

INTRODUCTION

The Current Moment

THIS IS NOT a history book. Or rather, this book does not only provide a history of the formation of racial categories in Europe and its colonies. The reader holds between his or her hands a collection of proposals on the ways historical research can contribute to contemporary debates on the attribution of racial identity to individuals and populations. The racial question looms on a global scale.¹ On the one hand, Western countries, whether or not they led colonial empires in the nineteenth century, must now deal with manifestations of racism, be they instances of police brutality in the United States, torrents of racist speech in a Europe confronting a migrant crisis, or “chromatic” social hierarchies in Latin America. On the other hand, interethnic violence and social fragmentation into castes based on ideologies of purity and heredity appear to exist on every continent. Nonetheless, this book focuses solely on Western societies, in Europe and the Americas, in order to avoid premature conclusions or approximations about situations that can be observed in Asia and Africa and that call for studies of those places specifically.

This book was initially written for a French-speaking audience with the aim of illustrating to what extent the French case is singular compared to experiences in other countries and to theories developed within other academic traditions. I hope that the American edition of this work will play a similar role for the American case. In the following pages, Anglophone readers will discover an analysis drawn from a historian's perspective and should note that my academic background does not mirror the usual approach to these subjects in the United States, and even less so do my proposals.

The method proposed in this work consists of identifying a core, which is specifically racial, within the collection of prejudices, phobias, political programs, and norms that are qualified, somewhat vaguely, as racist. Because *Race Is about Politics: Lessons from History* is not a history of racial thought, but rather an invitation for open debate to all readers interested in this field of study, its three primary objectives reflect a programmatic dimension. These objectives are as follows:

1. To distinguish racial categories and processes of racialization within a much larger group of xenophobic attitudes and policies;
2. To propose a chronology of the formation of racial categories in the West that dates back to the Middle Ages and is therefore not limited to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries;
3. To prepare students, citizens, and scholars within the social and human sciences to confront any challenges that may be created by the unpredictable outcomes of research in the field of genetic biology. It is, of course, indispensable to continue to denounce the ideological agenda and racist policies espoused by sociobiology. However, we must acknowledge that as the human and social

sciences continue to develop their respective expertise, it is critical to monitor what genetic biology may contribute in the future to our understanding of the development of man within society.

A Situated Perspective

This book makes proposals, which I am offering from within a specific time and place. At the same time, these proposals are underpinned by a methodological rejection of relativism. On the critique of relativism, we can go quickly. Suffice it to borrow from the anthropologist Gérard Lenclud a logical argument against the idea that there are between human societies incommensurable realities that are therefore incommunicable. When a researcher says that a word, a ritual, a cultural expression, or a social institution is untranslatable into the language of his or her own society, we assume that he or she first has understood these objects in their own context. If we say that social realities are incommensurable, it is because we have been able to measure them.² Thus the attribution of untranslatability and immeasurability to any object is a logical contradiction. Nonetheless, as the author of this book I have to clarify what my own historical and social coordinates are. Born, raised, and trained in France, I am a French citizen of second generation by my father's side and third by my mother's side, both of them having come from Jewish families, one of which migrated to France from Poland, and the other from Germany, before World War II. There is, of course, a direct link between my interest in racial issues and the memory of the Holocaust that has been central in shaping my personality. Knowing this, I do not interpret the whole history of the West as a long-term preparation of the final disaster of the Third Reich. My approach to political processes of early modern and

contemporary eras depends on my anchorage in the European experience, particularly in France. I admit, but only to a certain extent, the argument that only those who have experienced some type of phenomenon are able to transcribe it, but not that only a certain type of people is capable of understanding the transcript. My experience in France taught me that there was not necessarily a difference between a Jewish sensibility and a non-Jewish sensibility concerning the memory of the Holocaust.

