

"We are all tempted by racism. There is in us a soil prepared to receive and germinate its seeds the minute we let down our guard. We risk behaving in a racist manner each time we believe ourselves threatened in our privileges, in our well-being, or in our security."

Albert Memmi's controversial statements about racism and his call to each of us to devote ourselves to its eradication—futile though this effort will be—are straightforward and lucid, yet also powerful and universal. In this remarkable meditation on a subject at the troubled center of contemporary life, Memmi investigates racism as social pathology—a cultural disease that prevails because it allows one segment of society to empower itself at the expense of another. By turns historical, sociological, and autobiographical, *Racism* moves beyond individual prejudice to engage the broader questions of collective behavior and social responsibility.

Born in Tunisia, a Jew among Moslems, an Arab among Europeans, Albert Memmi is professor emeritus of sociology at the University of Paris, Nanterre, and the author of numerous books, including *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, *The Fall of the East*, and *Portrait of a Jew*.

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UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA PRESS, PRINTED
COVER DESIGN BY PERCOLATOR

RACISM

MINNESOTA

ALBERT MEMMI

Racism

FOREWORD BY KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH

TRANSLATED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY STEVE MARTINOT

The unfolding of a thought does not always resemble that of life. Were things to happen the way they should, the outcome of these long researches and theorizations should have been definitive. As it is, I have had to put these studies together in several different ways. When Lucie Faure, the editor of *Le Nef*,¹ asked me to collaborate on a special issue on racism, I jumped at the chance and wrote the article "Racism: An Attempt at a Definition." I reviewed the four points developed in *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, which were further elaborated in *Portrait of a Jew*, and added a commentary on each point, term by term, in the manner of Spinoza. I proposed this essay as a working hypothesis for the MRAP survey. Later, I incorporated it in *Dominated Man*, where, with a conclusion, it served

as a kind of conclusion to that book under the subtitle "Racism and Oppression" [see Appendix A, "An Attempt at a Definition"].

The article "Racism" that *L'Encyclopaedia Universalis* asked me to write is then the endpoint of this even longer trajectory. It differs quite markedly from the preceding attempts in two important respects [see Appendix B, "What Is Racism?"]. First, it restricts itself to considering racism in the narrow, that is, the biological, sense. It was, I guess, a way of acceding to some objections raised about my earlier thinking. But I still emphatically maintain that *the focus on biological difference, despite its shrillness, at least among our contemporaries, is not the essential aspect of racism*. It is, rather, merely a pretext or an alibi. However, something is to be gained by distinguishing the strictly biological dimension of racist thinking from others. That is what I did in that article.

The second point of the encyclopedia article concerned the function of racism. What I have tried to demonstrate, beyond the rage or hystionics of the racist outlook, beyond its incoherences and contradictions, is that *racism has a function*. It is both the emblem and the rationalization for a system of social oppression. Should a definition of racism include reference to the systematicity of domination through the advantages it purveyed, given that it seeks to be as concise as possible? Ultimately, I decided that it should. Moreover, I thought it would not be too difficult—essentially a question of formulation, to which I will return in a moment. But I have never wavered on what I consider the most fundamental

aspect: *the organic connection between racism and oppression*.

I maintain that racism, and the general structure that underlies it and of which it is a particular case, summarizes and symbolizes what I have previously addressed about the systematicity of social oppression. In other words, racism subsumes and reveals all the elements of dominance and subjection, aggression and fear, injustice and the defense of privilege, the apologetics of domination with its self-justifications, the disparaging myths and images of the dominated, and finally the social destruction or social nullification of the victimized people for the benefit of their persecutors and executioners—all this is contained in it. Assuming, of course, that one sees a general structure underneath the unfolding of racist practices. This is not a circular argument in which I require that one accept in advance what I claim to be demonstrating; it is rather a question of an articulation that will encompass the greatest number of cases.

Broad Sense and Narrow Sense

Let's step back a bit. Racism in the "strict" or "narrow" sense of the term certainly exists; it is a racism that makes reference to *biological differences for the purposes of subjugation and the establishment of certain privileges and advantages for itself*. There are those who believe they can compile sets of such traits to form coherent paradigms, which they call *rac*es. For them, the other races will be those that are impure and abominable, and their own, pure

and admirable. By authorizing this peculiar superiority for themselves, they also presume to enjoy advantages of a different order: economic or political, for example, or perhaps psychological, or simply a measure of prestige.

But a broader use of the term *racism* also undeniably exists—though, perhaps, pushing the term to its limit—in which the persecutor evinces the same attitude in the name of nonbiological differences (regardless of whether there are biological differences or not). The same processes of self-valorization through the devaluation of the other are at work, to the same end of justifying forms of verbal or physical assault and abuse. Furthermore, one cannot really interpret the first without understanding the second. And since the second is more common than the first, it would seem reasonable to consider biological racism, which is a relatively recent phenomenon, as a special case of the other, whose practices are more widespread and much older.

