

The Phenomenon of Racism and the Concept of Race: A Transdisciplinary Research

O.V. Novikova

Belarusian State University, Minsk, Belarus

Abstract

In recent decades, with development of scientific and philosophical knowledge, the transdisciplinary approach has become relevant, as it aims at comprehensive study of complex natural and social phenomena. Racism belongs among such phenomena, and it is usually studied in sociology and historical science. The article presents a transdisciplinary study of racism, involving a complex appeal to philosophy, history, sociology, and other disciplines. Special attention is paid to the philosophical conceptualization of racism and the relationship of racism with the category of race. The article follows the evolution of the concept of race in philosophy, science, and social and political practices from its origins to the 20th and 21st centuries, when this concept is declared to be artificially constructed and is gradually ousted from philosophical and scientific discourse. Bioanthropologists criticize the concept of race as inaccurate, while intellectuals see racial classifications as a sign of racism. The difficulty of the conceptualization is associated not only with the variability of the concept of race but also with the change in its historical types, from traditional to contemporary ones. Traditional (classical, biological) racism is based on the use of the category of race and the idea of insurmountable biological differences between representatives of different races. The article concludes that present-day racism exists in two forms: class (institutional) racism and cultural (differential or “subtle”) racism. Class racism is associated with social and political practices of implicit segregation in employment and, accordingly, with unequal distribution of income. Cultural racism shifts the focus from biology to culture and emphasizes the insurmountability of cultural differences.

Key words: social philosophy, philosophical anthropology, racial taxonomy, biological racism, class racism, cultural racism.

Olga V. Novikova – Ph.D. in Philosophy, Associate Professor, Department of Philosophy and Methodology of Science, Faculty of Philosophy and Social Sciences, Belarusian State University.

mod@tut.by

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5438-5634>

For citation: Novikova O.V. (2021) The Phenomenon of Racism and the Concept of Race: A Transdisciplinary Research. *Russian Journal of Philosophical Sciences = Filosofskie nauki*. Vol. 64, no. 5, pp. 140–150. DOI: 10.30727/0235-1188-2021-64-5-140-150

Феномен расизма и концепт расы: опыт трансдисциплинарного исследования

О.В. Новикова

Белорусский государственный университет, Минск, Беларусь

Аннотация

В последние десятилетия в развитии научного и философского знания актуальным становится трансдисциплинарный подход, связанный с комплексным исследованием сложных природных или социальных явлений. Примером такого явления служит расизм, изучаемый, как правило, социологией и исторической наукой. В статье предлагается осуществить трансдисциплинарное исследование расизма, предусматривающее комплексное обращение к философии, истории, социологии и другим дисциплинам. Особое внимание уделяется философской концептуализации расизма и связи расизма с категорией расы. Исследуется эволюция концепта расы в философии, науке и социально-политических практиках от истоков и до XX–XXI веков, когда понятие расы объявляется искусственно сконструированным и начинает вытесняться из философского и научного дискурса. Биоантропологи критикуют концепт расы за неточность, интеллектуалы видят в оперировании расовыми классификациями признак расизма. Проблематичность концептуализации расизма связана не только с вариабельностью концепта расы, но и со сменой его исторических типов – от традиционного к современному. Традиционный (классический, биологический) расизм основан на использовании категории расы и идеи непреодолимости биологических различий между представителями различных рас. В статье демонстрируется, что современный расизм представлен двумя формами, такими как классовый (институциональный) и культурный (дифференциальный или «тонкий»). Классовый расизм связан с социально-политическими практиками неявной сегрегации в сфере занятости населения и, соответственно, с неравным распределением доходов. Культурный расизм смещает фокус внимания с биологического на культурное, акцентирует непреодолимость культурных различий.

Ключевые слова: социальная философия, философская антропология, расовая таксономия, биологический расизм, классовый расизм, культурный расизм.

Новикова Ольга Владимировна – кандидат философских наук, доцент, доцент кафедры философии и методологии науки факультета философии и социальных наук Белорусского государственного университета.

mod@tut.by

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5438-5634>

Для цитирования: Новикова О.В. Феномен расизма и концепт расы: опыт трансдисциплинарного исследования // Философские науки. 2021. Т. 64. № 5. С. 140–150.