A recent book has shown it was exaggerated or even false to claim that silence was imposed in France concerning the Holocaust just after World War II, before the historical research on the genocide of the Jews changed the intellectual landscape starting in the 1970s.³ It is necessary, in fact, not to be deceived by the retrospective illusion that past experience is made of silences, occultations, and amnesia. For those who have been willing to read testimonies, books, and articles, neither the genocide of the Jews nor the extreme brutality of the colonial wars was unknown in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. Some historians of the late twentieth century composed inventories of silences that never existed. Thus, the practice of slavery until its abolition by Victor Schoelcher in 1848, the brutality of colonization in Africa (denounced by Albert Londres, André Gide, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Léopold Sedar-Senghor, Aimé Césaire, and Albert Memmi), the anti-Semitism of the Vichy regime, the practice of torture in Algeria, racist killings committed in metropolitan France during the three decades following the end of the War of Algeria: none of these historical realities was hidden by a State's censorship. Undoubtedly, restrictions have been imposed, particularly in school curricula and television broadcasting. The main reason some historians have fabricated the narrative of occultations is that they wanted a set of themes not taught at university and in high

schools to be explained, as opposed to other phenomena that cause less tension.

For those who wished to accept it, it was possible to be exposed to the revelation of all that in the history of France related to racist practices. It is also true that, for those who did not want to hear about it, these realities could have emerged from the individual and collective consciousness. That is why, after I have placed myself for the readers within a time, a place, and a family heritage, I think the critical work that is at the heart of the humanities and social sciences on an essentially open field carries much more weight in the work that I lead than what comes to me from my personal existence. I assume that the anti-relativist flavor of the above remarks may fall within the scope of a universalist paradigm, which some critics have identified as the mask of political domination. For now, suffice it to say that there is no correlation between the radicalism of claims for equal rights and adherence to a relativistic rhetoric. Frantz Fanon's universalistic perspective, as a thinker and as an activist, still remains an admirable demonstration of this.

As I write this in 2016, France suffers from a number of internal tensions. This historical situation encourages researchers in the humanities and social sciences, including historians, to think about the shaping of racial categories. An incident that occurred on television on September 26, 2015, during a popular talk show seems indicative of what is now at stake in France. A politician, Nadine Morano, former minister in Nicolas Sarkozy's government, explained three times that France was a "Judeo-Christian" country and a "white race" country. A member of the neo-Gaullist party, she sheltered behind the authority of General de Gaulle, presenting her definition of France as a "white race" country as a quote from de Gaulle. Obviously, this phrase immediately aroused great indignation even in her own party. The racist far-right leader Jean-Marie

Le Pen applauded these remarks. The expression “white race” belongs to the vocabulary of only small groups of racist activists, called today “Identitaires,” but not the neo-Gaullist party nor the National Front itself. In reality, the reference to de Gaulle was not straightforward: the supposed quote was reported by an assistant of the general over thirty years after it was delivered to him during a private conversation. As the conversation was later described by de Gaulle’s biographer, the French president would have defined France as a “white race” society shaped by a Christian tradition.⁴ But in 1959, this idea specifically meant that a country like France could not offer citizenship and nationality to the Arab and Muslim masses of Algeria. Therefore, if de Gaulle expressed this sentiment, it was meant as a mental preparation for the inevitability of the independence of Algeria. For de Gaulle, in a typically Jeffersonian move, the independence of Algeria was better for France than was the integration of native Algerians into French citizenship. Therefore, de Gaulle was preparing public opinion for the idea that the independence of Algeria was inevitable, or rather desirable. Since then, for far-right activists, France was ultimately humiliated when, after recognizing the victory of Algerian nationalists in 1962, it didn’t avoid the presence of millions of citizens and inhabitants coming from Muslim North Africa. If one can draw an analogy, this is similar to the permanence of African Americans on US soil after the abolition of chattel slavery in 1865. In the current context, Morano, then, has deliberately created an amalgam between the current response to jihadist terrorism, the Islamophobia that is itself closely linked to the detestation of Algerian immigrants since the French defeat in Algeria, and the anguish caused by the arrival of Syrian migrants in the summer of 2015. In the time since these lines were written for the French edition of the book, political developments in Poland, Great Britain, and

the United States have brought xenophobic and racist opinions out of the margins, and politicians have legitimized them in elections, conducting openly xenophobic campaigns.

