

The Persistent Power of Cultural Racism

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Abstract

‘Cultural racism’ is central to understanding racism today yet has receded into the background behind the focus on attitudinal racism. Even the turn to structural racism is largely circumscribed to inclusion without substantive challenge to existing processes or profit margins. When portions of the racist public are targeted, it is often the least elite members of society. Without question, the concept of cultural racism requires some clarification, but it will help bring the continued influence of colonialism forward and reveal the alibis given in mainstream and elite circles that justify exclusion, resource extraction, and domination.

1. Introduction

Anti-racism has become something of an industry in many parts of North America as well as Europe, generating profits for publishers as well as hefty speaking fees for the recognized experts. In the United States anti-racist training is ubiquitous, with identity-based affinity groups to follow up the lessons, and every elite university and arts organization has its ‘DEI’ initiative, referring to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Predictably, the scope of the profitable sphere of anti-racism is restricted largely to the domain of individual prejudice and achieving diversity in the professional classes. It is an attempt, as some have suggested, to rebrand privilege without relinquishing its prerogatives. And so the structural agenda of anti-racism is circumscribed to organizational improvement, not dismantlement, to inclusion without substantive challenge to existing processes or profit margins. When portions of the racist public are targeted, it is often the least elite members of society who come under fire, those very much outside of these elite organizations.

I will argue that the concept of ‘cultural racism’ is central to understanding racism today yet has receded into the background behind the focus on attitudinal racism. Without question, the concept of cultural racism requires some clarification, which it will be the aim of this paper to deliver. I will argue that it refers not only to racism in the sphere of culture, but also to a distinct alibi or legitimating ground given to justify exclusion and domination. The principal power of

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the concept lies in its ability to explain discriminatory patterns by which material resources flow around the globe. What Charles Mills (1997) named the ‘racial contract’, and Olúfémi O. Táíwò (2022) terms the ‘global racial empire’, has long required a legitimating explanation, but this has taken different forms. One of the most important shifts in racist ideologies of the 20th century involved the shift from biological racism to cultural racism, as Ramón Grosfoguel notes:

[...] after the Second World War there was an important shift in the global colonial/racial formation. Biological racist discourses about genetically inferior ‘Others’ fell into a crisis across continental Europe. The Nazi occupations delegitimized biological racist discourses in many continental Western European countries. The decline of biological racist discourses did not imply the end of racism in the core of the capitalist world economy. After the defeat of the Nazi occupations in Western Europe and the 1960’s Civil Rights struggles in Great Britain and the United States, global racial discourses shifted from biological racism to cultural racism. (Grosfoguel, 1999, p. 410)

Here Grosfoguel is following Frantz Fanon, who in his 1956 speech in Paris before the ‘First Congress of Negro Writers and Artists’, used the term cultural racism to explain the way in which the colonial powers were adapting to the discrediting of biological racism. Fanon explained that cultural racism ‘no longer [targeted] the individual man but a certain form of existing’ (1964, p. 32). With the language of culture, the material and political effects of racism could remain in force. Even so, the switch from biology to culture had important conceptual implications. Biological racism claimed that an individual’s ancestry could predict a whole host of attributes and dispositions, but this claim was vulnerable to scientific invalidation in a way that cultural racism apparently was not. It is the latter that has proved to be the more formidable strain of the disease.

So in the shift from biology to culture, justifications for racism move from the biological sciences to the social sciences and the humanities in order to characterize and assess diverse ways of life and social systems. Cultural racism involves misperceptions of people, certainly, but it primarily involves certain misperceptions of *peoples*, that is, ways of being and living, or what Fanon called forms of existing. It is the dress, the religious practice, the community values, modes of family formation, and the production of goods, as well as the artisanal production and forms of cultural expression and gender expression, even the types of food that is eaten:

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all of these now, under the domain of cultural racism, can potentially become signs of 'backwardness' or simply unbridgeable difference. And it is these practices that provide the alibi for exclusion. If artisanal creations don't meet the Western criteria of art, they can be justifiably excluded from art museums and placed in archaeology museums instead; if land is not privately owned by individuals in a way that Western courts can verify, it can be appropriated; and so on.

The important point is that cultural racism cannot be countered by a reminder of the rights of individuals. It is certainly wrong to preemptively judge what a given individual's likely beliefs, attributes, and abilities are likely to be on the basis of their connection to a cultural, ethnic, or religious group, but note that this focus on the individual does not necessarily challenge the overall assessment of the group: the individual could be viewed as an outlier.

But if we say that cultural racism takes aim at cultures rather than individuals, how do we delimit cultures with any clarity or precision? Related to this question we might ask if there is anything distinct about cultural racism in relation to other group-based antagonisms? A further important question is whether a critique of cultural racism disables all critique of cultures? I'll argue here that criticism is a legitimate practice and can even be a sign of respect if done with a dialogical approach because it reveals that we consider the 'other' to be approachable, rational, capable of debate. But beyond the way we approach criticism as a communicative practice we also need to look with care at the *grounds* upon which we criticize a given culture and a given cultural practice. An analysis of these grounds will help us understand the need for a category of cultural racism. In what follows I will address these questions both about the concept of culture as well as the specificity of cultural racism, as well as a further one that is perhaps the most important: what is the most effective antidote to cultural racism?