In any event, *it should be possible both to distinguish the two senses of racism and to encompass them in one common definition.*

Recalling the Definition

Racist thinking in the narrow sense is that which emphatically focuses on certain biological differences, including those of skin color, the form of the nose, cranial dimensions, curvature of the back, odor, composition of the blood, and even one's posture, one's manner of walking, of looking . . . the list

goes on and on. For such racist thinking, these factors all constitute evidence.

Naturally, one can discuss this evidence with those who see it as such, and accuse them of bad faith or defective vision. One can denounce their information as false, or reveal it to be pseudo-knowledge. Usually, it is easy to show the differences to be assumed, or invented, or simply construed to meet the needs of the racist cause. It makes no difference. They will continue to act and to think as if nothing had been said. Indeed, it quickly becomes clear that their focus on either real or imaginary differences is only to provide leverage for other things, namely, to derogate certain other people.

It is thus of the essence of this process that *the other's traits all have a negative valuation.* Whatever they are, they will signify something bad. The correlative effect is that the corresponding characteristics for the one who derogates are good. We must keep this inverse relation in mind; it recurs everywhere, even where not apparent and even where the order of the terms have been changed. What encompasses the core of this relation, whether it be one of dominance-subjection or codependence [*dépendance-pourvoyance*, which would include the dual dependence of the colonial relation], is the notion that the racist and the victimized constitute a structural dyad: the racist is likable because the victim is detestable; the world of the racist is moral while the world of the victim is evil.

A pragmatic conclusion that people who think in a racist manner arrive at and believe legitimate is

that they have to protect themselves, and protect their own, against contamination by this evil and against the potential (imminent) aggression of the other—to the point of needing to attack first. The Jews have quick fingers, sticky palms, and a ferret's nose, all of which point to their ability to sniff out money; therefore, one becomes an anti-Semite to defend oneself against them. Compared to Whites, Black people have an unnatural erotic power; *therefore*, in order to protect White women and the entire White race against them, lynchings become necessary.

The relative (structural) coherence of racism in the narrow sense, even in its obsessive aggressiveness and self-interest, *is confirmed precisely by the existence of racism in the broad sense*. I must mention that, ironically, while I have never seen the narrow definition seriously contested, though it is founded on biological differences that are themselves often neglected, many people have indignantly rejected the broad definition, though it holds the key to understanding the former.

In terms of the broad definition, I have still only scratched the surface. The discriminatory dyadic relations of social ostracism, which provide the machinery for real, concrete social exclusion, are found in many other forms of human relations, where biological considerations are either absent or irrelevant. *They participate in obscure domains where fear and aggression dominate, where fear leads to aggression, and where aggression gives rise to more fear. Indeed, in a more exact sense, fear leads to aggression, aggression engenders more aggression, and that aggres-*

sion provokes more fear. It is an endless circle that lives by feeding off itself. That is why it does not matter if one describes racism in terms of fear or aggression. Each engenders the other, like the chicken and the egg. Racists are people who are afraid; they feel fear because they attack, and they attack because they feel fear. They are afraid of being attacked, or they are afraid because they believe themselves attacked and attack to rid themselves of this fear. But why is there a fear of being attacked? Generally, it is because one wishes to obtain or defend something of value. I have already spoken of the many forms in which value can clothe itself. Whatever its form, however, and regardless of whether the threat is real or imaginary, the necessity to defend an individual identity and a collective identity, against all who come from elsewhere and don't belong, is in operation. But defensiveness requires an offense, and vice versa; then, having become aggressive, one awaits retaliation. Fear feeds fear and aggression feeds aggression. But underneath it all, racial affirmation is an instrument for self-affirmation. It is a detestable way of binding the social body together, through the self-exaltation of specific traits in order to debase others correlatively, but only one among many. It is no accident that nationalism, for instance, transforms itself so often into chauvinism; it is itself already a hostile denigration of other nations.

