

Psycho-social determinants of racism: from psychoanalysis and social psychology to a new interpretative approach

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Abstract

Racism is a critical phenomenon that continues to pervasively plague contemporary society. There are many factors underlying the manifestations of hatred and discrimination. In this article, we have decided to focus on the role played by psycho-social factors in the onset and maintenance of these problematic phenomena. The first part focuses on the contribution of psychoanalysis, in understanding racism from the perspective of the unconscious mechanisms that perpetrate its expression. The second part sees the contribution of social psychology and of the theories about intergroup relations. The last part sees the contribution of the semiotic approach to cultural psychology, which offers an alternative framework capable of addressing the specific object of racism from a different and innovative angle; namely, that according to which this problem is determined by specific cultural models which influence how the individual attributes meanings to the signs of the world.

Keywords: *racism; psychoanalysis; intergroup relationship; sense-making; affective semiosis.*

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Introduction

Diversity is a global reality. Every single person of the 7.85 billion people who populate the planet is different from each other. This could be a great asset in terms of creativity, better citizenship, and social capital development; on the contrary, the unknown very often comes as "the different" and, as such, as threatening, an "enemy". This image of the enemy is accompanied by the human need for belongingness, group identity and it becomes the expression of the rigid closure to otherness (Mannarini et al., 2020). The feeling of threat feeds the need to belong to a sure "we" that excludes and rejects the other. This need translates into a defensive reaction aimed at protecting oneself from the external threat and it is very often equivalent to the expression of conflict and violence within social relations. Although the debate on the concept of race and what racism is remains open in the philosophical field (Blum, 2002; Urquidez, 2018, 2020), today's academics, unlike the past ones, don't understand race as a biologically significant category because it is not supported by scientific evidence (e.g. Bamshad & Olson, 2003; Lewontin, 1991). If there are differences between groups, these are based on social and cultural adaptations to different contexts and circumstances, so a set of physical characteristics cannot be taken as a standard that makes one group better than others, as human diversity is the result of environmental adaptations that have occurred throughout history (Jones, Dovidio & Vietze, 2014). This article tries to highlight the articulations from which racism originates and to do so it takes into consideration three perspectives. The first part introduces the contribution of psychoanalytic theory in the attempt to provide an explanation of the phenomenon

through the analysis of the unconscious mechanisms involved in the different forms and expressions of racism. The second part focuses on the contribution of social psychology, on the theories that demonstrate that processes of categorization influence the way individuals and groups perceive themselves and shape their relationships with each other. In the third and last part we have presented an approach developed in the last twenty years which, in addition to representing an innovative lens through which to look at the phenomenon, can certainly provide a valuable contribution to the attempt to understand which are the determinants at the basis of the manifestations of racism. The present work, focusing on the main psychological mechanisms that help generate and maintain racism, does not assume that these are the only factors involved in this process. Obviously structural factors (e.g. economic inequality, populism, greater support for far-right parties) play an important role; however, psychological factors are crucial to understanding the pervasiveness of racism. This article aims to provide a basic tool for understanding the main unconscious articulations underlying the racist phenomenon, without, however, claiming to do so in an exhaustive way.

The contribution of psychoanalysis

In dealing with racism, it must be recognized that the social forces underlying exclusion on a structural level are supported and perpetuated by the subjective experiences of individuals, by affective-emotional mechanisms that operate both on a conscious and unconscious level. In this perspective, psychoanalysis offers a useful contribution to the understanding of racism. On the macro-social

level, the structure of society perpetuates racism as a social phenomenon. This process of perpetuation is supported on an individual's affective level by psychological mechanisms; it follows, then, that racism is also a psychological phenomenon. Through psychoanalysis it is possible to look at the tension between structure or society, the "external" world, and the psyche, the "internal" world in parallel (Clarke, 2003). According to Rustin (1991) racism is based on irrational, affective beliefs that feed racist discourse and translate into practices of exclusion and mistreatment of people because of their "otherness". For Freud, the inclination to aggression is a human instinctual disposition deriving from what he calls Thanatos (or death drive), that is, a destructive instinct that finds its expression in aggression towards others. This aggression directed to the outside needs to be released as it derives from the tension between psychological and biological drives. This dynamic approach is followed by the structural one in which the relationship between the internal world and the external environment is taken into consideration. The threat deriving from this relationship causes a sense of anguish that the Ego faces using what Freud conceptualized as defence mechanisms. Despite belonging to the Ego, the defence mechanisms are largely unconscious and represent a set of operations that concern the elimination or reduction of any change that could threaten the individual psyche (Laplanche, Pontalis, 1973); in other words, defences provide a compromise by allowing an inadmissible raw content not to reach consciousness (e.g. a forbidden desire, a shameful theme, a risk of self-disintegration) or to reach it in the "right guise" (Sanchez-Cardenas, in press). For Freud there are two main defence mechanisms at the basis of civilization and fear of the other: repression

