

Sigurd Skirbekk:

The Immigration Debate:

A Question of Moral, Science, Ideology, Myth or Belief?

C. Anti-racism as based upon research

The so called « the anti-racial front» has in public media and political debate been legitimized on the basis of purely moral argumentation. It has stood as a counter-balance to racial persecution. It has been perceived to be consistent with human rights and with values such as liberty, equality and tolerance. Moreover, it is a position supposed to be backed by research and enlightenment. Arguments in favor of a counter-position could thus be perceived as morally repugnant or as manifestations of unenlightened prejudices (in either case, as not being worthy of a dialogue.

Such thinking can easily be used to curtail democratic debate, which is all the more reason to take a critical look at its intellectual status. We must ask whether this position can be defended as an offshoot of scientific research, or whether its supposedly scientific nature should rather be understood as part of a self-immunizing strategy.

Before we can take a stand on such a question, we must decide on what is meant by racism. We could begin by exploring a presumptive authoritative definition of the term. The Encyclopedia Britannica defines racism as follows: «Racism is the theory or idea that there is a causal link between inherited physical traits and certain traits of personality, intellect or culture and, combined with it, the notion that some races are inherently superior to others».¹ Based on this definition, a notion (to be called racist (must be consistent with a theory of causal relationships between people's physical characteristics and their collective character traits, consistent with the notion that whole population groups can be categorized as superior or inferior to each other; and finally, that these relationships must remain constant over time, since innate characteristics are involved.

Such notions can be linked to the racial philosophy of the Third Reich. It was their brutal encounter with this philosophy that caused many to react against racism after World War II. A great deal of research involving these racial ideas was subsequently carried out in a number of countries. This research has revealed similar attitudes in a number of fields, and in more countries than were directly involved in the politics of Nazi Germany.²

Today a vast body of research has undermined several of the assumptions of the original concept of racism. Many human differences, once explained in terms of biological categories, as congenital character traits of certain populations, have since proven to be variable and culture-dependent. Both sociological and biological research show how previous categorizations of peoples into races, alongside political and civilizational distinctions, are not tenable. These days there is widespread agreement to reject previous forms of categorization of separate races in which everyone in a given racial group was assumed to have common physical and mental features that distinguished them collectively from those of another group. Intra-racial differences can reflect greater variation than the average differences between them. There is also agreement that much of what has been used as a measurement of mental differences, first of all, traditional IQ tests, are not scientifically pure. Today it is generally

assumed that variations reflected in IQ measurements manifest both the properties of the tests themselves, differences in the environmental background and genetic differences between those individuals who are being tested.³ On the other hand, it has not been possible to create environmental circumstances that would permit all ethnic groups to achieve the same average test scores.⁴ This suggests that we are dealing with populations in which the people are distributed in overlapping normal distributions.

One need not be an expert to tell that research in this area is far from finished, that much remains uncertain, and that there is widespread disagreement as to the most reasonable interpretations. All the same, it is not difficult to form a picture of what must be considered absurd interpretations. Nor is it particularly difficult to find examples of unreasonable explanations, among so-called racists and anti-racists alike. Some of these absurdities can be linked to ideologies and to social attitudes on the part of those who defend them.

From an evolutionist viewpoint, it would seem absurd to assume that hereditary explanations of the differences between ethnic groups would apply to external traits such as hair and skin color, while all mental differences in their entirety could be traced back to different environmental influences. Such an interpretation is bound to overlook many discoveries in the extensive research on the interplay between inheritance and environment, or internal and external predispositions for dissimilar adjustment. Furthermore, it is bound to overlook the effects of dissimilar environmentally-governed selection over a period of many generations.⁵ Evolution researchers think it likely that African and European populations have lived relatively apart from each other for about 100,000 years. This means that these populations have experienced approximately 4,000 generations of selection, which has determined which progeny would pass on the populations' mutations and inherited genes.⁶ It would be strange indeed if this selection were to have transpired in exactly the same way under different living conditions, just as it would be unreasonable to assume that a variable environmental selection were to have selected only those traits that we would judge to be positive for one population and negative for other populations. This suggests that it is a dubious proposition to assume that all ethnic groups should have exactly the same mental aptitudes, or that some groups should be superior to all others according to all standards of measurement. Even though there are many uncertainties in the evaluation of the relative significance of inheritance and environment, it would be risky to take it for granted that future research will confirm full equality of mental aptitude in the various populations - so as to connect all assumptions about human value to a notion of equality - and to do so only a few years before the human DNA profile is expected to have been fully mapped.

