

Sigurd Skirbekk:

The Immigration Debate:

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

D. Anti-racism as ideology

As long as research cannot justify the contemporary status of a predominant anti-racism in the debate on migration, the question arises as to what alternative explanatory principles are available to us. We shall begin by asking whether that aspect of anti-racism which cannot be explained as research-governed, is capable of being adapted to an ideology.

Ideologies have been defined in terms of five hallmarks: system context, distortion of reality, latent sacrifice, particularistic interest-dependency, and self-immunization¹. As for the first criterion, system context, we should emphasize that we are referring to a mutual support of different elements, so that the position gains credibility (as seen from within, at any rate.

To the extent that the anti-racist position causes participants in the migration debate to look like racists or anti-racists, there is a marked structuring of the social reality. Both moral and political viewpoints will support each other. While the racists can be linked to violence and anti-democratic thinking, the anti-racists can be linked to humane, democratic ideals.

It is not particularly difficult to find participants with particularistic interests in this kind of situation. This applies, of course, to individuals and groups interested in freer immigration; but it also applies to those who have special reasons for just wanting to see individuals from different cultures as players in a common human arena, and who would gladly disregard the significance of cultural differences. This can apply to those associated with the bureaucracy, with marketing, and to people with a humanitarian orientation. Those who also have an occupational link to the mass media will have an added reason for regarding interpersonal conflicts in terms of a simplified role distribution, recognizable to most as a drama between good and evil.

If all conflicts associated with immigration are linked to racism or anti-racism, it is obvious that this will lead to an oversimplification, and to a distortion of reality. Anxiety over world population growth and the ecological consequences of our lifestyle simply cannot be boiled down to racism in whatever guise, whether old or new. The categories of interpretation ensure that a large part of the immigration issue falls outside the scope of discussion.

An interpretation based on the categories of racism and anti-racism also lead us away from a realistic understanding of cultural conflicts associated with migration. Many have fallen prey to wishful thinking by taking it for granted that more immigrants would increase the tolerance between population groups. In fact, research points in the opposite direction. Conflicts have a tendency to proliferate in proportion to the number of immigrants within a given population, especially in times of high unemployment.²

Nor is it altogether realistic to assume that problems of integration are due solely to the attitudes of an established population. Among immigrants from the Orient residing in the West, there is considerable reluctance to embrace contemporary Western culture in all its complexity. For example, a number of immigrants have branded contemporary European gender relationships as immoral. With reference to Sweden, they claim that in our part of the world only half the women will ever get married. With reference to England, they claim that half of those who get married are destined to get divorced. With reference to Italy, they claim that the native population have no more than half the number of children necessary to ensure survival. Faced with such conditions, they often deliberately choose to select marriage partners for their children from among candidates from their own country, and to maintain their own traditions as long as possible. It has been estimated that over 80% of all Pakistanis who got married in Oslo between 1986 and 1996 got their marriage partner from Pakistan.

Viewed from a long-term perspective, it can be claimed that Oriental immigrants represent the superior form of culture compared to present-day Western standards. Treating immigrants as welfare cases should, in this situation, not only be regarded as an expression of generosity; it also implies a superior status for a Western liberal elite. At the same time it covers up the dysfunctional aspects of the cultural development this elite has advocated.

The anti-racist argumentation has largely rested on the concept that political freedom of action can be traced back to the choice between good and evil alternatives. This often leads to a distortion of reality. In all likelihood, we are faced with a reality which over time will lead to a number of evils and unpleasant forms of adjustment. The demographic and ecological challenges discussed in the previous paragraph cannot be solved by a liberal immigration policy. At best, this will merely mitigate or postpone a number of unpleasant developments. At worst, it will lead to a shying away from the real challenges.

In all probability we are facing challenges that call for restrictive answers at odds with both liberal-humane values and declared human rights. One type of restrictive agent that has been tried is the political/economic initiative. In China, parents have been fined, to all intents and purposes, when they give birth to more children than official policy allows. Other, more drastic agents include compulsory sterilization of people who have had a certain number of children. Some Australian researchers have predicted that this could well become common practice in a number of countries by the 2030s.³ Even more drastic measures involve compulsory abortion and the neglect of children and old people so that they will not remain alive. Even these policies have traditions, as well as their advocates.⁴ A policy of actively or passively allowing contagious diseases and famines to decimate whole populations are yet even more drastic measures. The same can be said of what science fiction literature calls «depopulation without discrimination», as «the fairest way to do what is necessary.»⁵ For that matter, it is not certain that everyone would consider the stochastic taking of human life as the «fairest» policy. Now and then, the Chinese refer to selective human breeding as a «quality of life policy». However drastic this might seem, it can be argued that it is less devastating than all-out war between population groups, or even worse: a war between the human race and global ecosystems.