The category of culture is itself ineluctably vague, and yet, it has a place in our collective common-sense understanding of the world. Fanon expresses the familiar idea that cultures encompass specificities of behaviour, practices, and doxa, the patterns of which demarcate 'ways of existing'. Cultures are identified by norms that present individuals with a choice structure that carries associated meanings as well as costs and benefits. Examples of practices that are judged differently in different cultures would include ignoring parental directives when one has reached adulthood, the corporal punishment of children, also starting families at a young age. These examples reveal the need for intersectional analyses since class makes a notable difference in the dominant norms *within* cultures.

Here is an initial formulation of cultural racism as a distinct form: cultural racism operates from a systematic ordering of global diversity in which some practices are portrayed as transcendent of culture or, in other words, rational and thus universalizable. The habit of characterizing some ideas and practices as ‘cultural’ and others as modern, enlightened, or rational is characteristic of the modern/colonial world system and sets its approach apart from the more local forms of xenophobia based on preference or personal judgment. Cultural racism does not present its judgments as based on one’s own particular way of life but as universal and culturally transcendent (see e.g., Dussel, 2013).

Examples abound of negative judgments of difference: the Ganda people of Uganda complained that the food of foreigners was ‘tasteless and likely to cause constipation’. The Swahili took some foreigners to be superior – the Persians, whose calendar they adopted – while they took other groups to be unkind and uncultured (Prashad, 2007, pp. 5–6). Interestingly, many groups in ancient and indigenous societies believed that persons from other cultures could assimilate and thus become ‘one of them’.

This issue of *assimilability* is a cornerstone of racism. Of course, there is another issue of whether any person or group should be forced to assimilate, but we can separate this from the question of whether some individuals or groups are believed incapable of assimilation, since this can be an indicator of a deterministic racialization. In the United States, for example, certain groups have long been seen as unassimilable, not because they are believed to have no culture, but because they are believed to have too much, especially in the case of Asians and the indigenous, whose cultures are portrayed as too old, too substantive, and too continuous, to the point of irrationality (Kim, 2014). Hence, the incapacity to assimilate is portrayed not as an individual failing but as a group problem rooted in specific cultures.

The ranking system that cultural racism deploys is made more powerful by its veneer of universal rationality and morality. It is on these grounds that states can justify exclusion, displacement, forced assimilation, and sometimes violence. The normative ranking of cultures is inevitably, as Fanon pointed out, ‘unilaterally decreed’, but, in a circular argument, the unilateral nature of the decree is justified by the ranking itself. As Michael Hanchard argues, strategies of political exclusion have long relied on an absolutist form of judgment that decrees the universal criteria by which backwardness and advancement can be identified, yet this allows neutral presenting

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judgments of culture to serve as a proxy for judgments of race or colour (Hanchard, 2018, p. 14).

Following the historian of racism Francisco Bethencourt, I will define racism as 'prejudice concerning ethnic descent coupled with discriminatory action' (2013, p. 1). This broad definition is not restricted to the modern concept of race and helps us focus our attention on practices that are embedded within political and economic projects, such as nationalism or colonialism or economic competition. Thus, this is less a conceptual argument than a pragmatic approach that argues in favour of a given definition on the basis of how it directs our focus toward significant types of historical events.

There is a long history of correlating behaviour and moral worth with physical characteristics, such as the Greeks and Romans who took the shape and strength of the body to indicate character and intelligence. But what is specific to *cultural* racism?

Consider the universalist criteria still commonly used to differentiate cultures, such as the distinction between traditional vs historical cultures put forward in the 1950s by Mircea Eliade, the Romanian historian of religion (1961, 1967; see also Graeber and Wengrow, 2021). Eliade defines traditional cultures as those that characterize eternity as cyclical and that engage in rituals of repetition of mythical or sacred events. Historical cultures, on the other hand, understand themselves as moving through an open or profane space without intrinsic meaning, thus allowing for greater freedom of innovation. If traditional cultures have the advantage of offering a substantive orientation to human life, historical cultures make up for this in being open to change.

The dilemma for historical cultures is of course how then to define progress if there are no stable continuities by which we can make the necessary comparative judgements. But this rather important problem is generally set aside in order not to distract from the hierarchy that the traditional vs historical distinction makes available to us.

The distinction brooks no equality on rational grounds. Reason requires open-endedness, the capacity to launch critiques at every level, but traditional societies as Eliade describes them enshrine repetition, thus conformity for its own sake. Those who understand theirs as historical cultures can feel justified in dismantling traditional cultures, as colonizers always do. It is in the best interest of the benighted individuals in those cultures to be dragged into modernity. Note that this requires deculturation as a prior step to acculturation. By accepting such individuals, societies of the global north can avoid the charge of racism as it is usually understood, but

if we use the lens of cultural racism as I am suggesting here, then we can no longer take the test of racism only to be whether majoritarian groups can accept minority individuals who deculturate.

Both Grosfoguel and Fanon are well aware that the form of racism that is focused on culture was not new to the post-Nazi period but was in fact central to the long period of European colonialism, starting with the Conquest of the Americas (Mignolo, 1995, 2011, 2021). There were no doubt precursors even before this, as Bethencourt proposes, but as a systematic approach to ranking different ways of life that was embedded within the emergence of competitive empires and transnational economies, and as a ranking that eventually gained a scientific and/or rationalist veneer, the form of cultural racism that we are still dealing with today is best understood as endemic to the entire modern era. Fanon is interested in the mid 20th-century shift from biology to culture because it emerged just as anti-colonial revolutions were beginning to win formal independence and helped to thwart the development of collaborative relations with the new nations by labelling them 'backward' and in need of tutelage. Critics of extractive capitalism from former colonies could then be dismissed as simply lacking knowledge and economic expertise about such things as financial markets, or assumed to be dupes of the USSR.