and projection. Repression is intrinsic to survival, as it protects the psyche from internal and external threats of annihilation. When an instinctive emotion tries to release itself, it is blocked by the Super-Ego, which, finding it repulsive and unpleasant, returns it to the unconscious (Clarke, 2003; 2014). Repression ensures that desires incompatible with the external environment remain unconscious or masked (Bateman & Holmes, 1995). Projection is a defence mechanism in which the material is projected outward as if it were something foreign to the self. For Freud this defence mechanism is symptomatic of a paranoid state, as the distorted feelings of persecution are expelled from the internal world and projected outside. The racist, therefore, by projecting his defects onto another individual or group, is denying what is unpleasant to him and attributing it to someone else. In this direction, Žižek (1992; 1993) uses the expression *The theft of enjoyment* to affirm that total enjoyment cannot be experienced. A trick to reach and not reach total enjoyment at the same time is to project it onto someone else who, therefore, will be imagined having "too much" of something (i.e. total pleasure). From the projected perception that this enjoyment has been stolen a destructive envy derives which translates into the desire to destroy the other (Sanchez-Cardenas, in press). Horkheimer and Adorno (1997), based on the Freudian theories just presented, by intertwining primitive drives and projective defence mechanisms, come to argue that a particular form of self-protection peculiar to the natural world has come to characterize the modern world: mimesis. In this direction, any "other", any minority that refuses to incorporate, becomes the target of hatred, of exclusion (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1997). The Kleinian theory represents an important

contribution to the understanding of the elements underlying racial hatred and discrimination. On the one hand there is splitting, which consists in unconsciously separating the objects of love into "good" and "bad". In some cases, love and hate are split, and the object can become the bearer of all rejection movements; in other words, "the bad object" (Sanchez-Cardenas, in press). On the other side, Melanie Klein extends the concept of projection by developing that of projective identification, that is, the splitting of the Ego and the elimination of unwanted parts of the self and the projection of the latter into the other (Rasmussen, Salhani, 2010). Projective identification becomes more complex when it comes to place itself in relation to the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions. In the paranoid-schizoid position, the individual tends to divide the world into dichotomies (e.g. good - bad) and to project evil into others. In the depressive position it is not only the bad parts of the self that are split and projected into others, but also the loving ones. Introjection and re-introjection of the bad object are, for Klein, the profound basis of paranoia and this implies that, by using projective identification to expel the bad parts of the self into others, the individual lives in fear of being consumed by the latter, thus perpetuating the cycle of persecution (Clarke, 2014). This can also be expressed through Bion's concept of *minute particles*, according to which the object is able to attack thanks to the fact that it can be divided and expelled "in particles so minute that they are the invisible components of a continuum" (Jacobus, 2005, p.217).

The contribution of social psychology

While some scholars, in the study of racism, conflict and discrimination, focus on individuals (e.g. micro-aggression, Sue, 2010; aversive racism, Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986; unconscious bias, Greenwald & Banaji, 1995), on their personality (Fiske, 1998; see also authoritarian personality theory, Adorno et al., 1950), on the defence mechanisms used - i.e. projection, projective identification (Clarke, 2014; Rasmussen, & Salhani, 2010) - on individual stereotypes and prejudice (Lippmann, 1922; Allport, 1954), social psychology highlights the deep interweaving between individuals and groups, personal and collective identity, and the processes of cognitive categorization at the basis of relationships and social behaviours. Based on the theory of Social Identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986) and on the Theory of Social Categorization (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher & Wetherell, 1987), in the socio-psychological field it has been shown that these influence the way individuals and groups perceive themselves and shape their mutual relationships (Mannarini et al., 2020). On the one hand, social identity theory assumes that group identification has the function of promoting self-esteem and maintaining a positive self-image; on the other hand, according to the theory of social categorization, belonging implies a cognitive process, in which people classify themselves and others as members of the same group (in-group) or belonging to different groups (out-group). This categorization process influences the way in which individuals perceive the in-group and the out-group and is characterized, on the one hand, by the minimization of differences within the group, on the other hand, by maximizing the differences between groups (i.e., in-group favouritism, Tajfel et al.,