DOI: 10.30727/0235-1188-2021-64-5-140-150

Introduction

One of the key trends in the development of modern social and humanitarian knowledge is associated with the formation of transdisciplinarity – a phenomenon that in the broadest sense can be defined as a tendency to create a universal methodology of cognition that can explore complex diverse natural and social phenomena. The demand for a transdisciplinary approach in the social sciences and humanities is largely due to their corresponding research objects, which are complex phenomena whose essence cannot be fully understood within one or several disciplines and requires a combination of methodological strategies from various fields of scientific knowledge.

Let us turn to the consideration of the phenomenon of racism, which over the last century has been the subject of research both in history, social and political sciences, and in philosophy. Racism is interesting as an example of the so-called transdisciplinary object, and its full explication is impossible within individual disciplines. It can be defined as a holistic concept, and this essence can be described with this Aristotelian paraphrase, “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.”

In recent years, the topic of racism has been discussed not only in politics but also in academic circles, especially in connection with the spread of a “new” type of racism, classified as “raceless,” differentialist, or cultural racism. In this context, the connection between the phenomenon of racism and the concept of race is interesting. To what extent do racial taxonomies shape racist discourse? Or, on the contrary, is the idea of race also a product of a racist worldview? Is race determined by a spectrum of certain biological parameters, or does it act as a referent of human identity? How is the problem of conceptualizing racism and its historical types related? Searching for answers to these questions in a transdisciplinary approach in it is useful to take philosophical discourse into account.

Evolution of the concept of race in philosophy and science

The concept of race has existed in European languages since the Renaissance, in the meaning of kindred, genus, breed. Its origins go back to the Italian word *razza*, which, in turn, is associated with *generatio* (“generation” in Latin), *ρίζα* (“root” in Greek), etc. The Russian *Philosophical Encyclopedic Dictionary* (1997) defines a race as a group of people “in which their typical external appearance is determined by common hereditary constitutional characteristics (skin color, shape of the head, face and nose, the type and color of hair, body size, etc.). In the broadest sense of the word, race is the form in which a person’s character finds expression in his external features, in particular in the shape of the head and face” [Gubsky 1997, 384]. However, for modern social and humanitarian knowledge this “classical” definition looks an anachronism. The *Encyclopædia Britannica*, defines race as the idea of dividing the human species into separate groups, based on inherited physical and behavioral differences, and specifies that in the modern world, races are viewed as “cultural interventions reflecting specific attitudes and beliefs that were imposed on different populations in the wake of western European conquests beginning in the 15th century” [Takezawa, Smedley, & Wade 2000] How does this change in the concept of race happen, from a material phenomenon to an idea?

Although the differentiation of people by skin color arose already in antiquity (for example, in the story about the descendants of Shem, Ham and Japheth), the first racial classifications were developed only in modern times in the works of C. Linnaeus, G.-L. Buffon, J. Blumenbach, and others. Buffon was the first to introduce the term “race” into the language of science [Jackson & Weidman 2005, 18].

A philosophical understanding of the problem of race was given by I. Kant and G. Hegel, and the latter considers racial differences as defined “the differences of the universal natural spirit determined by the Notion,” which later “falls apart into the multiplicity of local or national spirits,” therefore, “national difference is as unchangeable as the racial variety of men” [Hegel 1978, 65, 67]. The study of the specifics of these differences, from the point of view of the German philosopher, should be performed in natural history, which “is concerned with the disposition of national character as it is naturally determined” [Hegel 1978, 67], and the philosophy of history, which considers the world-historical significance of nations, while the study of races should be reserved to physiology. Hegel prefaces his reasoning about the specifics of races and nations with an explanation that “the freedom and supremacy of men can however derive neither justification nor invalidation from descent” [Hegel 1978, 45]. This is an important point that clears the German philosopher of any suspicions of racism that might arise from a cursory study of some of his radical quotations.

