

SYMPOSIUM: ANN MORNING AND
MARCELLO MANERI'S *AN UGLY WORD*

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Repositioning, not replacing, race: the case for concepts of descent-based difference

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ABSTRACT

In this response to the very thoughtful critiques of our book, *An Ugly Word: Rethinking Race in Italy and the United States*, we advocate for a comparative sociological examination of race that, while acknowledging and documenting its enduring centrality, also explores alternative notions of ancestry-based distinction. The framework that we propose for examining the full range of such “concepts of descent-based difference,” rather than obscuring social scientists’ comprehension of the enduring significance of whiteness or disregarding the role of race as a socio-political construct, serves to broaden and systematize our analysis. It facilitates a nuanced exploration of the perception and categorization of diverse groups in varied societies worldwide. We are also grateful for the critics’ suggestions for further exploring our “race-conscious versus race-skeptic” binary and the public relevance of our research.

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Introduction

Our critics have been generous in their comments on our book, both by hailing our attempt at “comparing in translation” and providing insightful observations about our research findings. They concur with our assertion that Linnaean phenotypical color-coded classifications, or “colonial and national archives on race” (Giuliani 2023), persist as influential factors in the realm of human differentiation, even in the context of Italy, a country in constant denial of the social realities of race and racism. They further observe that our work primarily serves as “an investigation into the racializing discursive

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structures of whiteness” (Ghebremariam Tesfau’ 2023; see also the title of Giuliani’s essay) that draws attention to outlooks that remained largely unspeakable for our Italian interviewees.

We also value the criticisms that have emerged from this symposium, as they present an opportunity to clarify the implications of our empirical findings and the rationale behind our analytical approach. We distill the critiques into three main points: first, a perceived oversight on our part when it comes to recognizing the central role of race, notwithstanding the evidence presented in our empirical research; second, the role played in this misrecognition by the “flat”, “vague” (Favell 2023), or “neutral” (Giuliani 2023) concept of descent-based difference; and third, reservations about the “race-conscious versus race-skeptic” dichotomy we describe. We conclude our response by taking up the invitations of our critics to extend or apply this research in new directions.

On the centrality of the “floating signifier” of race

Adrian Favell posits that race, even when narrowly conceived in terms of color-coded Linnean bodily characteristics, is “more than *just* another way of referring to ‘descent based difference’. It is somehow the fundamental grounding of a pervasive way of differentiating humans”. In his view, our theoretical frame, which positions race as a member of a *family* of concepts of difference rooted in beliefs about shared ancestry – a family that also includes classificatory schemes like ethnicity, caste, or tribe – is at odds with our own empirical evidence. In many respects, the findings point to a global Du Boisian color line, shaped by colonial practices and the transatlantic slave trade, which established European whiteness as a universal standard.

While it is true that we did not extensively explore the historical emergence of race and only briefly mentioned its ideological function, both of which were beyond the scope of our study, we do not think we overlooked its preeminence. In fact, we illustrate how whiteness serves as an implicit reference point for hierarchical, deterministic, and pervasive notions of racial difference in Italy, where it remains relevant even though the term “race” has become taboo. Postcolonial whiteness continues to serve as a mirror onto which threatening and denigrated images of purported non-Europeanness are projected (De Genova 2016; 2018).

Affirming this perspective, however, does not preclude the recognition of alternative conceptualizations of genealogical difference that also warrant investigation. While it is evident that a racial vocabulary (by proxy) shapes Italians’ perceptions of other groups – exemplified by the use of terms like “*marocchini*” (“Moroccans”) to refer to immigrants of color – this does not imply that everything is reducible to a racial lens. Our research demonstrates that various groups beyond the conventional color-coded racial categories hold

significance in Italy, and sometimes, even more so. “Ancient others” like the Roma or Muslims, for example, are not confined to the historical lineage of racial ideas; rather, they precede them. They were considered Europe’s others long before the era of European colonialism and imperial expansion ushered in an ideological framework centered on the concept of biological race.