For these sorts of reasons, Fanon held that 'a colonial country is a racist country' (1964, p. 40). By this he meant to disentangle racism from conscious racist intent and instead focus on the structural organization of exploitation. Thus, he says we must abandon the 'habit of considering racism as a mental quirk, as a psychological flaw [...]' (1964, p. 40). But Fanon was also clear about the 'reciprocal action' between racism and culture (1964, p. 32). He rejected the modernist hierarchy of cultures that makes use of the advanced/backward or traditional/historical categories, but he did not reject normative comparisons. He believed there were cultures with racism and cultures without racism (*ibid.*). The so-called advanced cultures of the West overcame what he describes as the 'vulgar, primitive over-simple racism' that claimed biological causes, but these then simply gave way to what he describes as 'a more refined' racism (*ibid.*). Colonialism claimed to be justified in its pursuit of 'the destruction of cultural values, of ways of life. Language, dress, techniques are devalORIZED' (1964, p. 33). But the goal, Fanon believed, was exploitation:

In reality, the nations that undertake a colonial war have no concern for the confrontation of cultures [...]. The enslavement,

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in the strictest sense, of the native population is the prime necessity. [But for this to work] the social panorama is destructured; values are flaunted, crushed, emptied. The lines of force, having crumbled, no longer give direction. (1964, p. 33)

To destroy a culture, then, is to destroy collective resistance, and to create the opportunity for a new system of values to be 'imposed' (1964, p. 34). And one of Fanon's main concerns with the way in which colonization was fought on the terrain of culture is that the colonial cultures that attempt to resist don't disappear, but become mummified, closed, inhibiting individual thinking. The essentialism he saw developing in some forms of cultural nationalism thwart needed transformations that might otherwise occur. And this too, Fanon argues, functions for the colonial system. 'Thus we witness the setting up of archaic, inert institutions, functioning under the oppressor's supervision and patterned like a caricature of formerly fertile institutions' (*ibid.*). This culture then becomes 'for the inferiorized [or colonized] an object of passionate attachment' (1964, p. 41).

So for Fanon, disassociating racism from colonialism is a form of misdirection that conceals what we most need to understand. The forms of modern racism we struggle against today have retained their force despite formal decolonization and without biological commitments to racial types, yet they continue to make it possible for richer nations to maintain practices of extraction post-independence, because of the long colonial history of ideas developed to justify a hierarchy of cultures, sciences, and economic practices. Bringing cultural racism to the fore will help connect present racisms to this long period of the modern/colonial world system and its enrichment of the global North. Protecting the rights to that enrichment is an ongoing task.

2.

As Edward Said noted in his book *Culture and Imperialism*, 'Culture is a sort of theater where various political and ideological causes engage one another' (1993, xiii). The argument of this book is that expressive artistic productions, as well as the work of their interpretation and critique, can be sites of battle over how the past is represented as well as how groups and nations are portrayed, and judged. Empires endeavour always to control the narrative, and a central feature of colonial narratives involved the ranking of other cultures.

Some wish to protect literature and art and cultural products of all sorts in a kind of gated enclosure, Said says, as if it were possible to create a free space in which expressive art forms could be appreciated on their own, to be seen as the production of a particular individual rather than a particular society. Culture should be judged by universal aesthetic criteria, not by its sociological origins or political effects, on this view. But this too is a tactic of control, an attempt to methodologically invalidate certain lines of critique, and in this way protect what Said calls the ‘pleasures of imperialism’. Such pleasures can include the crafting of narratives in which colonizers are rational and heroic civilizers when placed in relief against the backdrop of the ‘natives’. There can also be forms of imperial pleasure in the display of the spoils, and in the unchallenged right to judge, interpret, and curate without oneself being judged, interpreted, or curated. Said is not imputing intentions to the artists, but considering the meaning of artistic works, as well as their influence, distribution, and effects.

In truth, the idea of enclosing culture and protecting it from crass political judgement is just not possible. Unless a great many people are muzzled, there will always be contestation over the merit and the meaning of cultural productions, there will always be resistance to the enshrining of imperial narratives, and there will always be an effort to push against the censure of alternative narratives.

In this book *Culture and Imperialism*, Said is primarily focused on the high culture of the imperial centres, that is, the culture produced within the metropole for the consumption of its own communities, or at least for educated elites. It is this sense of culture, or high culture, that was defined by Mathew Arnold in the 1860s as simply the ‘reservoir of the best that has been known and thought’ (quoted in Said, 1993, xiii). Thus, what today we might call western high culture had, in Arnold’s time, no geographical specificity, no context or qualifiers. The term ‘culture’ signified a universal sphere that operated with putatively universal standards; in this way its dominion was secured over the mere crafts and myths produced by lower groups. The culture of the imperial centres was the paradigm or the standard-bearer in genre and content. Given that the high culture of the West manifested the paradigm, then the only question subject to debate was whether non-Westerners, or even the working classes and women of the imperial centres, could achieve culture, could write in sonnet form, or produce symphonies and novels or paintings with sufficient complexity and depth. Thus, the interpreters of culture did debate whether other peoples could achieve culture, but their assumption of universalist standards pre-empted their exploration of other cultures or how their content, their

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genres, their forms of expression, and their standards of judgment might differ in substantial ways, generating distinctive aesthetic criteria. And this extended to the definition of art itself, understood as non-functional objects, which justified excluding the artifacts of the 'natives', as well as most medieval art. As Taylor explains, the problematics that have garnered aesthetic debate are so diverse as to constitute incongruent conversations: 'Where [Western white] philosophers tried to define "art" and domesticate its ontology, black aestheticians argued that the concept of art was an expression of western parochialism, and that African cultures tended not to lock creative expression away in museums, concert halls, and galleries, separate from the rest of life' (Taylor, 2016, p. 23).

