Racism, prejudice and the body
Ineffable and ungraspable, the body can only be known through re-presentation. At the same time, it is the most significant indicator of the irreducible differences among subjects.
Subjects gradually construe shifting representations of their own bodies that do not originate only in themselves, but also in inherited family and social representations and in their relationships with and among others. Both our own body and the other’s bear a mark of alterity and foreignness that invades the mind, surprising it. Subjects may register this mark either as a stimulating novelty or as a trigger of rejection.
When coming into contact with another body, our body sets in motion a range of sensations, from pleasure to intrusion (violation) as well as the feeling of fear or terror of physical contact.
The body I call social body (that of fads and convenience) is constituted as a result of a (sometimes strange) mixture of inherited and current representations. It would seem as though both one’s own and body the foreign body were a silent support in our lives, as long as neither give out signals that rendered its presence hard to bear. Pain and suffering, or those traits of the other that are experienced as inadmissible, impose a disturbing presence.
The represented and the presented bodies give rise to two differing experiences that alternate and clash. Because at times those qualities that denote the presence of another body trigger violent rejection, taken to the extreme, such rejection might take the social guise of racism. To reduce the disturbing effects of the other’s difference, we resort to identifying mechanisms. This behavior leads us, for instance, to say or believe that we are all equal. Furthermore, empathy and falling in love enable us to tolerate or disavow alterity.
Each society regulates, or has something to say about, how couples must relate and how its members must conceive of sexual difference. In Sparta homosexuality was the rule. In present-day cultures a variety of relationships among people are supposedly accepted, even though this acceptance has not necessarily been incorporated into individual culture.

The body as representation and the present body
Dualistic and monistic philosophical views have tried to elucidate whether body and mind are the same substance, whether the body-subject and the body-object open up the same paths, and whether or not our bodies are independent of our minds.
Many everyday experiences lead to the blurring or erasure of the difference between the body-subject and the body-object, even if we know that we possess and are that body (Michaela Marzano, p. 7).

Levinas contributes other ideas to the reflection on the enigma of the body. He refers to that which is fleeting about it – the gaze, tenderness, caresses – which allows us to have access to the anxieties that originate in this complex feeling of being and appearing to be with regards to the body – the need to possess and to know one is possessed, and to know oneself as bound to the other’s body and to one’s own (Levinas 1979, p.96). Subjectivity is tied to vulnerability (Le temps et l’autre), to fragility, to the exposure to affection, to sensitivity, to passivity. It is associated with that which originates in the perception of an irretrievable time, the impossible dia-chrony of assembling, the fact of seeing oneself necessarily exposed to showing and expressing oneself, and therefore to Saying and Giving (Op.-cit p. 64). We can only get to know the corporeality of the body through the other. At the same time, the other can be pain or just sexual difference or, as I mentioned earlier, his or her essential traits.

We are linked to our body, and at the same time we are far away from it. We depend on our body at all times; it “prevails upon us,” and yet we neither know it nor have the ability to get to know it (we try to represent it). An example of the foreignness and alienness of our body is the reaction people have to a photograph. The body provides us with an experience of intimacy and alterity (M. Marzano).

Many experiences arouse in us a feeling of enslavement that refers to our own body and to the other’s. Painful experiences such as illness, pain-suffering, or the knowledge of the difference of the sexes and the need to choose between the two will cause us to become aware of the physical presence of our body. In addition, certain pleasurable experiences that are part of our erotic life will make our body becomes our allies.

Prejudice

When we associate body and prejudice, a certain definition of the latter concept becomes necessary. I think of it as a minimal, closed mental organization that constitutes a necessary point of departure for seeing and reflection the world. It is closed when it becomes conviction, and it is open when it can be rethought. Prejudice encompasses a variety of dimensions – political, social, personal, ethical, religious – in the manner of an intricate knot. These dimensions may share a similar mechanism – that of giving rise to a first form of organization that tends to separate and discriminate, to attribute values that are related to the various contexts, to suggest an order and establish categories, and to create a sense of belonging. Prejudice indicates how to conceive of and do things with the real world and how to relate to the other or others. That is how a sense of belonging is partly constructed. This sense of belonging to a group, to an institution, to a family is based on the need to belong, sometimes conforming at any price to the society or group of which one is part (S. Amati). It is hence possible to think of prejudice as a social concept.

At the same time, we invent ourselves in each relationship and in each context, and this self-invention is tied to the unexpected, a vital basis for encounters and for life. That which has already been expected by others (by previous generations), in which prejudice plays an important role, prevents us from creating new organizations for our relational life. Ways of thinking, existing, and belonging have already been named by others. The presence of the already expected becomes a
symptom in couples or families when there is a clash between ways of being and doing that stem from different cultural backgrounds.

The shift from prejudice to racism

Relationships among two or more subjects bring to light the need to work on the irreducible and radical difference that keeps us united and forever separated. This work, which involves relating to the other, is thwarted when we lack parameters to think of alterity or when our resources to do so are scarce. The lack of resources then becomes an attack on the other’s inadmissible traits, which are those that cannot be erased and are associated with what we usually call identity, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual preference, or any other defining aspect. As a result, we place those who are different in a space where they cannot shake our certainty. This space necessarily constitutes an outside separated by borders that must remain impassable.

The other’s inadmissible aspects give rise to a search for techniques that enable us to discriminate and distance ourselves, techniques that are reinforced by a mark of contempt. This behavior gives rise to wars, racial struggles, ghettos, sects, and enclosed groups, that is, forms of relational organization whereby contempt for the other protects us from the irritation or discomfort produced by his or her alterity.