To be clear, our intention is not to advocate for the wholesale abandonment of the term “race” or for the denial of its potent and violent influence. The issue of race, prominently featured in the title of our book, remains a subject worthy of investigation, if only because it has been institutionalized in myriad ways across the globe as a sociopolitical category of considerable significance, and as such, it merits study as well as being the object of political action. If however it is a “floating signifier”, as Hall (1997) famously put it, to which we want to apply a satisfactory degree of analytical precision, we must employ more clearly defined categories, whether or not this approach ultimately reaffirms the centrality of the hovering, metamorphic everyday concept of “race”.

On descent-based difference and our analytical framework

Gaia Giuliani raises questions about our approach, inquiring why we seem more inclined to define what does not constitute “race” through the use of descent-based difference, rather than recognizing the diverse ways in which the concept of “race” is articulated. She questions the necessity of employing our allegedly more “neutral” concept, which she believes may hinder the acknowledgment of the descriptive power inherent in the term “race”.

This contention revolves around our analytical framework, which, framing difference in terms of “descent” rather than “race”, gave rise to the concern that we were not only deflecting attention from its explanatory capacity but also attempting an unattainable stance of scientific neutrality. We characterize our “descent-based difference” framework as “neutral”, however, solely to describe a concept that is not influenced, like “race”, by entrenched conflicts within academia that are partly attributable to serious issues in translation across the Atlantic, and partly due to the bewildering and heterogeneous usage within any given country. Rather than “neutral” in the sense of endorsing the neutrality of science, our framework is de-naturalizing, establishing a set of second-order categories (categories of analysis) that do not uncritically adopt the categories of everyday life (categories of practice) but deconstruct them (for a more detailed exploration of this distinction, see Brubaker 2013).

Naturally, “descent” is itself a socially constructed idea (a valid point raised by Giuliani). Zerubavel (2012) persuasively demonstrates how the delineation

of our genealogical communities is influenced by conventions, narratives, and myths of origin that vary across different societies. Moreover, our decision to center our analysis of notions of difference on the concept of descent may be scrutinized, as Camilla Hawthorne does (Hawthorne 2023). In thought-provoking fashion, she asks “what else we might learn if the floating signifier of ‘race’ were further delinked from a necessary correspondence to descent. Such a move could open room for research into the ways ideas of geography, spatial differentiation, bodily habitus, and social relations (which were also central to the history of the concept of race at various moments) are marshalled in everyday understandings of human difference and the construction of racial hierarchies”.

Despite these intriguing critiques, we remain persuaded that the concept of descent is key in bringing together diverse modes of classification that share a family resemblance, even when local understandings of ancestry are certainly constructed in varied ways. The theoretical centrality of descent delimits the scope of inquiry to ideas about groups that are either implicitly or explicitly associated with a genealogy that justifies a shared sense of belonging – even if these associations are rife with logical and empirical contradictions, not to mention selective and deliberate choices. Placing ancestry at the center of the conceptual configurations we study in no way precludes the exploration of how ideas of geography, spatial differentiation, bodily habitus, or social relations impinge on the social construction of race. Quite the contrary, it illuminates how these characteristics are so often linked to beliefs about heritage, at times in what seems like defiance of evidence and logic. At the same time, this approach prevents the broad-brush application of race to any and all human perceptions of other groups – such as Italian accusations of “*razzismo*” against the elderly or disabled – which dissipates the explanatory potential of race.

What, then, are the advantages of our framework, in addition to broadening while delimiting the scope of inquiry and escaping intractable controversies over terminology? We contend that by identifying the characteristics that ostensibly distinguish descent-based groups; the perceived permanence and determinism of these traits; the sets of groups to which a given concept of difference is applied, and any imagined hierarchy among them; as well as the supposed mechanism for acquiring group traits, we were able to trace different configurations of ideas.