Said argues that the representation of Western high culture served to ground the self-understanding of the West, even though it was portrayed as a universal with no geographical qualifier. The works of Austen, of Goethe, of Tennyson, and Carlyle, and Kipling, and so on demonstrated the highest cultural achievements of the human race and in this way helped to secure the legitimacy of Western claims to dominion over lesser groups. And so, Said holds, expressive artistic products, and the interpretations of their meaning and significance made by experts, together created a reservoir for identity formation of a certain sort. Ideas about the cultures to which we are related ground our sense of who we are since they represent in visual and narrative form a moral life, a manner of reflective subjectivity, a form of intelligence, and in this way a means to both differentiate and rank. Said's claim is that in the contested terrain of culture it is important to protect positive interpretations not only for the purposes of empire building but simply for collective psychic affirmation.¹ Ideas and claims about culture are central to self-ascribed identity, intersubjective relations, motivational structures, the breadth and limits of solidarity, and thus to the achievement of hegemony in Gramsci's sense.

The decline of biological racism by the mid-20th century simply shifted racist and racial discourses on to the arena of an already quite well-developed terrain. To be sure, new concepts emerged, such as development versus underdevelopment, 'traditional' versus historical, advanced versus backward. Terms like savage, barbarian, and primitive appear less often today, yet the new terms, as David

¹ What about the fact that working classes often dislike high culture? What Said calls 'imperial cultures' do not represent a race or ethnicity as a whole, but a particular configuration of class, race, nationality, gender, religion, and ethnicity.

Theo Goldberg has argued, map nicely onto the meanings of the old terms (Goldberg, 1993). So, the decline of biological arguments for racial ranking did *not* in any significant measure reduce racism, given the ready availability of culturalist arguments that had been around since the beginning of the modern colonial system, as can be seen in the 16th-century Valladolid debates over the treatment of the indigenous between Bartolomeo de Las Casas and Juan Sepulveda. This debate hinged on the question of whether the indigenous had any culture at all or were simply animal-like, operating from urges without thought or design. Even though such ideas were regularly contested, they maintained influence, sometimes by slight revisions that took more palatable forms. But we must remember that such philosophical and anthropological debates occurred against the material infrastructure of colonialism and extractivist capitalism. Still today, cultural racism provides a strong alibi to protect the ill-gotten gains of the colonizing powers. Our current political divisions are generally seen as the struggle between open racists versus humanitarians, but neither side need engage with the issue of colonial history or its legacy in global poverty and war.

3.

Despite cultural racism's long pedigree, we should avoid imagining it as an undifferentiated practice or unified ideology. We should heed Stuart Hall's point that both racial identities and racisms are local as well as historically specific (Hall, 1978).

Environmental or geographical racism held that hot and arid climates stymied industry and progress; that the indigenous could hunt, fish, and gather the resources they needed without major effort because they lived in areas with such plenty, and hence it was no wonder their scientific and intellectual achievements lagged behind (Graeber and Wengrow, 2021). This 'explanation' suggested a 'correspondence between moral and physical geography' as Santiago Castro-Gomez argues (2021, p. 200), or a normative ordering not just of bodies or body-types but spatial terrains and environments.

Countering environmental determinism requires different sorts of analysis than the later biological theories, which were eventually refuted most decisively through research that disproved the genetic inheritance of behavioural dispositions. But the failure of the biological explanations led back to the environmental theories: if the 'fact' of inferiority was not explainable as a result of genetics, then

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some looked to social circumstances, and this includes where people live. Such ideas remain common in current ideations of tropical paradises (even Greece and Italy) that are thought to produce informal, easy-going cultural practices.

The principal problem with geographical or environmental explanations was the inadequate reasoning used to claim causation as well as intellectual inferiority or the absence of empirical sciences. To provide sufficient resources for communities, practices of hunting, fishing, and gathering require an inordinate amount of knowledge, including the knowledge of sustainable practices, so that sources would not run dry. Such societies often require mobility, and so the sophisticated practices of oceanic navigation developed by Micronesian groups informed and advanced the capacities of Western explorers (Harding, 2015). Hunting and gathering communities needed to develop knowledge about how to maintain their environments, leaving a river free to be replenished while moving on to another water source for their food. This is a version of letting a field lay fallow so as to protect its fecundity. The necessity of mobility also spurred the development of political knowledge in order to manage group relationships: to be a sustainable practice mobility cannot engender war or conflict every time the community needs to shift its domain, and this requires reflection of cooperation (Whyte, 2013).