In the second half of the 19th and early 20th century, the racial theory gained popularity, and there emerged the so-called racial-anthropological school represented by the names of J.-A. de Gobineau, G. Vacher de Lapouge, L. Woltmann, and others. The adherents of the school use race as a fundamental category for constructing sociological concepts and explaining inequality of people by natural features, and often lean towards polygenism, which denies the common origin of mankind and considers races as separate species. This school, which was sharply criticized and was labeled pseudoscientific, is an example of how racism uses the category of race as a natural foundation for declaration of social inequality and how it builds the racial hierarchy that it needs for self-justification.

Closer to the turn of the 21st century, the concept of race began to be used with caution. As É. Balibar writes, “it is not ‘race’ which is a biological or psychological human ‘memory,’ but it is racism which represents one of the most insistent forms of the historical memory of modern societies” [Balibar 1991, 44–45]. A similar idea is expressed by J. Derrida, claiming that it is racism that constructs the concept of race. In particular, he says: “Usually we think that racism is a concept which is formed, is shaped after the word or the concept of race. First, you know what ‘race’ is, but racism is a way of dealing with race, that is inventing or calculating a hierarchy... In fact, it is the other way round. We know that the concept of race has no scientific or philosophical content. So, it is racism that constructs or produces the concept of race” [Derrida 2003]. In this context, any racial taxonomy is a means for establishing the dominance of the corresponding reference group. Racial differences are emphasized and exaggerated in favor of the group that engages in racial classification [Sarich & Miele 2019]. Therefore, the nature of such classifications is inherently infected with racism.

The stated point of view coincides with the tendency to reject the use of the concept of race in modern natural science. As researchers M. Yudell, D. Roberts, R. DeSalle, and S. Tishkoff write, in scientific research it is not necessary to operate with the concept of biological race because it is “problematic at best and harmful at worst” [Yudell et al. 2016, 565]. In 2019, the American Bioanthropological Association (AABA) adopts the Declaration on Race and Racism, which states that “race does not provide an accurate representation of human biological variation” [AABA 2019]. In other words, as historian B. Isaak writes, “race does not exist, racism does” [Isaak 2006, 33]. As an alternative to the concept of race in social studies, it is proposed to use the terms “population,” “ancestry” or “racialised group” [Hochman 2019; Hochman 2021].

The idea of race in social and political practices

The vagueness of the concept of race is associated with its ambivalent interpretations. Firstly, the concept of race is interpreted both as a set of biological parameters and a social construct.

Secondly, there are many varying racial classifications. For example, in Soviet anthropology, the classifications of Ya.Ya. Roginsky and M.G. Levin, N.N. Cheboksarov, V.P. Alekseev, and others. As a rule, their emphasis was placed on “large” racial groups or trunks (conditional division into Caucasians, Negroids, Mongoloids, and Australoids), which included an extensive system of small racial groups, and they differed mainly biologically (phenotypically). A similar principle was used by European and American anthropologists until the last third of the 20th century.

Thirdly, the above classifications poorly correlate with the actual everyday and political implications of the idea of race. So, in fact, none of the scientific classifications clearly provided a clear definition of the white race or the black one. Historically, in different periods, Europeans ranked not only themselves as the white race but also Arabs, Berbers, and Hindus; at the same time, in the 16th and 17th centuries, the name “Moors” was used in relation to the Arabs, which included all black-skinned people. Opposition of white and black races was founded in the Early Modern Times in North America, in connection with the legislative status of slave labor for African immigrants, when white skin turned into a privilege giving the right to citizenship. Due to mass immigration to the United States in the 19th century, the racial divide was tightened, and until 1924, Slavs, Italians, and a number of other immigrants from Europe were not considered “full-fledged whites” [Shnirelman 2011]. For a long time, the white race in the United States was a homogeneous ethnic social group, and the entry rights had to be won. However, as R. Dyer emphasizes, this right meant belonging not so much to one specific race as to the human race as such: representatives of other races were representatives of other races, only whites were people as such [Dyer 2017]. Therefore, the racial question in the North American tradition until now has been connected with the “color issue.”