On the other hand, narrow racial arguments, which do not have a good reputation, are very often voluntarily abandoned. It does not mean that racist thinking has become less pernicious or denigratory

toward others; the bigot will not deprive himself of an attack on fellow humans, if one can put it that way. Instead, racist thinking finds plenty of other "noxious" differences with which to reproach others. Psychology, culture, social customs and institutions, even metaphysics furnish many opportunities for defamation. One no longer detests Arabs because they have a swarthy complexion or a Levantine physiognomy but because they practice ("let us admit it") a ridiculous religion, they treat their women badly, and they are cruel, or simply retarded. Okay, so not all Jews resemble the Wandering Jew, nor are they quick-fingered or hook-nosed, but "you must recognize" that they are in general greedy, cosmopolitan, given to treachery, and even, as the evangelists have said, capable of sacrificing God. Granted, neither the Germans nor the English nor the Italians have a distinct physical character (although, for the Italians . . .). But in every German you know a Prussian sleeps, and now it is an industrial Prussian bent on dominating Europe; in every Englishman, there is an unscrupulous adversary who has never renounced domination of the seas, or the subjugation of France, in a nation that now, in the Common Market, thinks only of its own interests (as if the other partners are doing something else). As for the poor Italians, there is only pandemonium, cowardice, and thievery—look at the tragic and ridiculous Red Brigades. Let us add the Japanese (who now comport themselves as industrial nations always have, but then, times also change: the colonial nations used to use force without hesitation—look at the Opium Wars). And even the Arabs, who wish to

impose their price! (As all monopolists have always done.) All this signifies, at the same time, that the French are humanist, prudent, loyal, generous (often to a fault, but it is only an excess of quality!), properly organized (not too much, like the Germans, or too little, like the Italians), courageous (unlike the Italians), and not regimented (like the Prussians). . . . One has only to take the contrary of any of the aberrant traits of others to arrive at the positive portrait of the French created by themselves.

Naturally, this double description can be redrawn from anyone else's perspective. Everyone has a stock of self-satisfying images of himself or herself along with unflattering ones of others. (Conversely, in each of us, as individuals or groups, there also exist self-denigrating or even self-destructive attitudes, discourses, and behaviors, but to address that would be to digress from our subject.) And all such images are mutually contradictory. It is all what should induce a modicum of modesty, if not a prudent irony about oneself and about humanity. But for that, one would need the imagination and will to put oneself in another's shoes. That is, one would have to stop being racist, since racism is precisely not doing so, and taking sides with inequality. It doesn't matter if, within each discriminatory dyad, the characteristics listed actually form a coherent whole or not. Being rational is not the issue; a different sort of logic is at work, the logic of fear and obsession.

In short, if I do not wish to omit consideration of those who practice the same discriminatory exclusions without using the biology alibi, I must recognize

the existence of a *general structure*, which traditional racism resembles like a son his father but which subsumes racism and generalizes it. A more open definition that takes into account all the *alibis*, the biological as well as the others, becomes necessary.

Thus, we arrive at the following. *Racism is a generalizing definition and valuation of differences, whether real or imaginary, to the advantage of the one defining and deploying them [accusateur], and to the detriment of the one subjected to that act of definition [victime], whose purpose is to justify (social or physical) hostility and assault [agression].*

A definition, of course, if I may be forgiven for repeating myself (see *Dependence*), is only a tool, an operational formula. If it is too general, it falls short of its purpose; by attempting to cover too broad a terrain, it grasps nothing adequately. But if too narrow, it will leave out of account too much of what it intended to circumscribe. I do not know how to make this one more concise, nor do I think it needs to be further developed. I have attempted to include a maximum of meaning in a minimum of words. What is important is that the essential idea not be lost to a concern for elegance and that it not be transformed into description through wordiness. I do not pretend that all the problems inherent in this subject are here dispensed with, but I think that this definition has what is needed to resolve them.

The main objections to this definition all boil down to this: in its broadness, it risks diluting the specificity of the racist arguments and dismisses the particularity of racism in its deployment of race and

of the biological. But objectively, that is not the case. Many people speak and conduct themselves in a racist manner but claim innocence when accused of it. In any case, there is an easy solution to the problem: two formulations of the same definition, one concerning racism in the strict biological sense and the other addressing all the other forms.

And here, by good fortune, the god of language comes to my rescue. The whole thing revolves around and resolves itself through the biological term; it is sufficient to add or subtract it to obtain a narrow or a broad formulation, without changing anything else. Thus, in its narrow form, it would be: "Racism is the valuation of *biological differences*, real or imaginary . . ." In its broad form: "Racism is the valuation of *differences*, real or imaginary . . ."

Others have suggested condensing the definition even more. I admit I have not found them convincing. I thought for a moment of paring it down to *racism is the refusal of the other*. This is true but inadequate to the point of being false. On the one hand, indifference is a form of refusal, and on the other, not all refusal is aggressive or denigrating. I can refuse someone while fully admitting his superiority, on one plane if not on all. There are people who do not like Jews, while fully granting them recognition as people. There are ways in which compliments given to those victimized by racism can be very subtly poisoned; for example, some say that Jews are *too intelligent* (in order not to denigrate); or that Levantines (Arabs from the Eastern Mediterranean) are exaggeratedly friendly (rather than call them

cunning). Of course, it is sometimes difficult not to reveal a certain animosity in one's refusal, but one is not obliged to love everyone. That would be an admirable ideal, but the issue here is that of harming people. Yet while all racism is harmful through its hostility, the inverse is not true; not all aggression is racist. To strike out at an antagonist, even preemptively, is not necessarily a sign of racism; one can respect and admire an adversary. Racism arises from a certain motivation; it utilizes particular mental procedures, from a very clear social motivation. It is not even enough to say that it is an aggressive refusal of the other; it is an aggressive refusal for a particular end, which is justified by a specific type of discourse. A definition must take account of this complexity; to overly impoverish its wording would be to lose its specific insight.