Furthermore, lush tropical climates are not simply bounties of food resources that discourage industry but dangerous environs that present numerous problems of pest control, requiring empirical observation and reasoning as well as the development of strategies such as inoculation. The people of the Choco region in Colombia observed that predatory birds such as falcons could safely feast on venomous snakes but typically ate a certain vine before beginning their pursuit. Based on this observation they developed methods of inoculation by use of what they named 'Falcon's vine', so that they too could operate in areas where such serpents were likely to be found. A Spaniard in the region, Pedro Fermín de Vargas, tested their vaccine on himself in the late 1700s and confirmed its reliability. However, de Vargas said the credit for the Falcon's vine vaccine 'does not go to the people who prepared the antidote but to the falcons [...]' (Castro-Gomez, 2021, p. 167). Despite their observation, experimentation, and testing, the people of Choco were viewed as analogous to the animals thought to happen upon a technique of inoculation (both judgments, of people and animals, are probably erroneous).

4.

The actual language of racism today is largely about cultures, and sometimes about religions that act as proxies for cultural difference, rather than genetics or biology. The infamous conservative commentator Ben Shapiro argues that it is ‘reason and moral purpose’ that made the West ‘great’, not colonial wars. The U.S. president Donald Trump argued against accepting immigrants from what he called ‘shithole countries’, even if they were refugees fleeing wars and violence. Despite the wars of aggression waged by Christian dominant countries, such as the United States over the past 50 years with hundreds of thousands of civilian lives lost, it is Islam that is portrayed as inherently violent. The cultures of other societies are relied on as explanatory devices more so than in the West.

Uma Narayan found that men kill their female intimate partners at about the same rate in both India and the United States; all that changes is the manner of killing, which seems to be governed by what is available (Narayan, 1998). Kitchen murders through immolation are common in countries where a container of oil is stored close to the cooking fire; in too many homes in the United States, a gun is more easily available. We might give some elements of culturalist explanations in both cases, but the fact that it is only given in the global South indicates the presence of cultural racism. Like murderers of women, we use what is most easily available to portray ‘their’ backwardness, and maintain ‘our’ superiority.

5.

So let me turn next to the topic of the comparison and judgment of cultural forms. Few were surprised that Putin made claims about the derivative nature of Ukrainian culture and language in relation to Russia, or that he used cultural reasons to deny Ukrainians the right to political sovereignty. Ukrainian curator Leonid Maraschak explains ‘this is a war about cultural identity’ and as journalist Jason Farago goes on to explain, ‘With Russia trying to erase Ukraine’s national identity, this country’s music, literature, movies, and monuments are not recreations. They are battlefields’ (Farago, 2022). Putin has claimed that truly sovereign states, which do not include Ukraine, are grounded in the ‘inner energy’ generated by common values, beliefs, and history (Paris, 2022). Thus, the mere existence of a governmental apparatus is insufficient to legitimate the right of non-intervention if the society lacks the cultural uniformity

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that grounds sovereignty, that is, 'inner energy'. Right-wing populists argue similarly that immigration weakens the spirit of commonalities that underlies national formations. Speaking in Warsaw and at the United Nations, former president Trump invoked the idea of sovereign *societies*, rather than sovereign states, and said that societies can only achieve sovereignty to the extent that citizens are willing to make sacrifices to protect and uphold their 'culture, faith, and tradition'. The idea that cultures are defined by their shared content and creed have long been part of modern notions of political community: Hobbes, for example, described the state as an 'Artificial man' with a soul expressed by its cultural forms.

However, we need to take care about the way in which we criticize Putin's claims. Some retreat from the discourse of culture that Putin, Trump, Orban, and others are articulating and replace this with the idea of a political community as simply bound together in a very minimal way by institutional and legal commitments. The advantage of this decultured definition is clear: societies defined by their chosen institutions rather than their shared culture and history can rebuke ethnic nationalist ideas such as Putin's in which a groups' cultural history is said to set the path for their enduring future. Decultured concepts of volitional, politically defined entities coexist more easily with pluralism in the religious and cultural spheres. But there are two significant disadvantages to this familiar classical liberal approach.

The first is its descriptive implausibility: has any political community, whether national or sub-national, created its institutions and mechanisms of governance through truly democratic choice? Has any political community risen above its various cultural influences, rather than being formed in ways that manifest the legacy of these influences?

The second problem is that decultured approaches to political community can become a form of avoidance. If what holds societies together is formal, volitional, intellectual, and has nothing to do with shared values, forms of life, or historical experience, then we need not engage with the fascist world view. We can dismiss ethnic nationalists as irrational or insufficiently modern, which is to covertly make use of, and thus reinforce, ranking systems rooted in colonialism. Most importantly, avoidance means that we have no counter-arguments to the claim that immigration and ethno-racial diversification will diminish our sense of relational commitments, our willingness to sacrifice for others in our communities, or the strength of our political institutions.

Cultures and nations are of course not natural kinds but social constructions, both in a formative sense and in an interpretive sense. Their content and boundaries are always subject to motivated interpretation, but the content that we are interpreting is itself the product of dynamic historical movements which are defined and demarcated, often by overdetermined, motivated interpretations.

Sociologists of the concept of culture have been exploring for some time how to best define the concept without underplaying the diversification of the public sphere. The debate between Raymond Williams and Paul Gilroy is instructive in this regard. For Raymond Williams, culture is not a reservoir of unified content. Against Matthew Arnold, Williams argued cultures come in plural forms and are broad and ordinary rather than exclusive to the high arts. Thus, he defined cultures as ‘essentially involved in *all* forms of social activity’, irreducible to the economy and beyond the control of the state (1981, p. 13).