Historians do not direct their research on the racial question according to the latest news. However, regardless of their preferred period of study, historians cannot approach questions of race without considering the triad of Jim Crow laws, Nazism, and apartheid. All scholars who explore racism share these points of reference whether they are explicitly recognized or whether they remain implicit and sometimes even unconscious. This is why, when applying the best historical methods, these historical phenomena should not be considered as the inevitable outcome of a long history that scholars attempt to unravel by following the thread backward. We should, on the contrary, consider the Jim Crow–Nazism–apartheid triad as the point of departure for any critical approach to a historical legacy—in other words, the political and intellectual context—that has concerned scholars of the human and social sciences even before they began studying race and racism. When historians of any period compare their specific case with contemporary racism, in order to demonstrate how their respective case resembles it or, on the contrary, is distinct from it, it's better to possess an in-depth understanding of how contemporary racist policies were established and developed. Consequently, historians of questions of race must be specialists in their respective periods and, at the same time, be equipped with a consequential knowledge and understanding of Jim Crow laws, Nazism, and apartheid. That is not always the case.

Racism as Politics

Broadly speaking, racism is distinct from all other expressions of hostility toward others by the fact that it identifies people

and groups by what they *are* and not by what they *do*. Pirates, heretics, rebels, and hereditary enemies are typically victims of segregation and persecution because of the way they act or because of what they have done. Yet the distinction between being and doing, once examined within the context of the humanities and social sciences, appears quite fragile. One wonders in the name of which analytical method it is possible to separate what people *do* from what they *are*, that is, as two distinct planes of human existence, if not precisely within a framework of racist thought. Nonetheless, it's worth contemplating what this use of the verb "to be" (what someone *is*) signifies. Here, it implies a collection of attributes as disparate as: phenotype or physical resemblance to one's forebears; gender; native language; sexual preference; place of birth or upbringing; socioeconomic milieu; and, a recent phenomenon in the history of human societies, allegiance to a nation. These attributes share two characteristics: First, almost all these features are inherited, which is to say they are the result of a more or less perfect process of reproduction from one generation to the next. Second, attributes thus received at birth are difficult to change, in the sense that people cannot easily reject them or be painlessly stripped of them.

In other words, judging people for what "they are" equates to defining them by that which appears to be, at first glance, scarcely modifiable, if modifiable at all. What's more, once you define what people "are" through a process of identification—understood here as an externally imposed action—you are solidifying the inalterable, unmoving nature of their traits. The persons who define others in this way often do so for their own political ends, because they are simultaneously molding a self-serving hierarchy of elements that the identity of the "other" must include: gender, genealogy, religion, language, sexual preference, phenotype, accent, and so on. Little wonder, then,

that mechanisms that characterize human beings according to race, or if preferred, genealogy and appearance, are often compared to mechanisms used to assign identity according to gender, class, and sexual preference. All these attributes benefit (or suffer, depending on the perspective) from limited alterability.

However, the aim of this book is not to examine the historical evolution of definitions of being, that is, what people “are,” even within a precisely situated social group, as that would entail engaging the entire spectrum of the humanities and social sciences and perhaps beyond. On the contrary, the current period can be characterized by the confrontation between defenders of the mutable character of individual attributes and those who maintain that some level of inalterability exists. This unique historical context necessitates a few preliminary remarks. The notion that some part of what individuals inherit at birth can remain fixed is now strongly disputed. Indeed, the constructivist approach to human existence, which has been included in humanities and social sciences curricula for over a century, seems to have finally gained favor in both the political and legal arenas. An individual’s native attributes are no longer definitively assigned. Gender (and even sex), physiognomy, sexual preference, relation to the past, and native language are now considered to be malleable, or more precisely, unable to be stripped of their malleability. We can reasonably interpret this state of affairs as the culmination of a process of emancipation via individuation.