Similarly, with respect to the goals of racism, two formulations, a narrow one and a broad one, are possible, distinguished by whether one focuses on racism's assaultiveness in general or on its effects, that is, on the modes of control and privilege produced. Usually, something does not appear as a privilege unless it is lived as an injustice or a deprivation by others, by those less privileged. A benefit accruing to all people would have no need of justification. A mode of control is not experienced as bad unless it is resented as being concretely oppressive. If one's questioning proceeds only to the level of the "how" of racism, the answer is through hostility and aggression. But one can also ask "why" there is aggression; racism is aggression motivated either by the fear of

losing something one possesses or by the fear of an adversary whom one wants to exploit to one's own advantage, and whom one then has to dominate for that purpose. In short, it is in defense of a real or potential benefit.

In any case, the duality of fear and aggression, if it really is a duality, is integral to the structure of all racist practices. Fear always accompanies the undertaking of hostility. To dispense with fear in confidence, the adversary or victim would have to be presumed so totally disarmed that there was no risk. For racism, its attacks are always seen as preventive reactions to what is unforeseeably foreseen as aggression by the adversary.² And fear is always a factor in one form or another. There is fear because one is preparing to attack the other, and there is fear of the other. One fears those who are unknown; one fears that they may be violent and invade; one fears that they will take away what one has of value, whether real or symbolic. "They want to take over everything." "They will take our women and our daughters." "We can no longer feel at home here."

The sense of threat can be yet more subtle than that. When I was correcting the proofs of this book, an association of specialized educators approached me with a problem: they asked if I thought there was a close relation between racism and the attitudes that so-called normal people often held toward those who were physically or mentally handicapped. I answered yes, that I thought so. One finds, at least at first sight, a similar sense of rejection out of fear, sometimes a pattern of hostile defensiveness, and even a secret

desire to do away with the handicapped. Here again, it would be clear what passage to the limit would mean; the Nazis also tried to exterminate the mentally ill. I am not sure that euthanasia does not partially derive from a similar disaffection. Indeed, the special rehabilitation centers into which people injured in auto accidents have been placed seem motivated by the same feeling; there, they can live with each other but out of our sight. Why such ostracism? Perhaps because they present an image that upsets our own psychic equilibrium—which would amount to the loss of a very precious possession.

Parenthetically, let me add a word of caution. I am not trying to point an accusatory finger. On the contrary, the sense of being obscurely disturbed, as a sensitivity, can actually be of great assistance in caring for the disabled. In other words, a fearful malaise, though it may be an inherent ingredient in racist behavior, does not in itself constitute racism. Racism truly begins when one prepares or justifies an offense or an assault through the devaluation of the other; that is, when one sets in motion certain discursive machinery that conceptually nullifies others and whose main function is to provide the groundwork for concretely preying upon and injuring them.

In truth, the single difficulty that surpasses the problem of formulation is knowing whether a real form of privilege is at issue. The question is crucial, since it governs all the rest. If there is profit to be gained, or benefits to be defended, then a form of racism is possible. And, on that basis, I think my affirmative answer was correct.

If we now look at the case of the rich, of those who want for nothing, there is clearly privilege. Yet still, just to be on the safe side, let us see what its limits might be. As previously stated, there is privilege only when there is consciousness of an injustice. A person who is privileged, yet wholly convinced of his or her rights to this privilege, should feel no need to be racist. Similarly, an individual or a group that had no doubts concerning itself or its domination of others should feel no need to justify itself. Racism would be of no use. In fact, some people have actually told me of certain colonists who, feeling secure in the legitimacy of colonialism, evince none of the reactionary behavior that I have attributed to them. Maybe. Personally, I have never encountered it. What I have encountered are endless attempts at justification, with greater or lesser self-assurance, accompanied by always self-legitimizing disparagements of the colonized. One of the greatest French sociologists, Roger Bastide, told me that the bourgeoisie of Europe was not racist. The proof was their cosmopolitanism and the facility with which they, following the example of royalty, contracted mixed marriages. I remain unconvinced. Neither cosmopolitanism nor exogamic marriages have ever obviated xenophobia. Let us say that, in their given situation, they could afford to grasp the relativity of peoples and cultures, and thus were harder to deceive. Racism is also a self-deception. One must be seriously fooled about oneself, as well as about others, to believe in one's essential superiority or in one's overweening rights. And racist thinking always contains a sense of superiority founded upon