But most importantly, Williams argues that a culture is best understood as a ‘realized signifying system’ (1981, p. 209). In other words, culture is not a way of life that is simply followed or adhered to, but a process of meaning-making in which shared historical experiences – living through the Blitzkrieg, the migration of the Windrush generation, or Thatcherism – become part of one’s hermeneutic horizon, influencing both creation and interpretation. Culture, he said, since it comes from the concept of cultivation, is a ‘noun of process’ (1981, p. 10). Signifying systems are not producers of coherent uniformity, yet there are patterns that can be discerned in language, media, intellectual work, ideas about values, and not only the traditional arts.

Williams’ approach is concordant with the concept of the coloniality of power developed by Anibal Quijano and other decolonial theorists. This is the idea that post-independence, or post-formal colonialism, global relations remain infused by colonial meaning-making or signifying systems that maintain the ranking of racialized groups. But Paul Gilroy (and others) sharply criticized Williams for continuing to render culture overly coherent making it then possible to conflate national with cultural identity, which gives rise to the sort of exclusivist nationalism the fascists today, as in the past, dream of achieving. Gilroy worries that, in fact, both conservative *and* socialist treatments of culture can evince ‘an absolutist definition of culture tied to a resolute defence of the idea of the national community [...]’ (1993, p. 30). The assumption that substantive cultural identities ground national identities, providing the inner energy Putin considers necessary for sovereignty claims, will have the

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effect of centring some citizens and side-lining others, justifying immigration restrictions among other things.

Gilroy is also concerned that tying cultures to nations produces unproductive forms of resistance in the beleaguered minority communities, such as cultural nationalism and what we used to call 'narrow nationalism'. Such forms of resistance create all sorts of problems, from general pressures to conform to efforts to restrict adoption along racial lines. Gilroy, like Said, Fanon, Amilcar Cabral, as well as more recent theorists such as Beltran, is as concerned with the ideas about culture in the resistance movements as he is with the ideas about culture in the conservative mainstream.

I share Gilroy's worries but will argue that the solution will not be found in separating cultures from political entities.

Decolonial theorists such as Quijano and Mignolo use the term 'the colonial matrix of power' to explore persistent colonial frameworks that generate, govern, and link economies, labour, families, political institutions, authority, and knowledge with resultant effects on subjectivity. Quijano famously brought social identities to the fore here, showing that in the colonies lineage, visibility, and socially recognized categories such as religion, gender, race, and ethnicity structured labour markets and political systems as well as epistemic credibility. This helps us see the difference made by taking colonialism as the key to understanding racism. Colonial systems operate with a signifying system that justifies and consolidates racial perception and judgment, with effects on the patterns of empathy and judgment. Within the colonial matrix of power biological racism emerged and bloomed for a time, but also other theories of the cause of human differences such as environmental and also evolutionary approaches that ranked groups on a single temporal map of progress as ahead or behind, advanced or backward. Some approaches rendered inferior groups beyond intellectual development, but in others, which some modern Europeans held such as John Stuart Mill, inferior groups could be brought into the light with the proper forms of education. But this evolutionary development template did not create the conditions for equality.

The Millian approach is the dominant ideation in the liberal, non-fascist West today: a multi-racial multiculturalism which believes many peoples from underdeveloped societies can advance if they gain Western education and cosmopolitan experiences so they can assimilate to the advanced cultures. This is not decolonization.

The dominant colonial imaginary and its associated apparatus can accommodate structured refugee admissions, affirmative action, the forgiveness of some loans to the world banking system, and other

reforms. It can also survive the demise of biological racism and address ongoing implicit bias and the remaining vestiges of attitudinal racism with diversity training and focus groups. But what the colonial matrix of power cannot make sense of is the push against Westernization, or the decolonial critique of cognitive racism (see Mignolo, 2021, especially pp. 85–98, 314–48). Resisting Western cultural and political dominance is continuously portrayed as a resistance to rationality and morality. De-westernization challenges the West at the epistemic level of its signifying system because it demands the West engages in dialogic engagement rather than assume a universal stance of unilateral judgment. And thus, de-Westernization feels like chaos and a violent anarchy, so unintelligible is it to the mainstream.

Cultural racism, then, is most importantly a mode of judgement created over our long colonial history. It is built into scientific practices that claim hegemony in vaccine production on epistemic grounds, and the exclusive right to have nuclear weapons. It is not just a misperception of other cultures, but a way of seeing and knowing. It *is* central to nationalism and ethnic self-formation, but in my concluding section, I will argue, it need not be.

6.

In this final section I will develop a response to cultural racism through an account of the concept of transculturation from Fernando Ortiz. Ortiz was a Cuban anthropologist writing in the first half of the 20th century, and his work provides us with a departure point from the West's ruling fantasies of cultural superiority. But beyond this, his work also helps to address the concerns of Gilroy, Fanon, and Cabral about the ways in which some forms of resistance to cultural racism operate with the same ideals of cultural homogeneity and exclusivity. In Ortiz's work, the border zones of conflict are re-understood as internal rather than exterior, and cultures are characterized as open and hybrid formations.