In European and American societies, those who qualify hypostasis and homosexuality as crimes, or who claim that interracial marriage is a blight on a family’s or community’s honor, are not operating from any sort of moral high ground. In reality, their indignation comes from seeing that the field of mutable attributes has grown to the detriment of the somewhat supernatural sphere of the immutable. “Liquid modernity,”

according to Zygmunt Bauman's expression, is made of unbinding and disaffiliation, on the one hand, but it does not necessarily abolish the possibility of racism, on the other hand. But this evolution cannot be considered solely as the end to a continuous line of progress, or, in other words, a fundamental good. The problem remains: for a society of individuals to function over time and allow people to project themselves into the future, it is necessary that rules and values be stabilized, be they actual laws, or beliefs of a metaphysical nature. In the same way, once a critical analysis begins to break down all forms of affiliation or belonging, it will perforce discover that individuals prefer to band together by affinity or obligation. This is because, in reality, social life only rarely resembles a fantasy in which subjects voluntarily adopt any number of attributes that suit them depending on circumstance and mood. One of the central themes within the humanities and social sciences, and perhaps beyond, is precisely the challenges to a subject's free will encountered in the social sphere. The contemporary humanities and social sciences have dispelled many illusions of the reputedly immutable character of the attributes that define individuals and groups. The fact that we consider it legitimate for everyone to define him- or herself at all times according to his or her conviction and his or her feelings of the moment does not mean that society functions only as the encounter of an infinity of free wills in constant mutation. In other words, even within the framework of an individualistic conception of society, structures and norms unfold at times and in rhythms that are not the immediate desire of each. Thus studying social and political relationships is about understanding how individuals and groups combine their individual and collective inheritances and aspirations with those of other communities in a relationship that is not free from the past and that cannot confuse the future with the expressions of

desires and fantasies. Conflicts are the expression of the opposition between interests, identities, inheritances, and projects. It is within this very general framework that racial discrimination is mobilized as a tool of domination or as a weapon of defense against processes that seem to threaten the interests and identities of racists.

The triumph of the plasticity of belonging should have favored the extinction of racist thinking in contemporary societies—an expectation that is, to say the least, off the mark. That observation is unsurprising, even though, as shown in the following pages, we are often reluctant to admit that racial definitions of individuals and groups are meant to challenge their ability (or right) not to correspond to the stereotypes assigned them. When people conform to the conceptions others have of them, meaning they maintain the role to which they've been assigned, there's scant need for a racial theory to express hostility toward them. The victory of mutability lies in offering individuals the possibility to *not* correspond to the image of the group into which they have been placed. The stigmatization of African Americans reached its racist peak when they obtained citizenship; homosexuals in France, upon demanding the right to be integrated into the common family norm, recently became a target. As will be seen in the following chapters, the main paradox of racism is that the rejection of the other is a response to the anxiety caused by the gradual erasure of differences between the dominant population and minority groups.

*Racism from the Humanities
and Social Sciences*

From the perspective of the humanities and social sciences, the current period can be characterized by a paradox. For the last sixty years or so, researchers in the humanities and social

