bound to simply mirror and repeat the violence it wishes to overcome?

## ***Racism and History***

In a historical perspective the question of why racism is still with us or more precisely: why racism today seems to come back with a vengeance, should perhaps be rephrased and transformed into the question of why modern anti-racism has failed. To refer to the allegedly new conditions of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in order to explain why racism is still around, is no explanation at all. For, what is still here or returning is still the same thing that shaped and sometimes dominated the history of the 19th and 20th centuries: the declaration of certain groups of human beings to be undesired, dangerous or simply disposable and the call for actively ‘doing something’ about them. That is perhaps the most simple (but accurate) description of racism. *Why* certain groups are undesired, dangerous or disposable and *how* exactly they should be dealt with – these rationalizations of racist thought and action have changed over time and varied in different places. But the idea that the disappearance of those undesired groups (or at least their containment) will make the world a better place – that has never changed ever since the birth of modern racism in 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe. From the enlightenment onward, Europe was no longer able to leave those other cultures and people alone. Driven by the mission of civilizing the world, Europeans were bound to integrate, educate, elevate and sometimes eradicate cultures supposed to be non-European in nature. From the invention of ‘lower races’ (harmonizing universal claims of equality with racial

exclusion) to today's notion of 'cultural infiltration' (turning hubris into paranoia) the idea to improve the world and its social order by purifying it, by practically realizing – against all experience – an imaginary 'natural' order, that was the core of modern racism, and still is.

But – if it is so simple – why has anti-racism failed so far to 'eradicate' its target? Because most forms of modern anti-racism have turned the phenomenon upside-down. What changed and varied in modern racism was mostly attributed to the differences among its victims.

Whereas the underlying ideology and self-rationalization of racism was regarded to be always the same. However, even though the historical circumstances and experiences of racist persecution differ immensely, the fact of violent persecution itself is always present and stays the same. In contrast, the ways in which the racist persecutors rationalized their ideas and actions vary immensely over time. Of course, there are affinities between the world view of a slave owner in the 19<sup>th</sup> century American South and the belief system of Nazi-Antisemitism in Germany – but no historian would argue that they are identical. Classic anti-racism, however, does exactly that. Racism is often traced to psychological factors or social conditions that almost automatically turn people into racists – in whatever time and place. Their victims, then, are simply the minorities at hand. Perhaps it's time to put the phenomenon of racism back on its feet again and to acknowledge the fact that – even though its major effect is always violence – it is still a historical and that means: a transforming and changing phenomenon.

Perhaps the most striking indication of racism's ability to live on by and through changing its ideological matrix is the fact that today's racism no longer needs the term 'race' – which informed its ideology and practice for over 200 years. Of course, one can say that talking about culture, heritage, nation, people or identity instead of 'race' changes nothing. Looking at certain right wing factions in Europe and elsewhere, this new vocabulary really does not seem to change much. But, all those factions, movements and parties would certainly and quickly sink back into irrelevance, if they were to start using the term 'race' again. That was the real, if ambivalent, success of modern anti-racism: it 'eradicated' not racism, but the term by which it used to be identified. While racism itself simply learned to go on without it.

That is not to say that we should rehabilitate the notion of 'race' as a somehow meaningful category! But we also should not continue to regard it as the problem's core. For, at least in a historical perspective (to rephrase what Judith Butler once said about 'sex' and 'gender') it might turn out that 'race' was culture all along. The idea that people regarded as foreign (*fremd*) pose a threat to our self-esteem, a threat best to be practically eliminated – this pattern

of thought and action has worked with or without the terms ‘race’, culture, identity etc. And sooner or later racism will find new concepts to rationalize and to continue it. Therefore, anti-racism should no longer focus on supposed ahistorical origins, definitions, basic concepts and explanations of racism, but on its concrete functions, its inner workings and on how the racist message is preserved and renewed by and through the self-adaptation of racism to different historical, social and political conditions.

The current wave of right-wing populism in Europe and elsewhere – as problematic as it is – provides ample opportunity to study the inner workings of today’s racism and of how racist ideology can successfully reproduce itself without being recognized as such. Today’s scandal is not so much that there might be some people who still believe Blacks or Jews to be ‘lower races’, but that racism is about to take political charge in large parts of Europe and the world – and that millions and millions of modern citizens truly believe to be non-racists, while constantly reproducing racist thinking.

So, if we seriously want to consider the question of how to ‘eradicate’ or overcome racism today, we must endeavor to understand the precarious relationship between racism and anti-racism – today. Because there are strong signs that racism has already transformed into something far beyond what anti-racism perceives it to be.