Ortiz's earliest work manifested aspects of a colonial mentality and racism. In 1906, for example, he published a book that characterized Afro-Cuban religions as forms of sorcery that were culturally backward. He saw Cuban culture in general as inferior to more evolved societies. Like the celebrated Uruguayan essayist, Jose Enrique Rodo, Ortiz thought that imbibing European intellectual culture was the cure for Latin America's cultural malaise. Such views are not surprising in the early 20th century: Ortiz had his academic training in Spain.

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As Fernando Coronil argues, the ferment of new anthropological and social theory during the first few decades of the 20th century convinced Ortiz to change his views. One of his main influences was the historian Ramiro Guerra y Sanchez who gave a markedly different account of the root causes of corruption, poverty, and political authoritarianism in Cuba: Guerra located the source of the problem not in Cuba's non-European practices but in its insertion in a global sugar industry, with its plantation economies, history of slavery, need for unskilled labor and a seasonal workforce. The problem was not Cuba's culture but Cuba's dependent economy that kept the population uneducated and desperate. Also, a number of social theorists began to replace the idea of culture as a singular universal, as Matthew Arnold had imagined, with the idea of multiple cultures. Importantly, theorists such as Franz Boas also began to resist the idea that cultures could be ranked by a simple uniform rubric, and that anthropologists should instead embrace cultural relativism. But Ortiz was actually more influenced by the work of Oswald Spengler, whose writings were translated into Spanish and widely read by a number of Latin American intellectuals. Spengler helped to abate the idea that European practices could be taken as universal, making it possible to analyse specific cultural forms, such as Afro-Cuban music, without comparison to European forms. These new theories of plural cultures gave rise to a newly decentred global imaginary.

So it is in his masterwork *Cuban Counterpoint*, published in 1947, which is a treatise on the competing cultures of tobacco and sugar production, that Ortiz invents the new concept of transculturation that I want to make use of here. With this concept Ortiz intended to provide an alternative to the concepts of assimilation and acculturation which are imagined as operating 'in a unidirectional process' involving an evolutionary uplift (Coronil, 2019, p. 85). Much of our current thinking about migration continues to operate with these concepts, albeit implicitly, so that the question is framed as whether a particular group *can* assimilate. Will they be motivated to adopt the ways of the dominant culture, or will they be recalcitrant and oppositional to acculturation?

By contrast, the concept of transculturation as Ortiz develops portrays a process of reciprocity that affects all who come into contact. Transculturation is neither a one-way nor a two-way assimilation: *it is the creation of something new*. But Ortiz importantly acknowledges the loss involved in transculturation as well, a loss that disturbs the ground of one's prior identity and its 'signifying system' for producing meaning. However, his is not a replacement theory, since what

emerges in the place of the lost cultural formation is a creative adaptation that involves both collective and individual agency. It is not one culture replaced by another, but a transformation that involves agency, with often invigorating effects, and indeed, the central feature of Ortiz's account is the multiple influences that reconstitute all sides. Cultural border walls are, after all, imaginary projections intended to protect existing forms of domination just as real border walls promise; neither ever succeeds. Even if laws are put in place to ensure that only one language may be spoken, linguists find elements of the outlawed language cropping up in the dominant language, such as Irish and African influences in U.S. English. Dominant religions enforced on all, such as Catholicism was throughout the Americas, experienced major transculturations, as historians of religion have shown. We have the indigenous of the Americas to thank for the prominence of the Virgin Mary, for example, who had previously been a marginal figure in Europe and, in fact, Mary-worshippers were executed as heretics and their temples were burned to the ground.

As Coronil's interpretation of Ortiz makes clear, the concept of transculturation has a de-fetishizing effect (Coronil, 2019, pp. 86–89). The relational nature of cultural forms undermines distinctions and binary oppositions, revealing the limits of their descriptive adequacy. Binaries are rarely fixed or stable. In truth, oppositions even between the centre and periphery of colonial empires are unstable and partial: Catholicism became reimagined and 'indigenized' in a way that was available to all.

Given the inevitability of cultural dynamism and reciprocity, the geopolitics of transnational economies in the modern, post-Conquest era activated new forms of sociality even while they operated within colonialism and imperialism. It is not quite correct to name all of these transmutations of cultural forms as theft or appropriation, as if agency only existed on one side. And some of the most fertile transculturations occurred across marginalized communities to produce forms like bebop and Latin jazz. Genealogies of various cultural forms are today being revised, such as the genre of 'country music' in the United States that has been characterized as originally white, even though its instruments, such as the banjo, and its musical styles (e.g. of picking rather than strumming) were brought by Africans to the new world and creatively transformed (see Taylor, 2016). Arguably, the emergence of this genre was also between marginalized communities: poor rural whites and former slaves. But on Ortiz's view, neither the dominant nor the subordinate side can effectively patrol their borders.

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New histories of modern science and modern political theory, such as David Graeber and David Wengrow discuss in *The Dawn of Everything* (2021), are retelling the story of European modernity as a process of transculturation precisely in Ortiz's sense. It was the encounter with native cultures, value systems, and forms of life that animated the imaginations of Montesquieu, Rousseau, Condorcet, and Kant, sparking debates about previously unquestioned ideas in the elite circles of European societies. Indigenous peoples found the European practice of subordination to the aristocracy inexplicable. As the Jesuit missionary Le Jeune wrote in 1642, from the perspective of the community of the Montagnais-Naskapi, 'the French were little better than slaves' (Graeber and Wengrow, 2021, p. 41). Native peoples could not understand the European practice of performing obsequiousness to others whose only claim was land, but they also asked other questions, such as why communities with abundance did nothing for those starving, ill, and unhoused in their midst. There were also different practices of political organization and open debate.