Though we might shut our eyes to the damaging consequences of good intentions, this does not make it likely that good intentions will automatically lead to a better world. Those who, in the name of morality, are determined to think only good, can reap a selfish benefit by living their lives with a good conscience while living a lie. All the while they can be shoving their problems ahead of them and leaving the shock of reality to a coming generation that is

ideologically ill-prepared. This reality shock can involve the sheer numbers of a future population. It can also involve the quality of human orientation in relation to an increasingly complex reality. In a culture dominated by an individual-centered here-and-now ethics, it will nevertheless be difficult to discuss the dilemma that Herbert Spencer mentioned in his own way, when in the 19th century he claimed that the kindness of one generation would lead to brutality toward another. The victims of an anti-racist situational understanding are the up-and-coming generations.

Many anti-racist viewpoints are justified on the basis of consideration for the victims of racist thinking, whether in practical politics or the self-perception of individuals in vulnerable groups. Such a consideration has some merit (for example, as a reminder to exercise caution when interpreting aptitude tests that have produced different results for different groups. Nevertheless, it is not clear that this consideration justifies concealing the results of different intelligence tests, which show overlapping distribution curves between the scores of different ethnic groups. In other words, the group distributions do not justify the sorting of specific individuals. Even after the American tests, which were the least favorable to African Americans, in which their average IQ scores were 80, compared with European Americans' 100, a normal distribution would suggest that approximately 15% of the black test-takers will score higher than the average for whites.⁶ And half of the whites will score lower than the same average. In practical terms, this means that we cannot judge one person's capacity for achievement solely on the basis of skin color.

There probably did not need to be any contrast between the liberal wish for non-discrimination between individuals in a legal society and modern racial research. Research does not contradict the principle that individuals should be evaluated according to their own qualifications, and not according to statistical features of the ethnic categories to which these individuals belong. As opposed to much older racial research, modern research on the subject can be used to defend the principle that equality, at the outset, will benefit capable individuals in all population groups. But, we hasten to add, it is not certain that all ethnic groups will end up percentage-wise with just as many representatives in every occupation, if qualifications alone are the selection criterion.

And so we have reached the last criterion of ideologies: self-immunizing techniques. The simplest technique for immunizing a liberal immigration standpoint consists of branding all opponents as racists, or as dangerous persons who are out to legitimize racism, and use this as justification for claiming that their arguments should be silenced dismissed as trivial. In some situations, opponents of immigration have even been diagnosed as infectious agents of sick ideas. This may give us a seemingly good reason to avoid contact with the critics, yet it is a highly undemocratic means of thwarting insight through dialogue.⁷

A more subtle form of self-immunization is to use research in such a way that it leads to a complete safeguarding against the risk of having to explain conflicts between ethnic groups in terms other than racial categories. In a book on violence associated with racism, a book that has been used by governments in many European countries, we find the following definition of racist violence: «Any violence in which victims are selected because of their ethnic, 'racial', religious, cultural or national origin. The victims are attacked not as individuals, but as representatives of groups that are normally minorities in terms of power. Buildings, properties and institutions may also be attacked, because they represent these same groups or their interests.»⁸

Since the authors give such a broad definition of racist violence, they are safe from attack by colleagues claiming that they are describing something other than true racism. On the other hand, if violence linked to ethnicity, religion and nationality is to be interpreted as racism, then what we have is a radical, expanded definition in comparison with the historically traditional one. The intermingling of a cultural and a biological racial philosophy need not be regarded as the mere manifestation of a definitive confusion; it can also serve as immunization against analytical criticism.

References

- 1 Skirbekk, Sigurd (2000): *The New Liberal Ideology*. Prelim. Script. Dep. of sociology, University of Oslo.
- 2 Cf. Quillian, Lincoln (1995): «Prejudice as a Response to Perceived Group Threat: Population Composition and Anti-Immigrant and Racial Prejudice in Europe». *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 60, Aug. (pp 586-611).
- 3 This has been suggested as a probable future prognosis in the last part of the Australian TV series in six parts, «After the Warming», produced by Mike Slee and broadcast by the British TV channel *Discovery* on December 15, 1996.
- 4 Hrdy, Sarah Blaffer and Glenn Hausvater (ed.) (1984): *Infanticide: comparative and evolutionary perspectives*. Aldine Publishers, NY, Cf. bibliography, pp 521-588.
- 5 Quoted from p 21 in Glaser, Alice (1991): *The Tunnel Ahead*.
- 6 One of the most used introductory textbooks in sociology at American universities, Macionis, John J. (1997): *Sociology*. Prentice Hall, NJ, operates on pg. 326 with average scores of 90 for Americans with African background, 100 for Americans with European background, and 103 for Americans with Eastern Asian background. The reference for these figures is Herrnstein and Murray's studies.
- 7 Susan Sonntag, in an article in which she analyzes the use of illness metaphors on counter-arguments, has spoken of this as an incitement to violence. Cf. Sonntag, Susan (1978): «Disease as Political Metaphor», *New York Review of Books*, 23, February, pp 29-35.
- 8 Bjørge, Tore and Rob Witte (1993) eds: *Racist Violence in Europe*, St. Martin's Press, Basingstoke, p 6.

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