the hierarchy it establishes between itself and those it racializes as other. It is the hierarchy, though not the superiority, that is real because racism bestows *objective advantages*. As a White person, one can be crippled, miserable, or dim-witted and still believe oneself superior to all Black people—or, as a European, to all Arabs—though the other be rich, handsome, and well educated. Now one would suppose, for the rich who want for nothing, that their own discursive violence, and the racism that would flow from it, would be inversely proportional to their confidence in their own thinking—a correlation that is in itself interestingly instructive.

In contrast, since privileges do exist and are perceived and lived as such, even though relative and at times somewhat ridiculous, various compensatory mechanisms come into play. "The natives have gotten what they deserve," one of our professors at the Lycée Carot de Tunis repeated endlessly. Though he was an upstanding man, all things considered, he reaped some small *benefit from colonialism* and did not manage to grasp his complicity in it. "These people are lazy, liars, incapable of good farming, only good enough for 'Arab-work,'" he would say, "whereas the workers of my country . . ." Then, without fear of contradiction, speaking of those same workers in "his country," he revealed that he thought still less well of them: "They should have gotten in on the colony!" "They too would have had a share in colonization." But, he fumed with enormous contempt, "They prefer the filth of their small lives to that of adventure." *We began to understand that whatever*

benefits he got, he felt he had merited them because he had taken the leap and the risk. If the others, the inferior ones, the natives, the workers, lived in misery, it was *their own fault*. The memory of such talk helped me later when writing *The Colonizer and the Colonized*.

The Racism of the Impoverished

One last question: can there be a racism of the dominated? I have already responded in the affirmative, but I think that one can even distinguish two varieties. The first, of course, is that toward those who are more impoverished—and there are always those who are worse off than oneself. I describe this *pyramid of tyrannies* with respect to colonial society, for which it constitutes a skeleton (see *The Colonizer and the Colonized*). Ultimately, I think it can be found everywhere. There are, for instance, those astonishing stories of certain communist-led municipal administrations that evicted North African workers from the city with extraordinary brutality. Two accusations were immediately levied: first, that it was an election-oriented stratagem, and second, that it was just plain racism. The two charges are not in close accord. If this were a calculated election strategy, then it is not done out of conviction. If it is done out of conviction, it is not just an electoral strategy, which would be contingent. I do not believe that the French communists became racists all of a sudden. But it might be more serious than that. As informed politicians, who know their constituencies well, *what*

they expressed *was the potential racism* of their electorate. One has but to review the justifications they gave for their actions: young couples, they explained, can no longer find residence in the public housing projects; there is no more room for the children of workers in the school complexes, and those children increasingly speak bad French because of contact with the children of foreigners; the immigrants make too much noise in the street at night; their cooking smells up the stairwells of the buildings; they play their music too loud; they break everything, and so on (as if French cooking had no odors and disco music was boring and noninvasive). Too often this is how French workers characterize North Africans. The crime of the communists is to have made use of these unfortunately too real sentiments. In 1977, a Harris poll showed that the hostility against the Jews and against the North Africans in France was found principally among workers and retirees. But why do French workers think this way? It is because French workers think that immigrants threaten the few advantages that they have over them. The fear of unemployment, for example, is not unrelated to this hostility. However impoverished one may be, one's poverty can always be less than that of another, at least in other domains.

More to the point, the workers who possess this attitude are the workers who live in daily contact with the immigrants, and not the inhabitants of the nicer neighborhoods; again, difference disquiets, and the oppressed do not escape that malaise. Nevertheless, we have recently witnessed an extraordinary

upheaval of a similar nature in a town just outside Paris that was not confined to the working class. The Moslem immigrants there wanted to build a mosque. Though they had been tolerated when unnoticed, they were found intolerable the moment they decided their residence was to be permanent and henceforth marked by a large fancy stone structure, accompanied by the strange songs of the *muezzin*. Let it be said, in passing, that this event elicited the claim from many that they had a high tolerance threshold, which others characterized more justly as an intolerance threshold. It was as if the issue were like an illness induced by the concentration of some toxic agent in the social body, except that the Moslem population would not change in number or in nature with the building of the mosque. In other words, the illness was not in those attacked (the Moslems) but in their detractors, who thus reveal their latent racism.

