

A conceptual approach to racism

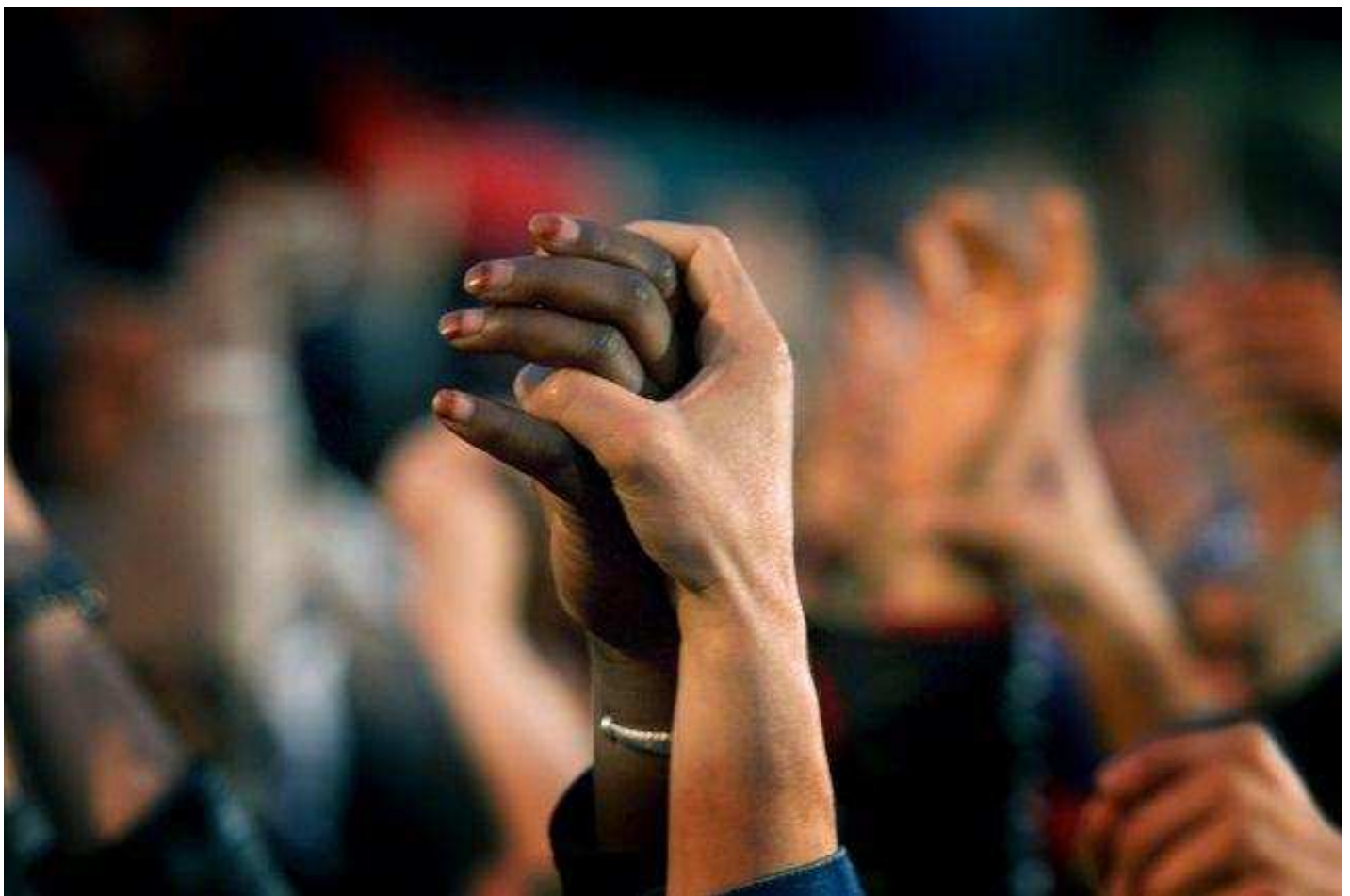
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There is a lot of discussion in Greece these days concerning the necessity for a new anti-racist law. It should be stated from the start that such a law is required both for moral reasons and for reasons of compliance with European law. However, to approach the subject of racism objectively one must first seek a precise definition of the concept itself. In other words, a conceptual clarification of racism is necessary before the judicial system may issue undisputed verdicts concerning allegedly racist behavior.

This article attempts a conceptual approach to racism. It is based on ideas published previously by this author in Greek newspapers and electronic journals (see, e.g., [1, 2]).