Without the multi-dimensional categories of analysis we employed, which transcend the oversimplified dichotomy of biology versus culture,¹ we could not have effectively compared the conceptions of difference based on ancestry that are held by Americans and Italians. Our two samples employed distinct rhetoric, language, and divergent categories of practice, even when their underlying ideas of race were quite similar. Furthermore, the multifaceted framework for describing concepts of difference militates against the

slide into the indiscriminate labeling as “racialization” of diverse descent-based categorizations and exclusions that Favell rightly warns against. Instead, this kind of analysis opens up a space for further inquiry into the driving forces behind these commonalities and variations. As noted by Mackda Ghebremariam Tesfau’, it facilitates the recognition of shared attributes or blurred boundaries among related concepts, especially in the context of comparative research, so that none are excluded from the investigation. And it paves the way for the “relational theorization of global racisms” that Hawthorne convincingly articulates, one “that focuses on the mutual constitution of understandings of race and racism across these different sites”, recognizing that Italy – and for that matter, the United States – do not “exist in a vacuum” but rather are “part of the transnational circulation of ideas about race”.

On racial consciousness and skepticism

Another framework of ours to have caused some consternation among our critics – but also creative responses – is the “race-conscious” versus “race-skeptical” dichotomy we introduced. With these terms we aimed to offer more neutral and less inflammatory versions of labels like “race-obsessed” and “race-blind” (or “color-blind”). By replacing terms meant to be dismissive with ones that we hoped would be acceptable to the individuals to which they were applied, we meant to capture both the logics that diverse parties bring to debates on the place of race in social scientific analysis, as well as the grounds on which their detractors object to such reasoning. In response, however, the critics raised the questions of who should be considered part of which camp and whether there are other potential stances that we overlooked.

For one thing, Favell takes issue with who we depict as race-conscious versus skeptical. Here he is correct that we use a quote of his to illustrate a race-skeptical position, but that it is inaccurate to place the publication or author in the race-skeptical category because the quote referred to a hypothetical response to Alba and Foner’s (2015) *Strangers No More*, and not his view (Favell 2016). For this oversight, we truly apologize.² Moreover, we appreciate his suggestion that heirs of the U.S. Chicago School might also be placed in the race-skeptical category for “envision[ing] the (ethnicity-like) dissolution of race lines”.

Our critics also raise the important question of whether the race-skeptical vs. -conscious binary overlooks other possible stances on the place of race in discourse and analysis. Giuliani opens up this possibility when she positions herself as neither race-conscious nor -skeptical – although her self-description as “assum[ing] race is a social construct” (not to mention her important work on “racial figures”) seems to us to exemplify race consciousness. Another

alternative is what Favell calls “race relativism à la Lamont”, to “open the emerging comparative field to influences” [from other parts of the world] that may decenter the Du Boisian emphasis on race. As we understand it, this approach would contend that race is a more meaningful or immediate organizing principle in some contexts than others – or at least be open to that possibility, in the comparative spirit that we value.

Where next?

Some of the most powerful commentary that we received concerned the ways in which our book, as well as the scholarship of our critics and the broader community of related researchers, has the potential to interact with the world beyond the ivory tower. From the everyday experiences to the media discourse and public policies that are shaped by beliefs about ancestry, our commentators ask us, what are the ways in which our research speaks to and can inform our stratified societies? As Ghebremariam Tesfau’ puts it, “Perhaps the greatest contribution this research can make lies outside academia”.

Both Ghebremariam Tesfau’ and Hawthorne offer a vivid sense of the current limits of educational institutions’ capacity to foster and manage probing conversations about descent-based difference. Hawthorne’s encounter with an Italian academic who scolded her for using the word “*razza*” in connection with her research on racism and Blackness in Italy closely mirrors the attitudes of our Italian student interviewees. And Ghebremariam Tesfau’s experiences as a lecturer for U.S. university campuses in Florence highlight the difficulty that American students face in grasping notions of race, ethnicity, and nationality that differ from their own. Their accounts underscore our contention that educators in both countries have their work cut out for them to help young people disentangle rhetoric from concept, aspirational norms from empirical realities, and local cultures from universal practices when it comes to reflecting on notions of group difference.