Is there, then, a racism of the impoverished against the rich? I suppose I may shock some people by answering in the affirmative. But it is a racism that is in part reactive, though it obeys the same mechanism as the other. Take a look at Epinal's cartoon images of the possessing classes, capitalists and small proprietors; they are presumed to be perverse and deformed, that is to say, evil and biologically corrupt. Let us add, the bourgeoisie is universally suspect a priori of these two characteristics, which we have noted in all cases of racism. From the steel-mill owner to the petty bourgeoisie of the nineteenth century, through the large and small entrepreneurs of our day, all are considered avaricious and cruel, afflicted with

an unbridled sexuality that threatens the daughters of the people. Antithetically, the poor man, the proletarian, is good, healthy, and virtuous. Here again is the old seesaw movement: differences (perhaps biological, perhaps imaginary) are set in relief for the purpose of self-valorization and in order to devalue the other. And on the horizon lurks the justification of an eventual attack, both individual ("all bosses are the enemy") and collective (the necessity of revolution).

If the racism of the poor gets less notice, it is because they have an excuse. Too often plundered, and sometimes crushed, they are precluded from many pleasures of life, barred from the objects of their desire, of which they dream more avidly because it is denied them. How could they not be full of bitterness and resentment against those whom they believe are the cause of their situation? And who in fact are most often. In addition, because the troubled souls of the downtrodden are scarcely noticed, it is only through the violence of revolutionary upheavals or impulsive individual acts, for which they are severely punished, that the poor can express themselves. In confrontation with the dominant, the racism of the dominated remains at the level of opinion. The racism of the poor is ordinarily a toothless racism—except when it manifests itself against other poor people.

Generalization³

The mutable character of the racist phenomenon repeats itself everywhere one turns. If I do not always mention this facet, here or in other places,

it is because it appears to me to go without saying.⁴ But I definitely think that racism's plasticity is an essential part of its nature. One sees this in operation in two of its other facets: *the tendency to generalize and the tendency toward absoluteness.*

There are times when these two aspects of racist valuation of the other are not wholly evident. Sometimes it may look as if a person is simply heaping opprobrium on another individual, without allusion to the person's group or status. But I think one would find a double generalization implicit if one scratches the surface. First, an act of disparagement almost always implicitly refers at least in part to a group, in the sense that others must also suffer from the quality being disparaged. And second, the content of what is said tends to be atemporal, that is, not a function of time; no foreseeable event will ever put an end to it.

To say that a certain Black worker cannot master a technique because he is Black is to say that no Black person can do it; therefore, all Blacks, or almost all, are technologically inferior. To describe a woman as having "long hair and short ideas" because she is a woman designates all other women as well. When a bigoted person is obliged to recognize the professional, artistic, or scientific merits of a particular woman, he tends to twist that recognition to fit his own logic; "it is the exception that proves the rule."

Socialization

The tendency to generalize is sustained by the underlying *sociality of racism* to the point where

it becomes difficult to address its generalizations because they are themselves so universally generalized throughout society—that is, they go without saying. Though racism has some roots in a person's emotional structure and sensibilities, its basic formulation is social. *Racism is a cultural discourse* that surrounds each person from childhood on, in the air one breathes, in parental advice and thinking, in one's cultural rituals. One is exposed to it in school, in the streets and the newspapers, even in the writings of people one is supposed to admire and who might be otherwise admirable. Remarks have been made by Voltaire, Balzac, and Gide that reveal their repulsion of Jews. The Jew, the Arab, the Black, and even the Corsican, the Italian, and the German have become literary or cinematic stereotypes, through which they eventually are treated as cartoon characters themselves. Racist or chauvinist vocabulary becomes the reservoir, the social memory of a group's hostility toward others: for the Arab, *le raton*, *le melon*, *le bougnoul*; for the Jew, *le youpin*, *le judas*, *le moise*; for the Italian, *le rital*, *le macaroni*, *le spaghetti*; for the German, *le boche*, *le frisé*, *le schleuh*, *le mangeur de choucroute*.⁵ It is remarkable how lively verbal invention becomes when it concerns social prejudice. A veritable fireworks of derogatory terms exploded on us during the Algerian War, as did anti-German nicknames during the Second World War. These derogatory terms actually define, concretize, and nourish one's individual experiences. *Racism is a collective language at the service of each person's emotions.*

Racist practices are doubly socialized in both their discursivity and their purpose. *It is a discourse formulated by a group that addresses itself to a group.* At the level of these totalizations, the function of racism becomes clearer still. An individual is no longer considered in himself but rather as a member of a social group, whose characteristics he possesses a priori. Through an individual, an entire group can be stigmatized as detestable and offensive, and condemned to being attacked; inversely, each individual member of a group so stigmatized will be seen as warranting denigration and hostility, a priori. When the racist recognizes any good qualities in a particular group member, it is with regret or astonishment. "There are good people everywhere," he will claim, meaning, "even in your group, otherwise so contemptible." Or, more to the point, "you are not like the others"; "I have a friend who is Jewish and who . . .," which hardly praises the others who are not exempt from the usual derogation and its eventual "punitive violence." Besides, even for "the exceptions that prove . . .," the suspension of judgment is only temporary. At the slightest mistake, the least social impropriety, the alleged misunderstanding is dispelled, and the guilty one again becomes what he had always been, a member of an abominable group. "At bottom, they are all alike." The suspicion had never totally disappeared. It was simply put on the back burner, masked by a provisional indulgence in favor of "someone who does not merit it"—again, a priori. What had happened "shows that only too well."