sciences have admitted, consensually, that race as a biological reality that determines the variety of humans has no relevance when analyzing human societies, either in relation to their internal cohesion or to define what distinguishes one from another. In other words, while on the one hand the question of race must occupy a very important place in the study of social and political relations, on the other hand most scholars reject the idea that humanity is divided into races whose members bear the characteristics attributed to each of these supposed races. This constructivist model views race as a social and cultural artifact, and not as an underlying physiological reality. This is the only model on which studies by historians, sociologists, anthropologists, political analysts, and philosophers are based.⁵ These researchers' approach is reinforced by the fact that geneticists themselves reject the concept of race. Biologists in fact resist the use of the term "race" because of its vagueness. Indeed, the notion of race, a combination of physiological concepts and social characteristics, proves useless when describing relevant distinctions between human beings.⁶ Nonetheless, the prevention of genetic diseases relies on the identification of at-risk populations, meaning it relies on the probability of the presence of certain genes within certain populations rather than in others. And common sense tells us, based on an image repeated a thousand times, and verified a thousand times, that children resemble their biological parents (and grandparents). Researchers in the humanities and social sciences are thrilled to hear geneticists publicly state that races don't exist. When geneticists advance this idea, they mean that we cannot infer social characteristics from genetic variations among individuals or groups. But at the same time that the social sciences' desire to prevent physiological analysis from interfering with this field of study appears to have been satisfied, biologists have begun to decipher the codes that will

allow for a better understanding of the biochemical mechanisms through which the intergenerational transmission of physiological traits occurs. In other words, the constructivist paradigm is occupying the entire intellectual space of the social sciences at the same moment that, for the first time in the history of humanity, the biological sciences have become capable of precisely describing the causalities linked to heredity.⁷

Despite the sense that a global approach to racial questions is pertinent to research (and to public policies), any analysis of these issues conducted in the humanities and social sciences is by definition situated within a specific historical and cultural context. Race isn't written about in France or Germany in the same way that it is in Great Britain or, even less so, in the United States or Latin America. Our countries' respective histories bequeathed legacies that diverge dramatically on the elements essential to understanding racial policies. European countries continue to digest the very long-term consequences of two historical upheavals: first, the suicide of Europe during the two World Wars, and more specifically the human, material, and moral destruction caused by Nazism; and second, the pendular movement from colonization to decolonization, and then to the migration toward Europe of populations that more or less inherited the colonial situations created by Europeans in the migrants' home countries. The United States and many Latin American countries must, for their part, bear responsibility for the dual legacies of the genocide of Native Americans and the chattel slavery endured by Native American populations and masses of deported Africans. These two sets of experiences have generated different ways of reflecting on the processes of racial segregation and persecution. On the one hand, it is necessary to read the works of researchers of both worlds while taking into account their roots in different historical trajectories. On the other hand, it is important not to act as if

European societies and American societies have lived in separate universes: connections and reciprocal influences have never ceased, including in the field of racial discrimination.

The way the humanities and social sciences approach the subject of race in Western Europe in general, and in quite a unique way in France, is certainly different from what can be observed in the United States. This divergence begins with vocabulary. In contemporary French, the term “race” has completely disappeared from the scholarly lexicon. This can be explained by the fact that its meaning was radically restricted after 1945. Indeed, whenever “race” has been mentioned in France, following the end of World War II, it has been solely to designate the biological unit of a population. Restricted to that sense, the term can therefore no longer be mobilized to designate a people, culture, nation, or any other descriptor used to define populations by their cultural, social, or political characteristics. In truth, the term arouses such repugnance among researchers that it is also no longer used to designate biologically similar populations. It is as if, in reality, it has become impossible in France to strip the word “race” of its political connotations and the memory of the crimes committed in its name. The phenomenon of a stigmatized group appropriating a stigma is absent: racialized groups only recently adopted the term “race” to use against their persecutors. The activist circles that have begun to deploy that lexical strategy are the same as those that adhere to a so-called decolonial ideology, which is expressed as an anti-white supremacy discourse, if not as black supremacy. Both, white and black, refer less to skin color than to a political separation between Europeans and second- and third-generation migrants, whose origins are the former imperial colonies of the French Republic. In such a political context, French scholars have to make decisions about the notions they introduce in their analyses and surveys. “Racism” is

unendingly used to designate various forms of collective discrimination. But at the same time, the term “race,” which should be the referent on which political racism is based, in fact remains absent from racist discourse itself.