Not surprisingly, such depictions of contemporary academic discourse and training raise questions about the role of the academy in contributing to understandings of difference based on ancestry within broader society. Hawthorne does well to remind us of “the steadfast efforts of Black Italian scholars, activists, and culture workers” over the last decade to advance conversations about race in the nation’s cultural politics as well as scholarship, but as she acknowledges, the results have been limited: “everyday white Italians still continue to express reservations about explicit discussions of race, even in the midst of an undeniable resurgence of racial nationalism and racist violence across Italy”. Relatedly, Ghebremariam Tesfau’s chronicle of the Vannacci affair highlights the irony that racist

outbursts are seen as protected by the principle of free speech, while using the word *razza* to describe social inequalities is seen as an unacceptable moral transgression. No doubt with such instances in mind, Giuliani sees in our book the confirmation of “how engaged scholarship reflecting on the reproduction of racism and white privilege [has] had a very limited public impact in Italy, impeded as it has been by the neglect of media, political debate, and education circuits to influence public opinion and political agendas”. As we point out in *An Ugly Word*, moreover, research and teaching on race and inequality also face serious challenge in the contemporary United States of “stop woke” and “anti-Critical Race Theory” legislation and public policy.

Nonetheless, our critics’ comments point the way to meaningful connections and goals for our research community. One is to promote the inclusion of scholars of color and other minoritized backgrounds in the European academy and by extension, in crucial national debates about the workings of race and other descent-based boundaries. (Consider, for example, that in 2021 the University of Genoa established a Center for the History of Racism and Anti-Racism in Modern Italy with an entirely white roster of over 20 researchers.) Another is to work to contribute to the “fields of Black, race-critical, and postcolonial studies in Europe” that Hawthorne highlights; in that connection, we are currently working to have *An Ugly Word* translated into Italian in order for it to reach a wider relevant readership.

In the same vein, impact on policy is also on our critics’ minds, raising the challenge to academics like us of determining where and how to intervene. Starting from the question, “how can we de-invisibilize Black Italians if we do not record their existence in any way?” Ghebremariam Tesfau’ takes aim at census practices that hamper the recognition that some citizens and other residents of Italy are people of color and/or subject to descent-based exclusion. As she points out, the possibility of the census being used as a tool for collecting data to identify and root out discrimination against minorities seems inconceivable, as it was for our interviewees, even as politicians clamor to create (unconstitutional) registries of Romani people. In a similar vein, she observes, the prospect of descent-based affirmative action policies – akin to the “pink quotas” Italy has enacted for gender representation in politics – seems very distant indeed. And we might add that the fate of the movement for *jus soli* citizenship is also shaped by unspoken beliefs about descent. In all of these domains, our research contributes empirical evidence that, as in the United States, notions of race, ethnicity, and other forms of difference routinely shape everyday Italians’ worldviews, whether or not they ever pronounce the word “*razza*”. The social reality of prejudices against individuals because they are Romani, Black, Muslim, Albanian, Chinese, etc. is not in question; instead, the issue is how

twenty-first-century Italy chooses to reckon with it – and how scholars can best contribute.

Notes

1. Here Giuliani seems to attribute to us the distinction between two forms of racism – one cultural, the other biological. Our utilization of culture and biology as distinct analytical categories, however, does not imply their empirical separation; quite the opposite, as we state in the book's conclusion.
2. On Favell's claim that we quote his phrase "the few European scholars who have put in serious time on both side of the ocean" (2016, 2352) inappropriately, however, we beg to differ; we maintain that it nicely illustrates our argument that scholars in this area pay attention to the "national frames" that researchers bring to the table (*An Ugly Word*, p. 23).

Disclosure statement

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