1986). Just as the conscious expression of racist attitudes does not translate into acted behaviour according to a simplistic logic of cause and effect (LaPiere, 1934), the *negativization* of the out-group is not the direct consequence of the categorization at the intergroup level (Mannarini et al., 2020). The negativity attributed to the out-group is triggered and amplified by specific factors such as, for example, the strength of identification with the in-group, the status of in-group and out-group (System Justification Theory, Jost, Banaji & Nosek, 2004), the feeling that groups may feel deprived of something compared to other groups, that they may feel that they have been harmed or that they perceive the out-group as a threat (Hewstone, Rubin & Willis, 2002). These factors explain the different forms of hostility between groups, from mild expressions (such as verbal attacks and avoidance) to actual acted out behaviour (including discrimination, physical violence and even extermination). In this perspective, racism can be seen as the manifestation of a general basic dynamic at the intergroup level that tends to spread within the uncertain and unstable context of contemporary societies, in which the need for identities and reference points have become more difficult to satisfy and where traditional sources of authority (family, institutions, religion) have been deprived of their ability to act as normative devices (Mannarini et al., 2020). Due to this lack, Hartman and colleagues (2021), according to authoritarianism theory (Stenner, 2005), showed that perceived threats to the social order (in their case Covid-19 disease) activate a latent authoritarianism that results in anti-immigrant attitudes. In this regard, Bochicchio and colleagues (2021) observed that right-wing authoritarianism explained maladjusted behaviors such-as phobia for Chinese people, discrimination and

panic buying in an Italian sample. According to the Uncertainty-Identity Theory (Hogg, 2000; 2012), people are motivated to reduce their feeling of uncertainty, especially if the uncertainty refers to aspects or objects that are relevant to themselves or their identity. In this direction, group identification is one of the strategies used to reduce uncertainty, as groups offer prototypes, standards, and world views that, through a process of consensual validation, stabilize the individual's beliefs and self-concept (Mannarini et al., 2020). In addition to identification with a group, some qualities of groups (interaction between members, shared goals, common destiny, and clear boundaries) are also particularly effective in reducing uncertainty; such qualities make certain groups a safe option in times of extreme uncertainty, as they offer a coherent and understandable framework for the self and the place of the self in the world (Mannarini et al., 2020; Salvatore et al., 2019a).

The contribution of Semiotic-Cultural Psychological Theory

Semiotic-Cultural Psychology theory (hereafter: SCPT) has developed over the past two decades within the more general framework of Cultural Psychology. It integrates different theoretical-methodological perspectives such as Relational Psychoanalysis, Dynamic Systems Theory, Semiotics-Pragmatics and presents interesting convergences with the Theory of Social Representations (Moscovici, 1988; Marková, 2003).

According to the central thesis of Cultural Psychology, the SCPT assumes that individual cognition is mediated - "constrained/channelled/mediated" (Salvatore et al., 2019a, p. 347) - by semiotic resources (e.g.

beliefs, symbolism, images, values, behavioural scripts, rituals, world views) provided by the cultural milieu to which the social group belongs (Salvatore, 2016; Valsiner, 2007, 2014); therefore, the activity of signification (meaning-making) is intrinsically social and cultural. Semiotic resources related to the context in which meaning-making takes place (domain meanings) facilitate the access to object-specific meanings while inhibiting others. (Salvatore et al., 2021a). According to the SCPT, domain meanings (e.g., the relationship with otherness) are in turn influenced by hyper-generalized and affect-laden meanings that function as embodied and pre-reflexive hypotheses among the relationship between oneself and the world. Recently, Salvatore and colleagues (2019b) HAVE analyzed the cultural environments of different European societies and identified five models, which they called Symbolic Universes, operating within them:

1. *Ordered universe* - i.e., generalized positive view of the world (institutions, services, future), perceived as reliable and based on identification with transcendent values (e.g., justice, solidarity, etc.);
2. *Interpersonal bonds* - i.e., the view of affective bonds as the only dimension of life that matters;
3. *Caring society* - i.e., the view of society and institutions as sensitive to individual needs and, therefore, capable of helping people to pursue their personal goals;
4. *Niche of belongingness* - i.e., primary networks are the refuge from an anomic and threatening environment;

5. *Other's world* - i.e., a negative and desperate view of the world characterized by generalized mistrust, desperation, lack of action, anomie.

Symbolic universes represent hyper-generalized global views of the world - i.e. they do not refer to discrete or domain-specific objects; rather they include the whole field of experience - and affect-laden as each of them is made up of a set of meanings that are linked by reason of their affective valence (e.g. pleasure, sense of power), even in the absence of a semantic link - or even despite their semantic conflict (Ciavolino et al., 2017; Salvatore et al., 2019c). Symbolic universes, as affective and embodied meanings, are a combination of basic global patterns that work as organizers of the experience at the sensory-motor level (Salvatore et al., 2021a); at the same time, the way in which the combination of such patterns occurs depends on the discursive practices and on the institutional dynamics in which meanings are inserted (Salvatore, 2019). The symbolic universes, therefore, function as internalized cultural frames, which guide the individual in the construction of meanings, consequently orienting his social behaviour.

The influence exerted by these globalized world views is not direct, as they do not guide the interpretation of a specific object. On the contrary, the symbolic universes exert their influence indirectly in two ways: on the one hand, the symbolic universe with which the meaning-maker identifies himself limits the access to the domain meanings that are affectively opposed to him; on the other hand, the symbolic universe moderates the salience of domain meanings - "the greater the consistency between the symbolic universe and

the domain meaning, the greater the latter's capacity to frame the interpretation of the specific object" (Cordella et al., submitted) - thus orienting behaviour towards them. (Cremaschi et al., 2021).

The enemization of the other according to SCPT

From the semiotic perspective of cultural psychology, racism can be understood in terms of a strategy able to provide meaning to the world and to establish a position, a role, and an identity to the self. The SCPT perspective can provide an alternative vision useful for understanding the phenomenon of racism, through the investigation of the influence exerted on it by the domain meanings. To this end, the understanding of what are the factors that allow symbolic universes to influence the domain meanings is of great importance. Taking into account those positions that see in structural factors - e.g. the worsening economies of European societies (Billiet et al., 2014), people's living conditions (Mitchell, 2020) - the direct consequence of the manifestations of racism, SCPT focuses on the contextual uncertainty associated with meaning-making (for an extensive review on the theme of uncertainty and sense-making process Cfr. De Luca Picione & Lozzi, 2021): the greater the uncertainty, the greater the salience of the symbolic universe on the domain meaning (Cremaschi et al., 2021; Salvatore et al., 2021a; Salvatore et al., 2021b). Given that uncertainty, understood in terms of an affective-cognitive condition of human experience, is characterized by a condition of unpredictability of the future, decision-making process, identity, sociality and agency, it requires an inner effort of sense-making in order to re-establish an ordered and predictable worldview

(De Luca Picione & Lozzi, 2021). Uncertainty is the basis of the cultural model (the symbolic universe "Niche of belongingness") characterized by the generalized negation of otherness, which interprets belonging in paranoid terms (Salvatore et al., 2019a). The term paranoid, as in psychoanalytic theory (Klein, 1967), refers to an elementary form of affective sense-making in which individuals tend to personify any critical event that hinders their actions and desires, and to perceive it as a threat. Paranoid belonging means that identity, the "we", derives from protection from external threats, but also that identity can develop only from the lasting perception of others as enemies (Salvatore et al., 2019b). This is a process of meaning-making that does not have a specific purpose, nor does it refer to a particular and delimited physical and social environment. In fact, on the one hand, by means of its affective nature, it works in a generalized and homogenizing manner as a way of assigning meaning to otherness, rather than to specific social objects (Salvatore & Freda, 2011; Tonti, Salvatore, 2015). On the other hand, it denotes a symbolic space that covers all the people who share the same identity referents, be they real or unreal. Once the world is seen as the conflict between one's own group and the threatening group, any relevant part of the experience can only be interpreted by reason of belonging to the in-group or out-group. Perceiving others as enemies allows individuals to overcome social, geographical, and cultural differences and experience a sense of "weness", that is the sense of being united in and by the common threat (Salvatore et al., 2019a). Again, Salvatore and colleagues (2019a) understand paranoid belonging as the result of a process of irradiation of the identity bond. Irradiation refers to:

[...] To the tendency to define the we in terms of dematerialized symbolic objects, weakened in their anchorage to / confinement within places, practices, interests, and social positions, therefore capable of extending themselves in an unlimited and asymptotic way in spite of social, cultural and economic differences. (Salvatore et al., 2019a, p.363)

Again, paranoid belonging is an emotional construction based on what Salvatore and colleagues (2019a) have defined the *enemization of the other* as rooted in the construction of identity. The enemization of the other is the result of the absolutization of the paranoid form of belonging that constitutes the fundamental form of being-in-the-world. In psychoanalytic terms, the relation with the object is interrupted by the enemy that acts as the *third* which represents the limit of the desire (Salvatore et al., 2021c). While considering the importance of structural factors and political-institutional dynamics, intolerance is not only the effect of the threatening power attributed to the other, but it must be considered as a contingent manifestation of the very dynamics of identity construction. The representation of the other as an enemy to defend oneself against is constitutive: it is the semiotic mechanism of identity that dominates in the current historical phase; it is the way in which a large segment of the population satisfies the need for identity (Salvatore et al., 2019b).

Conclusions

In this article we have presented the psycho-social factors at play in the generation and perpetuation of racism without presuming to be exhaustive given the complexity of the phenomenon under investigation. We initially presented the contribution of psychoanalytic theory, from Freudian models - e.g. the death

drive, or a destructive instinct that finds its expression in the aggression towards others; the use of the defence mechanisms such as repression (an emotion blocked by the Super-Ego that is returned by the latter to the unconscious as repellent and unpleasant) and projection (unpleasant parts of the self are projected outwards as if they were something foreign), also presented through the expression “the theft of enjoyment” by Žižek, from which a destructive envy emerges driven by the projected belief that the other has too much of something - to the concept of mimesis (any "other", any minority that refuses to assimilate, becomes the target of hatred, exclusion) of Horkheimer & Adorno, through the more complex Kleinian approach - e.g. defence mechanisms such as splitting (objects of love are split into good and bad), projective identification (through which the unwanted parts of the self are projected into the other) and its adjustment in relation to the paranoid-schizoid (the world is divided into dichotomies) and depressive (the divided and projected parts of the self are both bad and loving ones) positions - until Bion's concept of minute particles (the object is able to attack because it is divided and fired into minute particles), highlighting how the psychoanalytic perspective is able to provide a basis for understanding the psychodynamics underlying racism. Next, we presented the contribution of social psychology and how, based on the theories of Social Identity (group identification has the function of promoting self-esteem and maintaining a positive self-image) and Social Categorization (people, through a cognitive process, develop a sense of belonging that translates into the classification of themselves and others as belonging to the in-group or to the out-group), scholars tried to provide an explanation of the mechanisms that regulate the relationships between

the groups. A large section was dedicated to a new approach within cultural psychology: the theory of semiotic-cultural psychology. The SCPT allows us to see how the representation of the other is embedded into a cultural environment consisting of generalized and affect-laden meanings (e.g. symbolic universes). According to this perspective, the creation of meaning is what shapes the experience of the internal and external environment, that is the image that individuals and groups have of themselves and of their relationship with the surrounding context. SPCT, together with the contribution of theory and research on social representations, opens the possibility of linking the *nemicalized* representation of otherness to cultural models - i.e., the symbolic universes - currently widespread in European societies, which contribute to the current wave of intolerance, rejection, closure, and discrimination against diversity. This approach offers an alternative view of the problem which can be used, on the one hand, to broaden the understanding of the mechanisms involved in manifestations of racism; on the other hand, to contribute to the design and development of interventions and policies that are able to counteract a phenomenon that is as pervasive as it is lasting.

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