In this way, social behaviors are gradually organized that have been designated as racism. I have distinguished three type of racism. Firstly one supported by a death policy implemented under the sign of violence and leading to the extermination of a group (Hitler’s extermination of Jews, homosexuals, and Gypsies, certain terrorist groups, and so on). Secondly, a racism based on the rejection of the other’s sexual identity that might manifest itself as homophobia or misogyny. Thirdly, what I call everyday racism, which we detect in our colloquial language and that may seem innocuous.

Institutionalized racism is based on dogmas and clear axioms. It acts with certainty and generally proposes some form of activism, which may lead to taking action. Everyday racism, in turn, involves an aggression, sometimes subtle and sometimes blunt, against unchangeable characteristics of the other or of other groups. In everyday language we may say in passing, “that one is colored, he is a homosexual!” Violence contained in language usually goes unnoticed, and in these cases, the attacked and despised individual is but the representative of the group to which he or she belongs. Other times, racism takes the shape of the denial of essential identity differences in phrases such as “we are all equal.” I experienced this myself when I told a black friend of mine that we were all equal. She reacted violently, saying, “Absolutely not.”

Pain

Both physical and psychic personal pain demand personal invention. Pain may be experienced on the basis of a form of categorical foreignness, of irreducibility of the self, and one’s own foreignness enhances anxiety and uncertainty (Le Breton p. 96). Identification renders alterity more tolerable, but we may glimpse its boundaries when we confirm that it is impossible to share our own physical pain and that of the other’s. The body bears signs of the passage of time, of pain, and of pleasure that seem unchangeable, and yet the other’s gaze can make these signs vanish or become present. The ways in which experiences are registered in the body have to
do with bodily memory and memories, even though bodily changes erase memory and replace memories. At the same time, it is in the body that we register linkage experiences – the other’s body leaves a mark, a memory.

**Experiences that give the illusion of the blurring of the space between two**
The sexual act and orgasm, the illusory fusion of the intrauterine relationship, and breastfeeding are some of the experiences that may offer the illusion that the experience of alterity may be silenced. It would seem then that throughout our lives, human subjects try to find resources to prevent irreducible differences from causing us pain or from making us aware that every encounter bears an unpredictable facet. In this way, we may also avoid the experience of fragility, unexpectedness, and uncertainty.

Yet even if it is easy to mention these ideas in everyday life, in the life of nations radical difference and its various meanings open up two divergent paths. One encourages the search for new situations and interests, and the other one – the one we are dealing with here – leads to biased resolutions of difference.

**The body of the other or others**
We should also ask ourselves whether prejudice bears any specificity when it is linked to sexual identity – to the ways in which others give shape to their sex life. Is it possible that such identity originates solely in the parents’ socialization, or does it also stem from the ways of thinking and doing imposed by society through inherited representations and established ways of relating? In the case of misogyny and homophobia, there are other components that determine what is possible and what is accepted, to which they oppose through rejection and terror that which is impossible, rejected, and/or forbidden. There is something about the other sex or about the others’ love relationships that generates horror. Hate and terror combine in misogyny and homophobia.

In each of the spaces of subjective constitution, which I call intra-subjective, inter-subjective, and trans-subjective, specific conflicts arise. In these spaces, abuse, violence, and rejection are present, albeit bearing different meanings. We should stress here that when rejection is tied for instance to sexuality, to the abuse of the partner of the other sex, to the existence of enclosed homosexual groups, or to political struggles, violence may become extreme.

Each society legislates what it allows and what it forbids. Sexist societies and their slow acceptance of homosexuality have led to the emergence of new linkage organizations that show how difficult it is to accept and to do something with difference, whether sexual, epochal, or ethnic. Violent techniques used to resolve the various forms of difference vary and seem to temporarily relieve the tension brought about by the inevitable confirmation of the existence of the other/s.

**Solidity and fragility**
The fragility of human relations is one of their greatest assets, but since it is not easily tolerated, belonging to a relational organization that bears the appearance of solidity may be reassuring. When prejudice/racism are associated with link formation, groups will be established that appear to be solid but that are actually very fragile. They seem solid because since others have conceived them, they preclude criticism, and they are fragile because they block their members’ ability to think.
Key words
Racism, pain, prejudice, death policies

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Summary:
Racism and prejudice may be linked by the fact that they are both ways of establishing differences with the other/others, differences generally loaded with a negative and destructive potential. It is impossible to live without prejudice, but the latter sometimes leads to the implementation of destructive policies against aspects of the other/others that are inherent to their essence.

The body, the appearance, the face (following Levinas’s reflections) is the pure manifestation of an otherness, of an irreducible alterity that forces itself on the beholder. The body is the most visible and enigmatic aspect of a human being, and both for this reason and due to the anxieties it creates, subjects try to possess it, control it, or annihilate it through various types of mental organizations supported on different forms of ideology – religious, political, ethical, esthetic, and so on.

And just as the body presents itself to the other as irreducible, maybe precisely because of this it is believed to be susceptible to being tortured in order to punish, to force the other to say what cannot be said, to impose one’s will, or to produce a certain kind of pleasure linked to cruelty.

The body may then be violated on behalf of fanaticism, of ideals, of prejudices. At the same time, it is possible to try to alter the body through various medical technologies that oscillate between the esthetic and the uncanny.

I will, therefore, focus on the place the other’s body occupies in the mind and on the various modes of linkage it produces.