In the United States, blackness was determined not only by the skin color; children of mixed marriages were automatically classified as blacks, according to the “one drop rule”: if you are half black, then you are black. (Modern view gives an interesting inversion of this rule: the slightest presence of “white discourse,” for example, in schools, means supporting “white supremacy” [Blaisdell 2018].) At present, in connection with the tendency to abandon the use of the category of race in natural science discourse and the shift in emphasis to its social aspect, the issues of racial self-identification are coming to the fore. Race is characterized as a reference to identity. However, if most representa-

tives of the white race in the United States identify themselves with any ethnic group (English, German, etc.), then most of the so-called mixed racials (e.g., mulattos) identify themselves as blacks: “and when asked to explain these black identities, they describe how both blacks and whites see them as black” [Khanna 2010, 96].

In its turn, the French National Consultative Commission on Human Rights (CNCDH) publishes annual reports reflecting the levels of racism, anti-Semitism, and xenophobia in the country, based on the results of social survey. The 2020 report noted that less than 7% of respondents agree with a hierarchy of races, 59% believe that all races are equal, and 34% answered that human races do not exist at all. The summary clarifies that although “many millennials and especially members of previous generations continue to think that all human races are equal (and this is a position that refutes the principles of biological racism), but there is the fact that they do not choose the answer [among the proposed options] that denies the very existence of races, and this should cause some concern” [CNCDH 2020]. In the modern world, the very belief in the existence of race as a material phenomenon is a sign of racism.

Thus, the idea of race, rejected in today's scientific discourse, in socio-political practices acts as a foundation for substantiating differentiation, characterized by absolutization of sociocultural differences. Race persists in social and humanitarian discourse as a social construct and correlates with ethnic or cultural affiliation, around which the neo-racism builds a wall of insurmountable contradictions. But what is this modern type of racism? How does it differ from the preceding types?

The issue of conceptualizing racism and its typology

In reference literature, definitions of the term “racism,” as a rule, boil down to ideas of discrimination practices against members of a particular social group, on racial or ethnic grounds. G. Fredrickson, a highly-regarded researcher on racial issues, wrote: “The term ‘racism’ is often used in a loose and unreflective way to describe the hostile or negative feelings of one ethnic group or ‘people’ toward another and the actions resulting from such attitudes” [Fredrickson 2015, 1]. In the *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, racism is defined as “a taken-for-granted belief system which posits that some racial groups are naturally superior to or more deserving of material and symbolic resources than other groups” [Clair & Denis 2015]. The Russian *New Philosophical Encyclopedia* offers a broader definition, where racism appears as “a doctrine and political and ideological practice, proceeding from the idea that the human race is not united, but consists of species fundamentally different from each other, usually hierarchically subordinate to each other” [Malakhov 2010, 415].

This definition seems to be the most successful, at least because it does not deal with the category of *race* and therefore avoids bias toward biologization of racism, while remaining suitable for describing its modern “non-biological” forms.

The racial issue becomes an object of natural scientific and philosophical attention only in the second half of the 17th and in early 18th century: it was during this period that supremacy of the white race over the black one was affirmed in North America. By the beginning of the 20th centuries, the first historical type of racism – traditional racism – took shape. In this form, the foundation is the idea of the insurmountable biological differences between representatives of different races, and it can also be designated as classical or biological racism. It exists in different forms: from pseudoscientific (racial-anthropological school, Nazi racial theory of H. Günther, etc.) to colonialist ones. Most forms of traditional racism were eliminated by the last third of the 20th century, but nowadays its echoes can be found in pseudoscientific raceology [Mondry 2016].

Modern racism (neo-racism) differs from traditional racism both phenomenologically and conceptually. Whereas the “old” racism characterizes the racial phenotype and other biological determinants as a basis for substantiating the ideology of natural inequality, modern racism extends primarily to the spheres of culture and economy. Neo-racism is difficult to conceptualize: it is often understood as xenophobia, ethnocentrism, nationalism, and various manifestations of social intolerance. In general, the “new” type shows in two main forms: class racism (denoted as economic or institutional) and cultural racism, called differentialist or symbolic racism or cultural fundamentalism [Weidinger 2017; Stolcke 2021].

