

Race and Republicanism

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Though race is socially constructed, it nonetheless really exists: consequently, Magali Bessone argues, the concept of race must be taken into consideration when fighting racism. But what positive content can be given to the “critical republicanism” she advocates?

Reviewed: Magali Bessone, *Sans distinction de race ? Une analyse critique du concept de race et de ses effets pratiques*, [Without Race Distinctions ? A Critical Analysis of the Concept of Race and its Practical Effects], Paris, Vrin, “Philosophie concrète,” 2013. 240 p., 24 €.

On a topic that might seem rather overdone, Magali Bessone has written a remarkable book, one that sparkles with intelligence and culture. She seeks to deconstruct a concept that has become taboo in France, though it is commonly used by English-speaking scholars and statisticians. With great flair, she proposes an analysis that can be summed up in several propositions encompassing the very core of her arguments.

1. Biologists have now established that racial categories (not to be confused with racism, despite complex affinities with it), which became systematic following the encounter with the Other during the Age of Discovery and the eighteenth-century attempt to classify species, do not exist. There are no homogeneous populations groups that can be defined once and for all, and which are different from and unequal to others. Skin color, which for a long time was used to distinguish human races (depending on the author, there were four, five, or seven races, thus proving that race is not self-evident), is but one marker of geographic and historical affiliation among others. Essentialist ways of thinking, which attribute specific and final characteristics to particular population groups, have no biological basis. Differences between individuals are greater than differences between groups, and the boundaries between human groups are porous. “There is no racial essence that can be defined coherently from a biological point of view” (p. 71).

2. As a result of the atrocities that have been committed in the name of certain races’ claims to superiority, the French have generally replaced the term “race” with “ethnicity” or “culture.” Scholars are afraid that they will be accused of believing race exists if they use a term that, as biologists have shown, lacks any scientific basis and, as historians have demonstrated, was used to justify colonialism and genocide. Yet, as Pierre-André Taguieff has already argued, these terms are not immune to the criticisms directed against race, since ethnicity and culture are characterized by permanent and inherited traits. Consequently, this strategy does not lead to the abandonment of essentialist ways of thinking, which are constitutive of racial thinking. This is the reason I proposed getting beyond the American sociological debate over the

validity of the concepts of “racial” or “ethnic group” by proposing that of “historical collectivity.”¹

3. To escape essentialist thinking, racism must be understood on the basis of an analysis of the social construction of race. Though race is socially constructed, it nonetheless really exists. One must thus deconstruct the concept to understand the reality which, despite being socially constructed, nevertheless has very real effects, taking the form of discrimination, stigmatization, and the downgrading of particular groups of people. “Races are real because racial categorization exists, leading to stigmatization, domination, and perpetuation of social, political, and economic inequalities at the expense of racial minorities in contemporary society” (p. 186). If one refuses to consider race’s existence, one limits one’s ability to grasp the phenomenon of racism and to combat racism effectively. To fight racism, one must have the courage to speak of race.

4. It is important to emphasize the limitations of anti-racist policies that have been pursued until now. “Affirmative action” or “multicultural” (i.e., quota-based) policies have the unfortunate side-effect of validating the very ways of thinking and behaving that one is combating. Universalistic policies that, in the name of republican principles, claim to be “difference” or “color blind” have, in denying the problem’s very existence, the unfortunate side-effect of objectively legitimating racial stigmatization, making it difficult to identify and combat. Consequently, we need a “critical republicanism” which, while invoking the republic’s universalistic principles, takes into consideration the reality of race thus defined and is capable of effectively fighting the social consequences of race by acknowledging how domination works.

Readers will admire the philosopher’s skill and follow her critical demonstration, even if, here and there, particular historical and interpretive points are debatable. As Bessone readily acknowledges in her introduction, the positive side of her argument is still “exploratory” and is limited to “suggesting a few directions” (p. 24). Her “critical republicanism,” which echoes the position Cécile Laborde has theorized,² will be acceptable to most scholars, particularly since genuine republicanism is critical by definition. But the difficulty arises precisely when one tries to give it concrete content. How is it different from tolerant republicanism or a republicanism that can adapt to different political traditions in various countries? How, in other words, can one “promote a politics of recognition that would not be an identity politics” (p. 199)? It is only on the basis of concrete analyses and proposals—which Bessone says she will explore in a later work—that it will be possible to determine if “critical republicanism” is more ambitious or more just than “traditional” republicanism, on the basis of which efforts have been made to provide empirical solutions to the tensions and contradictions inherent in democracy by making “reasonable accommodations”—to borrow an expression from our Quebecois friends—to the best of principles. Politics is an entirely applied art.

The difficulty of giving concrete content to this position is not simply the result of the difficulties of “applying” republican principles to social life and of shifting from the terrain of ideals to concrete reality; it also reveals contradictions inherent in the democratic project. How does one allow for the individual equality of each citizen while recognizing the distinctive situations of particular population groups? To what extent are the effects of “color

¹ Dominique Schnapper, *La relation à l’autre. Au cœur de la pensée sociologique*, Paris, Gallimard, NRF/essais, 1998, p. 75.

² Cécile Laborde, *Français, encore un effort pour être plus républicains !*, Paris, Seuil, 2010.

blind” and affirmative action policies performative? Do controlled and temporary policies of positive discrimination enable one to “unblock” particular historical situations? If so, which ones? All of these question and many more arise from the contradictions inherent in democracy. Louis Dumont once wrote: “if the advocates of difference claim for it both equality and recognition, they claim the impossible.”³ Politics consists in the empirical management of logically contradictory social situations. We expect the author of such a brilliant book, particularly one appearing in a series called “Concrete Philosophy”(“Philosophie Concrète”), to answer these questions. It is only natural that we look forward to seeing her offer a concrete analysis of the “critical republicanism” that she advocates. She must not content herself with using the concept of “domination”—which, having become a universally applicable interpretive tool, has ceased to be illuminating—to describe all the asymmetrical social relations that exist within democratic societies.

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³ Louis Dumont, *Essays on Individualism: Modern Ideology in Anthropological Perspective*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 266-67.