The widespread idea that in France public statistics would not produce data on the nationalities and geographical origins of naturalized persons is simply false.⁸ For example, as the great TeO (Trajectories and Origins) survey—carried out by two major public research institutions in demography and statistics—shows, it is possible to produce quantitative data on ethnic discrimination in France, even though the administration does not recognize the validity of ethnoracial categories in the population census.⁹ The recently published results of this survey confirm the fact that starting with equal training, the careers of postcolonial migrants and their descendants are hardly successful, and these citizens suffer from discrimination, for example in housing. Similarly, the French government has annual statistics on racist offenses and crimes.¹⁰ One can draw two conclusions: racial discrimination does exist in France, and the idea that color blindness dominates in the country is simply wrong.

For a European reader, what strikes in the mass of American historiographic production is, first of all, the overwhelming domination of a certain chronology. Indeed, the great majority of the works propose an equivalence between the practice of mass slavery and the development of a racist social system. Now, as the massive use of slavery began in the English colonies during the last third of the seventeenth century, it follows that the history of race is concentrated on the period that begins in 1660 and continues until the 1960s. And within this chronology, the most recent periods are incomparably more studied than the oldest. When one reads this scholarship in Europe, this way of cutting history appears purely Anglocentric and calls for at least two criticisms. The first relates to the slave

trade, a system that, in the Iberian monarchies, dates back to a period long before the *Mayflower* left the quays of Plymouth. The second criticism concerns the exclusive relation between racism and slavery that European experiences of racial discrimination, unrelated to slavery, contradict. The histories were different, and the narratives diverge. One of the main questions this book addresses, then, is this: how can the construction of the problem of race by a historiography born of European experience dialogue with the humanities and social sciences that are produced in the United States?

Definitions

To progress in the argument, a series of definitions of race and racism that are developed throughout this book will guide the reader:

1. Racial prejudice or racism postulates that social and moral (or cultural, religious, political, etc.) characteristics of people and groups are transmitted from generation to generation through vectors found in bodily tissue and fluids (blood, sperm, milk); when the relevant conditions are met on the ideological, normative, and political levels, then fluids like blood, sperm, and milk must be understood by the historian not as symbols, images, or metaphors, but as material objects in themselves. If a historical source uses blood merely as a kind of metaphorical expression of a spiritual principle or social process, it is not proposing a racial definition of identity (or alterity, which amounts to the same thing);
2. Racial discrimination, or racism, is based on the notion that a minority cannot join the social majority to which it aspires to belong regardless of the political circum-

stances present and regardless of voluntary individual efforts to reduce the distance separating it from the social majority to which it aspires to belong; an unalterable element remains, which renders the aspiration to rejoin the social majority either futile or impossible. The host of this immutable remainder, real or metaphysical, is the person's body. This incapacity to change or rid oneself of a heritage (or heredity) affects all the individuals who belong to a stigmatized group equally;

3. Racist policies aim, primarily, to impede the processes by which marginal or stigmatized populations can integrate a shared political space within the society in which they reside. In other words, when the members of a family or group undergo a process of social and political transformation that will result in reducing the distance separating them from the majority society, then racists will identify the minorities' differences as physically rooted, indelible, and present in all individuals of said family or group without exception, and this denunciation is motivated by the desire to slow the process of integration. Racists will declare that the alterity embedded in the body of the other is inalterable, because its roots run deeper than all social affiliation, and so, they will denounce the idea of a shared affiliation or belonging or the disappearance of differences, declaring this idea to be a dangerous illusion.

If we accept this three-tiered definition, racism does not consist of defining alterity, or otherness, as a static and visible reality, and rejecting those that fall into this group, namely because that is the definition of any form of xenophobia. Racism, which should be understood as a narrower political phenomenon, is a plan of action consisting of producing alterity in a

society in order to feed mechanisms of stigmatization, distinction, and discrimination. Historical research on the formation of racial categories thus confronts both methodological and theoretical uncertainties. Making a number of those difficulties explicit remains the best way to illustrate where we currently stand on these questions.