Rethinking Marx, 2: Rethinking Race

> Are these identities ones we can be happy with in the longer run? (…) There will be proper ways of being black and gay, there will be expectations to be met, demands will be made. It is at this point that someone who takes autonomy seriously will ask whether we have not replaced one kind of tyranny with another (Anthony Appiah in Taylor ed. 162).
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> Between the politics of recognition and the politics of compulsion, there is no bright line (Appiah in Taylor ed. 163).

There is much that is good and questionable in Gilroy's arguments against race. Much of what is good is questionable. That is to say, while his argument may not be easy to accept, neither is it easy to dismiss. I propose to argue with him then against him and then, perhaps. ultimately, with him, for one cannot help but conclude with him that race, for all it has brought into being, must be overcome.

Let us begin by considering what Gilroy calls "The New Racism", the shift in focus from biology to culture for markers of incontrovertible and differentially valued difference. Specifically, I wish to dwell on one aspect falling under this rubric, which, I think, is particular to our current cultural moment (dating from the 60s on), that is, the partial revaluation of racialized signs: "The postmodern translation of blackness from a badge of insult into an increasingly powerful but still very limited signifier of prestige" (Gilroy 23)[1].

Of course, just because black bodies can now be beautiful does not mean that they don't still signify what they used to: depravity, menace, *ugliness*. This backdrop of meanings may even enhance their prestige: black beauty comes as a revelation. That is, the

[1] Gilroy seems to attribute this reversal to corporate multiculturalism, which prizes "some degree of visible difference from an implicit white norm…as a sign of timeliness, vitality, inclusivity, and global reach" (21), but we must keep in mind, of course, that marketers have only stylized what had already been effected by the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements of the 60s and 70s.

investment of blackness with positive connotations does not necessarily displace its negative inflections. Both meanings, whether contradictory or complementary (black athletic prowess deriving from their animality), cohabitate in the same sign, are conveyed by the same skin.

The partial revaluation of race has done little to assail it for what it really is, a sign system; indeed, by widening its valence of articulation, it may even have entrenched its reality by making it more resilient and by masking its reductions with inflated claims of identity. Racialization, Gilroy notes (after Fanon), is, more accurately, an epidermalization: "The observer's gaze does not penetrate the membrane but rests upon it and, in doing so, receives the truths of racial difference from the other body" (46). The book can be judged entirely by its cover, so to speak.

Despite the constricting, the demeaning nature of racial identities, they remain jealously guarded by the subjects they interpellate. Certainly, unmistakable privileges inhere in whiteness, but even, and perhaps especially, the victims of white supremacy cling to race as an indispensable axis of identity. Why? The proffered answer is, of course, solidarity or community—but communities of color, so called, merely reinflect the racial categories used to designate them in the first place: inclusion rather than exclusion is now emphasized. But the notion of racial solidarity, indeed, of any particularistic solidarity, is premised as much on dis-identification as identification. The black community, then, becomes incommensurably different from the white mainstream or, for that matter, the Asian or Hispanic communities—and vice-versa—because all these formations become perceived as culturally distinct and thus represent organic aggregations around natural axes of difference. Racial difference becomes interpreted as cultural difference, as incommensurability at the very least but more commonly in terms of hierarchy. Nevermind the infinite fractures beneath the gloss of "community"—political, religious, ethnic, not to say, of course, real cultural fractures (Indians and Pakistanis, Filipinos and

Japanese, Fijians and Uighurs all crammed into a Procrustean rubric, "Asian").[2] Even the voguish term "people of color" only makes sense politically, that is, as an alliance against white supremacy[3].

The boundaries of these communities, moreover, are *policed from within*, and in ways more extensive, more insidious than previously. The deconstruction of race in law solidified its grip on social life. Now even cultural miscegenation—not just interracial unions but deeper even, acting white/black despite one's own race (*acting* because one can never, of course, *be*)—is subject to unspoken proscription. It's the same zest for purity enforced mainly by the gaze and the occasional derogative: Oreo, banana, wigger—all connote *betrayal*. The race traitor is the new transgressive figure, confounding the de facto, the elective Jim Crow of the New Racism.