The immigration debate is rife with anti-racist statements which presuppose that research has confirmed the notion of full equality between populations with respect to hereditary mental aptitude. This is usually justified negatively. Since the nazis' interpretation of racist dissimilarities was untenable, so the argument goes, then an interpretation of equality had to be right. In the perception of what constitutes the right interpretation, a distinction is not always made between research findings and what would be democratically desirable. This intermingling has a number of explanations, and is not always due to poor contact between research environments. A number of researchers who were invited after the war to the UN's subdivision UNESCO to express themselves on the subject, should perhaps share some of the blame for the confusion.

For many participants in public debates, UNESCO statements have been regarded as an authoritative source of research-based anti-racism. There are a number of well-founded

explanations as to how this perception took hold.⁷ In 1950 a scientific conference was called at the UNESCO building in Paris, where the secretary-general expressed his wish to combat discrimination based on racial prejudice. On that occasion he stated that if only researchers produced reliable scientific data, racism as it was known before the Second World War would no longer be defensible. There were a number of key geneticists and physical anthropologists who either could not or would not attend that meeting. On the other hand, far less renowned researchers, along with the publicist Ashley Montagu, did attend; he offered to disseminate the conference's final report, which was not meant to be published before the geneticists and physical anthropologists had had a chance to make statements that could be worked into the report. However, Montagu, who had made a reputation as an anti-racist at that time and later,⁸ publicized an incomplete summary in *Saturday Review* the following week. Among the statements made there was the following: «For all practical purposes, race is not so much a biological phenomenon as a social myth.» A number of genetic scientists disagreed with the published text, but UNESCO found it difficult to correct something that had already been publicized.⁹

At a later UNESCO conference on the same subject, the final communiqué was given in a negative form, not the positive one that followed the first conference. It stated that science lacked evidence for racial dissimilarities in mental capacity, and that the same thing applied to the consequences of racial intermarriage. This is the kind of negative conclusion that researchers will normally support, provided the falsification criteria are stringent and the issue at hand involves complicated matters such as distinguishing between hereditary and environmental factors. Nevertheless, only 22 of the 108 researchers who subsequently submitted papers to this UNESCO conference supported the conference conclusions. The rest made negative comments of greater or lesser importance. Unofficially, as many as 80% of the genetics researchers had claimed that they believed demonstrable differences between population groups were in part genetically determined.¹⁰

The statements from these conferences could be interpreted differently, as indeed they have been. Media moguls and geneticists have apparently gone their separate ways. For a long while it appeared that modern research had become the best guarantee for the new interpretations, since many researchers eschewed old interpretations and pointed out social and cultural explanations of differences once thought to be innate. However, commentators in the major media have gradually begun to suspect researchers of having lapsed into traditional racist thinking. For their part, these researchers have said they felt the media hype had been one-sided and somewhat distorted.¹¹

An extensive body of research has been carried out into the relationship between genetic predisposition and different forms of behavior. This research not only involves dissimilarities in IQ test scores, or traits that are readily categorized in a hierarchical distribution. Researchers have also studied the genetic aspects of different character traits that can predispose people for various reproductive forms of adjustment.¹² Philippe Rushton and others have pin-pointed certain physiological differences between Mongolian, Caucasian and Negroid populations, and defined these in relation to various strategies for reproductive survival.¹³ To the extent that their research is reliable (and the basic data is extensive, albeit controversial (this suggests that we should altar our assumptions about the maintenance of a given culture, if a society accepts a larger number of individuals with mental aptitudes other than those which have characterized the established population.