These uses of generalization represent another way the racist proclaims reason to be on his side. "You see? What did I tell you?" "I knew that he was no good." Things are put back on track. The systematic hostility of the racist turned out to be an asset, keeping him always on guard with respect to necessarily deplorable people; with it, one runs no risk of being taken in or taken by surprise. Thus, if he considers every Gypsy to be a potential thief, he warns against this Gypsy here, because "forewarned is forearmed." No matter that *this* Gypsy has done nothing. If he wished to commit a theft, it would have been forestalled in advance. It is a measure of security, a practical and logical guarantee that both protects and completes the racist's argument. In the meanwhile, this Gypsy, who is not a thief, neither in act nor in intention, is truly treated as one. But that doesn't bother the racist; it is precisely what it means to be a racist.

The other totalizing dimension is that of *extension in time*. It follows in the footsteps of social generalization. Racism seeks to render definitive the stereotype that it attaches to the other. Not only does the other belong to a group of which all the members are rotten, but they will be that way *forever*. Thus, all is in order for eternity. The bad guys are the way they are *definitively*, and the good guys as well—the masters on one side, the slaves on the other. That a Black person fails to master the technique only signifies that he never has been able to and never will. Similarly for the colonized: they have never understood industrialization, science, or

progress, and they therefore never will . . . until decolonization.

Once again, it corroborates the expedience of the biological argument. The inferiority of the colonized, of the Black, or of the woman is inscribed in their flesh. "How one might wish that it were otherwise, and could be corrected, but it is their destiny." And what destiny is more tenacious than the biological? The Black is irremediably black; the woman irremediably female. *Biology is the very figure of fate.* The prey of the racist was predisposed in his or her being and condemned to remain like that until the end of time. And what better guarantee of privilege is there than eternity? Thus, these social and temporal totalities are transformed directly into metaphysical assurance. It is truly a passage to the absolute. The Jew, the Black, the Arab, the Gypsy, even the woman, *become figures of irremediable evil.* The Jew, as the accursed elect of God, author of the death of God, remains outside time and disturbs both the moral and the cosmic order. Has it not been suggested, seriously, that the Black recalls by his color the darkness of malevolence itself? And then there is the figure of Lilith, Eve's double, the one born of sperm, the inconsummate actress, ancestor of the *femme fatale*, the devourer of man, whose infernal appetite is as much for money as it is for sex. Racism reaches its apogee in metaphysics and in religion; do not the metaphysicians and theologians see themselves as specialists of the eternal? But here, it is a question of a negative absolute.

Negation and Nullification

We can now see, in passing, how social negation is the prelude to social nullification. How much is conscious and how much unconscious can be debated. The moderate racist, if one can use such a term, would probably be horrified if he took full account of where the path of racism leads—to the cemetery. Yet it is never a question of anything but the ongoing process, more or less hidden, more or less affirmed, of symbolic destruction whose end is the dehumanization of its victim. There are racists who have no desire to see a Black person or a colonized person suffer a violent death. It would not be a fitting end for someone they instead consider rather comic. But the actual death or suffering of such a person provokes in them a sense of derision rather than compassion. The one who suffers is not exactly a human being, with a mother and children, but rather a species of animal, and it is always easier to imagine the disappearance, even the eradication, of animals than of humans. The moment at which Black people began to be thought of in this fashion can be dated precisely: it was the period of the slave trade in Africans. I strongly suspect that such were the sentiments, perhaps not wholly conscious, of many people when they learned of the systematic massacres of Indian tribes throughout the Americas—a massive entrapment of beasts in the form of humans. But sometimes the blatant desire for murder also gets expressed. How often have I heard, in the colonies, the gratuitous remark that tries to be a pleasantry:

"We are 10 percent of the population; give each of us a rifle and nine bullets, and the problem will be solved."