The emergence of class racism falls on the 1970s and is associated with the socio-economic and political situation of the late modern era, primarily with the flows of immigrants and labor migrants to economically prosperous countries. This type of racism presupposes discrimination against ethnic groups, to whom employers would provide jobs for less pay. Thus, a new labor market was formed in the countries of the “first” and “second” worlds.

Class-based stratification was enhanced with ethnic stratification (“Chinese laundries” in the USA, etc.). This fueled racist sentiments among white working class (the so-called “class anxiety”), fears of increased competition due to the influx of migrants. Institutional racism, described by S. Carmichael and C. Hamilton in the realities of the United States, is an implicit, latent form of racism that is a legacy of social practices of segregation: for example, “black” areas of American cities with a low level of school education automatically meant low-paying jobs for their inhabitants in the future

[Ture & Hamilton 1992]. Thus, with the declared policy of multiculturalism, an internal discourse of social confrontation was built, due to economic reasons. This type of racism, sometimes also referred to as “hegemonic,” is characteristic of today’s United States, along with the declared ideology of “color-blindness” [Bonilla-Silva 2019].

The term “cultural racism” was first used by F. Fanon: if “old” racism tended toward rationalization, individualization, and phenotypic determinism, the “new” type of racism is addressed not to the individual, but to “a certain form of existing,” which means cultural values, lifestyle, language, and other phenomena that mark cultural differences [Fanon 1967, 32].

The emergence of cultural, or differentialist, racism is associated with migration processes of the era of globalization: it arises when the policy of multiculturalism collides with everyday xenophobia. This type of racism develops at the junction of biological, cultural, and political issues, and it declares insurmountable differences between representatives of “our” and “alien” social groups, then a more politically correct “culture” acts as a marker of differences instead of race. In a report made by the French National Consultative Commission on Human Rights, this “new” type of racism is labeled *deguize* (“subtle”), which exaggerates cultural differences between your own and “another” group and suppresses positive emotions towards representatives of the other group [CNCDDH 2020]. The concept of race is no longer required for this type of racism; the role of race is replaced with cultural affiliation. Therefore, this type of racism is also qualified as cultural fundamentalism: if appealing to racial differences is no longer acceptable and immediately regarded as racist, then problems in intercultural communication can be explained by the incapacity of cultures to communicate that is inherent in human nature [Stolcke 2021]. However, some authors tend to view cultural fundamentalism as an independent phenomenon, distinct from racism [Siebers & Dennissen 2015].

The specificity of cultural racism is based on the assignment of the right to label the Other as failing to meet the criteria of normativity. The Other in this case acts as a product of absolutization of cultural contradictions, as reification of difference. The problem lies not even in the fact that the logic of cultural racism builds a connection between the binary oppositions of friend and foe and of norm and anomaly, in which “my own” appears as a norm, and “another’s” as an anomaly, but in the idea that social differentiation always exists in the form of rivalry and confrontation.

Conclusion

Turning to philosophical and scientific research on race issues and racism brings out a historical connection between these phe-

nomena. In the works of anthropologists from the 17th century to the mid-20th century, race was qualified as a biological phenomenon, a subcategory of the human species. This interpretation can be considered as the basis for the formation of the first historical type of racism – biological (or traditional). However, the modern approach indicates a feedback: it was the emergence of the racist discourse that contributed to the substantiation of the biological foundation of the racial idea.

In recent years, genetics and bioanthropology have rejected the use of the term “race” and racial classifications, due to their variability and lack of precision. The concept of race remains active in social sciences and humanities, which interpret race as a social construct and indicate that speculation on the idea of racial differences inevitably becomes a foundation for the development of racism.

The increasing migration processes in the era of globalization have contributed to the formation of “new” types of racism: class (institutional) racism, associated with uneven distribution of economic benefits between different ethnic groups, and cultural racism. The latter type shifts the emphasis from race to ethnic and cultural affiliation, essentializing and actually biologizing it. Thus, neo-racism, whose essence lies in the absolutization of cultural differences between representatives of ethnocultural groups, gradually loses its connection with the referent concept of race and, due to this, the cultural difference turns out to be a more stable phenomenon than race as such.