In relation to the extensive discussions that have been carried on between researchers on these subjects, the public-oriented media debate comes across as singularly one-dimensional. A striking characteristic is the reference to race in connection with immigration linked (practically without exception) to the complex of meaning around opposition to immigration. Few have discussed the possibility that race could also speak for different types of immigration, as a «genetic upgrading» of a population. The joint assumptions of the protagonists to the effect that «race» is an explanatory category that stands to benefit the opponents of immigration strengthens the impression that the various viewpoints in the debate have been determined by political ideals of equality rather than by evaluations based on research and broad-based analysis.

Another striking characteristic, which also makes it difficult to see predominant positions as diversions from research, is the fact that spokesmen for these positions do not mean the same thing when they talk about «racism». Now and then reference is made to an original biological philosophy of racism, such as the one quote from the Encyclopedia Britannica. But just as often, reference is made to a new and expanded philosophy of racism, in which everything that can lead to social discrimination of people from other cultures is perceived as "racism".¹⁴ A number of researchers have pointed out that this leads to a form of confusion, one that might serve some ideological purpose but is not consistent with researcher's assumptions.¹⁵

The possible connections between cultural forms and varying genetic predisposition have generally been absent from the debate. The major part of this discussion has focused on intelligence studies and on averages in the different populations. To the extent that these studies show innate limits in people's potential, and especially if they show that these limits are unevenly distributed among different population groups, this can be taken as a challenge to alternative ideas about human freedom and about social equality.

A survey study carried out during the mid-1990s among immigrants to the United States can shed some light on this confusion of ideas.¹⁶ According to this study, 87/88% of all those who had come to the US during the last 10 years replied that they had felt welcome, both upon their arrival and at the time of the survey. At the same time, 48% of the same respondents stated that they agreed with the claim that the United States was «a racist country». At that time the vast majority of immigrants had been classified either as «Hispanic» or «colored». The fact that nearly 9 out of 10 immigrants felt welcome in the US, and nearly five out of ten felt that the country in which they felt welcome was in fact racist, suggests that the popular use of the term «racist» no longer reflects its original meaning, but refers instead to a milder form of discrimination based on ethnic traits.

There are several reasons for doubting that scientific arguments can account for all the positions in the contemporary anti-racist front. If arguments rely entirely on scientific authority, they should not be contradicted by empirical evidence. At the same time the arguments should be formulated in such a way that they theoretically could have been falsified.

The debate over Herrnstein and Murray's book *The Bell Curve* , itself accused of not being sufficiently scientific, tells something about the scientific status of the anti-racist front.¹⁷ These two researchers submitted many bivariate tables between aptitude tests and social placement in order to argue that social differences between classes and races also involved a genetic component. A number of objections can be raised to some of the conclusions of this

work, particularly for its failure to make use of multivariate analyses.¹⁸ But this fact, which we could call a normal scientific criticism, is not sufficient grounds for rejecting all the conclusions in the book (such as the claim that there are innate limits to human development, and that these limits have somewhat differing mean values in different populations and social groupings. It is a leap from the scope of research-based criticism to the kind of conclusions the critics have wanted to defend.

The most radical have conceded this. To neutralize the argumentation in *The Bell Curve*, it would be necessary to claim that the crux of the work rests on scientifically invalid premises. To provide a «definitive refutation» of Herrnstein and Murray's reasoning, it has been claimed that, strictly speaking, from a scientific viewpoint, it is impossible to draw conclusions about innate dissimilarities between population groups on the basis of empirical data, for the simple reason that environment and heredity are too closely intertwined to be gauged separately.¹⁹

Some would object that people with such views underestimate researchers' ability to find their way in these types of problems, but this is not the most amazing thing in this context.²⁰ What is important in principle is that the claim is being made that research has no way to refuse the notion that all racial groups have equal hereditary potential. What is claimed is that there are no operational criteria for observations that could eventually have falsified such an hypothesis. Thus, what is being implied is that the premises of anti-racism cannot be scientific, since what cannot be falsified cannot enjoy scientific status.