This 'American indigenous critique', as Graeber and Wengrow call it, enlivened the imagination of many Europeans, such as Rousseau, and led to new anti-authoritarian directions in European political theory. Such new intellectual histories show that even subordinated groups are very much a part of the intellectual and political story of modernity. Yet, the myths of modernity, as Dussel calls them, have misrepresented our histories to make it appear that Europe was, like God, self-caused.

Ortiz developed the concept of transculturation with the central example, not of aesthetic expression or religious practice or other domains generally associated with multi-culturalism, but through an analysis of the colonial agriculture in Cuba based on tobacco and sugar production. Thus, he places cultural forms in the context of economies, not to establish cause but to demonstrate the elaboration of forms of life that could accord with the particular way these products were produced in this colonial space. As he explains:

Tobacco requires delicate care, sugar can look after itself; the one requires continual attention, the other involves seasonal work; intensive versus extensive cultivation; steady work on the part of the few, intermittent jobs for many; the immigration of whites on the one hand, the slave trade on the other; liberty and slavery; skilled and unskilled labor; hands versus arms; men versus machines; delicacy versus brute force. The cultivation of tobacco brought about the small holding; that of sugar

brought about the great land grants [...]. The native against the foreigner. National sovereignty against colonial status. The proud cigar band as against the lowly sack. (Ortiz, 1995 [1947], pp. 6–7)

Ortiz is not the only one to give us concepts of cultural reciprocity, but I think his is of particular interest precisely because of this detailed contextualism that focuses on the economy and labour.

Despite the power imbalances in the Cuban colonial context, the result was not an acculturation in a single direction, but major transformation of all participants, or the ‘intermeshed transmigration of people’ (Coronil, 2019, p. 86). Ortiz describes Cuban history as ‘an intense, unbroken process of transculturation of human groups, all in a state of transition’ (Coronil, 2019, p. 86) and suggests that this is not just the story of Cuba but of the whole of the Americas. He traces its effects in economic practices as well as topics more commonly written about such as the forms of music, dance, and humour as well as the shared sensibilities of uprootedness manifest in every cultural form. The rumba has no origin story that can establish a pure lineage or singular geographical source; the antiphonal and percussive elements of Cuban music today is a creative response to the joy that sometimes accompanied contact.

Europe has a different history than the Americas. But since the time when it became self-consciously Europe, self-identified as Europe, it too should be understood as the product of a transculturation wrought by imperial conquest and subsequent migrations, mobile borders, multiple empires, some of which were centered outside of Europe, as well as the contact between majority and minority cultural communities within Europe, with peoples such as the Roma, the Sinti, and Jewish groups. As Benedict Anderson says, ‘It is easy to forget that minorities came into existence in tandem with majorities’, there from the beginning (Anderson, 1998, p. 318). State formations create both and regulate their relationships.

Perhaps the most pernicious myth of all has been the persistent portrayal of an idyllic homogeneous past, as if there was a time prior to group-related differences in which trust and understanding were easier, even automatic.

7. Conclusion

The concept of transculturation helps to undermine the narrative of Western supremacy that has been reproducing cultural racism in

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every generation since the Conquest of the Americas. It is not a solution in itself, yet it forces a reassessment of the nostalgia for a fictional homogeneous past and it helps us decolonize what we think we know about the emergence of Western science, industry, political institutions, and culture in general. If we continue to use familiar geographical-historical categories like the 'West', they will need to be redefined and their use more carefully circumscribed.

White nationalism is today a transnational phenomenon, whose basic premise – that a community of ethnically homogenous citizenry has legitimate rights over a geographical territory and all of its current resources – finds resonance in many non-white parts of the globe, such as India, in which a kind of ethno-essentialism grounds national identity and the right to exclude. But we should be clear that ethnic essentialisms of this sort are enabled by cultural racism: others are thought to be justifiably excluded not simply because they may be newer to the nation but because they have a bad culture. We should also be clear that noxious forms of nationalism used to exclude refugees and immigrants can be ethnically and racially inclusive. There is a new form of multi-racial Christian nationalism in the United States, Brazil, and elsewhere today in which inclusion requires assimilation and acceptance of the creed.

Without minimizing conflict, Said pointed out in his final book, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, that 'far more than they fight, cultures coexist and interact fruitfully with each other' (2004, p. xvi). Said suggests we return to Vico for our understanding of humanism not as doctrine but as practice, a making relation to knowledge. What unites human groups is their universal 'capacity to make knowledge, as opposed to absorbing it passively, reactively, dully' (2004, p. 11). He believed that one can be 'critical of humanism in the name of humanism and that, schooled in its abuses by the experience of Eurocentrism and empire, one could fashion a different kind of humanism [...]' (2004, pp. 10–11).

His is, I suggest, a humanism without empire: a rejection of ranked types in favour of the claim that all human groups engage in meaning-making, or in other words, culture. This was also the basic idea of Las Casas's defence of the Indians in his mid-16th century debate with Juan Gines Sepulveda: the Aztec should not be classified as barbarians, or animalistic, Las Casas argued, because they had reasons for their actions. Thus, from the very beginning of modernity, up to its present day, there have been contesting alternatives to cultural racisms, alternatives we very much need to resuscitate in these dark times.

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