REFERENCES

American Association of Biological Anthropologists (AABA) (2019) *Statement on Race & Racism*. Retrieved from <https://physanth.org/about/position-statements/aapa-statement-race-and-racism-2019/>.

Balibar E. (1991) Racism and Nationalism. In: Balibar E. & Wallerstein I. *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (pp. 37–68). London: Verso.

Blaisdell B. (2018) The new one-drop rule: challenging the persistence of white supremacy with in-service teachers. *Teaching Education*. Vol. 29, no. 4, pp. 330–342.

Bonilla-Silva E. (2019) “Racists,” “Class Anxieties,” Hegemonic Racism, and Democracy in Trump’s America. *Social Currents*. Vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 14–31.

Commission nationale consultative des droits de l’homme (CNCDH) (2020) *Rapport sur la lutte contre le racisme, l’antisemitisme et la xenophobie. Année 2020*. Retrieved from https://www.cncdh.fr/sites/default/files/rapport_racisme2020_basse_def.pdf

Derrida J. (2003) *iRACEs: Race, Deconstruction, and Critical Theory*. In: University of California Humanities Research Institute. Retrieved from <https://uchri.org/events/traces-race-deconstruction-and-critical-theory/>

Dyer R. (2017) *White*. London: Routledge.

Fanon F. (1967) *Toward the African Revolution: Political Essays* (H. Chevalier, Trans.). New York: Groove Press.

Gubsky E.F. (Ed.) (1997) *Philosophical Encyclopedic Dictionary*. Moscow: Infra-M (in Russian).

Hegel G.W.F. (1978) *Hegel's Philosophy of Subjective Spirit. Vol. 2: Anthropology* (M.J. Petry, Ed. & Trans.). Dordrecht: D. Reidel.

Hochman A. (2019) Race and Reference. *Biology and Philosophy*. Vol. 34, no. 32, pp. 1–22.

Hochman A. (2021) Janus-Faced Race: Is Race biological, Social, or Mythical? *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*. Vol. 175, no. 2, pp. 453–464.

Isaak B. (2006) *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Jackson J.P. & Weidman N.M. (2005) *Race, Racism, and Science: Social Impact and Interaction*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Khanna N. (2010) “If You’re Half Black, You’re Just Black”: Reflected Appraisals and the Persistence of the One-Drop Rule. *The Sociological Quarterly*. Vol. 51, no. 1, pp. 96–121.

Malakhov V.S. (2010) Racism. In: Stepin V.S. (Ed.) *New Philosophical Encyclopedia* (Vol. 3, pp. 415–416). Moscow: Mysl’ (in Russian).

Mondry H. (2016) Censorship and Intellectual Freedom: Reflections 30 Years After Chernobyl and Glasnost (1986–2016). *Continental Thought & Theory*. Vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 7–17.

Sarich V. & Miele F. (2019) *Race. The Reality of Human Differences*. New York: Routledge.

Shnirelman V.A. (2011) *The “Threshold of Tolerance”: Ideology and Practice of New Racism* (Vol. 1). Moscow: Novoye literaturnoye obozreniye (in Russian).

Siebers HD. & Dennissen M.H.J. (2015) Is It Cultural Racism? Discursive Exclusion and Oppression of Migrants in the Netherlands. *Current Sociology*. Vol. 63, no. 3, pp. 470–489.

Stolcke V. (2021) Talking Culture: New Boundaries, New Rhetorics of Exclusion in Europe. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*. Vol. 11, no. 1, pp. 221–239.

Takezawa Y.I., Smedley A., & Wade P. (2000) Race (human). In: *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/race-human>

Ture K. & Hamilton C.V. (1992) *Black Power. The Politics of liberation in America*. New York: Vintage books.

Weidinger B. (2017) Equal before God, and God Alone: Cultural Fundamentalism, (Anti-)Egalitarianism, and Christian Rhetoric in Nativist Discourse from Austria and the United States. *Journal of Austrian-American History*. Vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 40–68.

Yudell M., Roberts D., DeSalle R., & Tishkoff S. (2016) Taking Race out of Human Genetics. *Science Magazine*. Vol. 351, no. 6273, pp. 564–565.