References

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2 Cf. Solomos, John (1993): *Race and racism in Britain*. MacMillan, London. - Silverman, Maxim (1992): *Deconstructing the Nation: immigration, racism and citizenship in modern France*. Routledge, NY. - Anderson, David D. and Robert L. Wright (1971): *The Dark and Tangled Path: Race in America*. Houghton Mifflin, Boston. - Browser, Benjamin P. (1995): *Racism and Anti-racism in World Perspective*. Sage, London. - Bowser, Colin and John Whitmore (1993): *Race and Sex Discrimination*. Sweet and Maxwell, London.

3 Cf. Loehlin, John, Gardner Lindzey and J. N. Spuhler (1975): *Race Differences in Intelligence*. Freeman, San Francisco. - White, Elliot (ed.): *Intelligence, political inequality and public policy*. Praeger, Westpoint, Conn. - Nyborg, Helmuth (ed.) (1997): *The Scientific Study and Human Nature*. Pergamon, NY, p 261 f. - Cf. also Popenoe, David (1995): *Sociology*, Prentice Hall, NJ, p 235 under the paragraph, «Race, Intelligence and Character».

4 An overview of research-based studies of average intelligence tests in various populations may be found in the article «Geographic variation in intelligence» by R. Lynn, pp 259-281. Helmuth Nyborg, ed. (1997): *The Scientific Study of Human Nature. Tribute to Hans J. Eysenck at Eighty*. Pergamon, Oxford. - According to Philippe Rushton, serious American IQ-researchers reckon with the following average scores for different population groups: 85 for Afro-Americans, 89 for Latin-Americans, 103 for Euro-Americans, 106 for Asian-Americans, and 116 for American Jews. Cf. Rushton, J. Philippe: «The mismeasurement of Gould». *Academic Questions*, Sept. 15, 1997

(<http://www.nationalreview.com/nationareview/15sept97/Rushton091597.html>).

5 Cf. Halsey, A. H. (ed.) (1977): *Heredity and Environment*. Methuen, London. - Degler, Carl N. (1991): *In Search of Human Nature. The Decline and Revival of Darwinism in American Social Thought*. Oxford University Press.

6 Leakey, Richard (1994): *The Origin of Mankind*, Basic Books, NY.

- 7 The following account is essentially based on accounts that professor William B. Provine from Cornell University gave at a seminar in scientific theory at the University of Oslo on May 27, 1994.
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- 10 Cf. Snyderman, Mark and Stanley Rothman (1988): *The IQ Controversy, the Media and Public Polity*. Transaction Books, NJ.
- 11 In addition to Snyderman and Rothman's book, mentioned in the foregoing footnote, cf. Fletcher, Ronald (1991): *Science, ideology and the media. The Cyril Burt Scandal*. Transactions. New Brunswick, and Mackintosh, N. J. (ed) (1995): *Cyril Burt: fraud or framed?* Oxford University Press. - Cf. also Levin, Michael (1997): *Why Race Matters. Race Differences and What They Mean*. Greenwood Publishing Group, Praeger, NY.
- 12 Cf. Rushton, J. Philippe (1995): *Race, Evolution and Behavior: A Life History Perspective*. Transaction Publications, New Brunswick.
- 13 Cf. Rushton, UJ. Philippe (195): «Differential K theory: The sociobiology of individual and group differences». *Personality and Individual Differences* 6:441-452, and Rushton, J. Philippe and A. F. Bogaert (1988): «Race versus social class differences in sexual behavior: A follow-up test of the r/K dimension». *Journal of Research in Personality* 22:259-272. - Rushton; J. Philippe: "Ethnic Differences in Temperament", in Y-T Lee, C.R. McCauley, & J. Draguns (Eds), *Personality and personal perception across cultures*. Pp 45-63, Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
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- 16 The study that was carried out by Gallup is reprinted in the November/December 1995 issue of the American magazine *The American Enterprise*. It is also mentioned in *USA Today*, May 25(June 4, 1995. - Cf. also the discussion in D'Souza, Dinesh (1995): *The End of Racism*. NY. Free Press; ch. 7, pp 245-287. «Is America a Racist Society? The Problem of Rational Discrimination.»
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- 20 Cf. the problem statement and literature references in Plomin, Robert (1994): *Genetics and Experience. The Interplay Between Nature and Nurture*. Sage, London.

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