As a matter of fact, no precise and generally accepted definition of the concept of racism seems to exist. The concept is usually defined in reference to certain discriminatory behaviors on the basis of, e.g., racial, national, religious, cultural, etc., characteristics. This conceptual fragmentation, although useful for the study of particular aspects of the problem, leaves a feeling of incompleteness to those seeking a more general definition, one which would encompass the diversity of behaviors characterized as “racist”. As a first step towards such a definition, we propose the following:

***Racism** is any ideology or practice that aims at a selective discrimination against a group of people, members of a society, on the basis of a set of common characteristics that each member of the group carries **involuntarily**, which characteristics, objectively, **do not affect** the participation of the group members in the fundamental functions of the society. (By “fundamental functions” we mean the totality of actions necessary for the self-preservation and the progress of the society according to commonly accepted standards and goals.)*

We note three fundamental conditions assumed in this definition:

1. Racism singles out certain people for **negative** treatment; thus, it places these people at an **inferior** status relative to the rest of the society.
2. The common characteristics due to which the group members suffer discrimination **are not a result of the members’ own choice**.
3. These characteristics **do not constitute inhibiting factors** for participation in the society.

Let us illustrate this definition by means of some examples:

1. The Nazi persecutions against the Jews were racist since they were based on an involuntary property – race – which, objectively, could not affect the participation of Jews to the economic, cultural, political, etc., life of Germany.
2. The exclusion of a player 1.50 m. tall from a basketball team (the “society” in this example) is **not** racist. Although height is not a chosen property, it may nevertheless affect the capability of the player to positively contribute to the function of the team. Similarly, the exclusion of a white actor from a play portraying the life of an all-black community is **not** racist. Although color is not a property of the actor’s own choice, it is a preventing factor for her participation in this play. On the other hand, the exclusion of a person from public office in this person’s country (a different “society”, with different needs and goals)

because of height or color **is** racist since these properties are irrelevant to one's tasks in that position.

3. Similarly, the exclusion of a person from an academic position or from promotion in a company because of this person's sex **is** racist. In general, any racist discrimination on the basis of sex is referred to by the term "*sexism*".
4. Heavy smokers sometimes claim that the prohibition of their habit in public places is "racist". On the basis of our definition, this is untrue, for two reasons: First, smoking is a **deliberate** act (something one chooses to do). Second, this act is potentially harmful even for "passive smokers", i.e., non-smoking people in the vicinity of an "active" smoker. Thus, exercising the habit of smoking in public places makes the smoker "anti-social" and justifies the necessity for anti-smoking laws.

An issue of increasing interest is racism on the basis of **culture** (as opposed to race): Should we regard as racist the unwillingness of a society to accept immigrants from countries with different cultural characteristics?

Naturally, every immigrant carries the distinctive elements of the culture within which his (or her) personality was built from the beginning of his life. Thus, such characteristics may not be regarded as voluntarily chosen. On the other hand, integration into a new society requires a degree of adaptation to a set of institutions, some of which may not be compatible with the immigrant's cultural origins. As an example, the trend to take the law into one's hand for reasons of honor may be tolerated in certain societies while it is unacceptable in any civilized society. The question is, therefore, whether the immigrant is willing to give up a part of what he considers as "lawful" in order to conform to the rules of his new homeland. This adaptation **is**, of course, a matter of choice!

So, whether the reluctance of a society to accept certain immigrants constitutes or not racist behavior depends on the degree of adaptation of these immigrants to the standards of the society, as well as on the sense of justice of this society in recognizing this adaptation when it happens. The absence of such a sense of justice as a result of deeply rooted prejudice may indeed be regarded as racist.

I leave it to the reader to judge whether or not the following cases constitute manifestations of racism – at least, according to our more general definition of this concept – thus whether or not the author of an anti-racist law should anticipate them:

1. The scornful attitude toward those who are not endowed by Nature with a "beautiful" appearance according to a society's aesthetic criteria.
2. A similar behavior toward handicapped people.

3. The almost caricature-like representation of a woman who dares to claim a position in a traditional men's job.
4. The snobbish attitude of "intellectuals" toward those that haven't had the privilege of a proper education.
5. The "condemnation" to death of a helpless elderly person by a powerful burglar who considers that his body strength gives him the right to decide on life or death of the weak. (We note, in this connection, the dramatic increase of crime rate in this country due to illegal immigration, which explains the alleged "racism" exhibited by a part of the Greek population.)
6. The crime of rape (again, an exercise of an assumed "right" of the strong to force themselves on the weak), one of the most appalling of "human" perversions.

I close this article with a remark on the penalization of the **denial** (I do *not* refer to the *praise!*) of **crimes of genocide**. This almost hypochondriac idea mainly represents a German patent of atonement and redemption from guilt for the horrible Holocaust of more than six million. I can hardly comprehend its rationale, however, with regard to the Greek society, a society that experienced the horrors of nazi atrocities including those in concentration camps! (The fact that this society developed **xenophobic** sentiment in recent years – and let me note here that one should not confuse *xenophobia* with *racism* [2] – is mainly due to the behavior of those who didn't respect the hospitality this country offered them.)

So, **praising** mass murder is certainly an unlawful act since it encourages a recurrence of the crime. Simply **denying** the historically proven fact of this crime, however, should not be a matter of concern to the law in a democratic society with guaranteed freedom of speech. Rather, it should be regarded as a clinical case for the psychiatrist!

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[1] C. J. Papachristou, *Racism: A conceptual approach to a tag* (in Greek)

[2] C. J. Papachristou, *Some thoughts on the anti-racist law* (in Greek)