I would echo Gilroy's observation that under so pervasively racialized a regime culture becomes a kind of property, "to be owned rather than lived" (24). Racialized bodies acquire exchange values; black for black, Asian for Asian—as long as the quota is met. That is, they are considered in terms of quantity, race being their quality.

Of course, racial boundaries may be more scrupulously policed because desire has become democratized. Many of the signs that formerly marked racial bodies have come loose; old signs have reversed in polarity, new signs have been incorporated. The meaning of blackness, of whiteness is now less stable than ever, and to some extent, has been freed from its bodily confines. The white rapper Eminem can represent "black culture", just as, perhaps, a black secretary of state can represent "the (white)

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[2] Filipino-Americans (who routinely drop the latter half of the hyphen) regularly make the woeful discovery that, despite the logic of race, they have less in common with "real" Filipinos than with Americans of whatever hue.

[3] Gilroy: "Strange alliances and opportunistic connections have been constructed in the name of ethnic purity and the related demand that unbridgeable cultural differences be identified and respected. This desire to cling on to "race" and go on stubbornly and unimaginatively seeing the world on the distinctive scales that it has specified makes for odd political associations as well as for less formal connections between raciological thinkers of various hues" (30).

establishment". Their conduct might be stigmatized as acting white/black but as a reactionary gesture, a fist shaken at the ineluctable unfolding of markedly new racial dynamics. Desire, moreover, may not altogether neglect racial boundaries but, keeping within racialized terms, become activated by them—nothing like lingering proscription to arouse eros. The point is, the accelerated circulation of race, not just rooted in bodies but as a signifier that has become free-floating to an extent, revives fears of contamination, of adulterated communities, but now on all sides of the color line—which, I might add, may have been erased in law but is underlined daily in social practice.

To what extent, then, can racial solidarities, originally reactionary formations, impart positive identities? This is no longer a question in Gilroy's mind when he discounts the durability of "pseudo-solidarities"[4].

Here I diverge from Gilroy. Such solidarities, although originally defensive, are not empty. The racialized identities on which they are built are not empty either. To be sure, they are premised on reification, but they are palpably real nonetheless. Moreover, such identities, forged out of the crucible of race, represent values that defy the reductive logic of reification—that point the way beyond the constraints of racial identity despite being predicated on such identity. Martin Luther King, Jr. is the exemplary case, of course, but Michel Lamont's research encourages us to generalize. She distinguishes between the primarily caring and disciplined selves constructed by black and white workers respectively. The values inhering in the caring self—solidarity, egalitarianism, generosity, interpersonal altruism, even a social justice ethic underlies claims of racial solidarity—provide a humanizing corrective to the primarily disciplined selves of white workers (52). More than a humanizing corrective: an index of possibility, even an excavation of possibilities that had been interred in the construction of the disciplined

[4] Gilroy: "The spaces in which 'races' come to life are a field from which political interaction has been banished. It is usually replaced by enthusiasm for the cheapest pseudo-solidarities: forms of connection that are imagined to arise effortlessly from shared phenotypes, cultures, and bio-nationalities" (41).
"Routine experiences of oppression, repression, and abuse…became the basis for dissident cultures and an alternative public world. Togetherness produced under these conditions was inherently unreliable" (38).

self, that had been uncalled for in its interpellation, only to be recalled, *salvaged*, in the formation of identities based on exploitation and disenfranchisement. The stone which the builders rejected.

The question is, can the humanist ethic blast its racial integument? We know that reifications, if nothing else, are "good to think with". We might ask if they are just as useful to think *against* with. We might consider what Charles Taylor calls the Fanonist application of multiculturalism, that the revision of inculcated images of inferiority is a stage through which the subjugated must pass in order to truly be able to imagine freedom (66). We might add that their oppressors, equally maligned by the privileges they perversely derive from the racial order, must likewise revise their conceits of superiority. If this is so, might we think with reifications provisionally, that is, in order to think beyond them?

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