What provides the key to the violence in racist discourse is a psychological inversion—one accuses the victim of absolute evil because one wishes an absolute evil upon him. The Jew is accused of murder because one wishes him dead. (The syllogism "He poisons the wells; should he then not die?" is a reformulation of the real thought: I want him to die, so I accuse him of poisoning the wells.) "The Black is the power of the infernal; should he not be sent there?" is a translation of its real inverse: I wish him in hell, so I consider him a creature escaped from there. It is fortunate that all exclusions do not end in such extremes. But there is more than enough historical experience to convince us that the difference between the stigmatization of the other and, when sufficiently critical circumstances arise, his or her physical destruction is not a difference of kind but of degree.⁶ Not so long ago in Europe the background social atmosphere of misogyny was transformed into mass suffering through the stoning to death or burning at the stake of women as witches.

Racism and Heterophobia

Finally, let me say one more word about terminology, recognizing that no attempt to clarify language can fail to influence our vocabulary. The ambiguity in any discussion of racism derives in part from the ambiguity of the word. In its strict sense,

racism refers exclusively to a biological concept. But then, through its use, it comes to have a much broader meaning. Many people no longer think of biology at all when they speak in a racist manner. That does not mean they are making a mistake, however, since both uses have a common source.

To resolve the ambiguity, could there not be two terms marking the duality, but sufficiently close to suggest their common source? Can one not express the disparity in the double definition by means of a linguistic distinction? Here is what I suggest.

The word *racism* works perfectly well for the biological notion. But I propose that henceforth it be limited to that. This would not stop current racist discourse from sailing along as always in fact and fantasy, but it would at least provide an instrument better suited to dealing with it. When one speaks of racism, the term would refer to people who accord primacy to biological characteristics. There would be less time wasted making arguments that do not address the essential question. Many people who think and act in terms that are exclusionary or derogatory insist that they do not do so in the name of biological concepts. It would be unjust not to take note of this, let alone unveil their latent racism, if it exists.

I think that the word *heterophobia* would work well enough to refer to these people. *Heterophobia* would designate the many configurations of fear, hate, and aggressiveness that, directed against an other, attempt to justify themselves through different psychological, cultural, social, or metaphysical means, of which racism in its biological sense is only one

instance. To my knowledge, this term does not exist in the dictionary, but perhaps need and usage will change that. Many people think themselves cleansed of the sin of racism if they pay little attention to skin color, to the form of the nose or the size of the lips. But are they less guilty if they attack others for their religious faith, or for cultural differences?

The term *heterophobia* would be relevant as well to more recent issues. It is questionable whether one could speak of racism with respect to prejudice against teenagers, or women, or gay men and lesbians, or the handicapped. Strictly speaking, it wouldn't apply—although either in irony or in confirmation of the importance of difference, little attention has been paid to the fact that for both women and teenagers, real though not racial biological differences exist. A man I know once said of my friends, with questionable humor, "I do not know if there is a Jewish race, but the women, now that is truly a race apart!" Naturally, the compliment would have worked as well if spoken by his wife with respect to the men. And in that sense, for adults, teenagers are quasi-biologically different. The term *heterophobia* would allow one to encompass all these varieties of hostility and exclusion. Inversely, it has the advantage of modifiability to fit different cases. For example, instead of speaking of anti-Semitism, which is manifestly imprecise, one might employ the term *Judeophobia*, which clearly signifies both fear and hostility toward Jews. The same can be said for *Negrophobia* and *Arabophobia*. I leave to the reader the pleasure of searching for terms that would represent the hostile

fear and devaluation of women or adolescents, of homosexuals or old people, and so on.⁷

One last word on this subject. I am not wedded to these distinctions, any more than I am to the wording of a definition. I simply see a need for a definition that can operate at two levels at once and that thus calls for a corresponding double terminology. The details can be discussed. I once gave some thought to the adjectival part; it occurred to me that *alterophobia* would work as well as *heterophobia*. I abandoned it out of a certain purism; "altero-" comes from Latin, and "phobia" from Greek. Though we should be accustomed to such things—the term "socio-logy," for instance—I thought that in making something new, one should attempt to make it better. There is also *ethnophobia*, which has the advantage of referring to the exclusion of a group as a whole, one of the central characteristics of racist practice. But to insist on this generalized character exclusively risks being restrictive in turn. Racist speech can be addressed to a singular individual, even were it to submerge him or her in the plural later on. The same goes for *xenophobia*, which has the virtue of existing already and, through its etymological roots, would have been adequate. But usage is king: the term *xenophobia* refers exclusively to the exclusion and denigration of foreigners. Not only foreigners are excluded, unless what is understood by "foreigner" is all who are different from us—by age, sex, social class—but that would stretch the meaning of the word too much.

Enough on this point. I persist in proposing the

pair *racism* and *heterophobia*. The first designates the refusal or rejection of the other in the name of biological differences; the second the rejection of the other in the name of no matter what difference. The second includes the first as a special case. And what I have tried to do here is come up with a single definition that would be unitary and at the same time able to articulate this duality.⁸