

My journey: 'race', the sciences, and gender

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The paper starts from the problem that politics and everyday interaction to counter discrimination on grounds of racial or gender difference use the categories of race and gender, thus possibly reinforcing the belief that these differences are real not only in a social but also in a biological sense, thus implying an unchangeable difference between humans. Using examples from 1920's pre-Nazi Germany popularisation of racial thought it argues for a conscious and context dependent use and critique of "race" and for a critical investigation of the historical contingencies of the creation and use of "race" as a scientific category.

Antidiscrimination politics, Racial classification, History, Nazi Germany racism, Gender

'Race' is with us, popping up unexpectedly in all sorts of circumstances, sometimes even with a Big Bang as it did on 19 March 2014 in the *Daily Mail* and at UCL. Two women scientists, the UCL lecturer in cosmology Hiranya Peiris and the physicist, mechanical engineer and BBC presenter Maggie Aderin-Pocock explained the latest theories of the origin of our universe and gravitation on the television programme *Newsnight*. For some people this was a problem. The *Daily Mail* published an article, which claimed that the two women were invited, just because the *Newsnight* editor was 'keen on diversity'. Our vice provost for Research, David Price defended in an open letter to the *Daily Mail* the academic qualifications of the two women scientists: he criticised the Daily Mail for 'drawing attention

to the gender and race of scientific experts, suggesting that non-white, non-male scientists are somehow incapable of speaking on the basis of their qualifications and expertise'.¹

In the short communication on UCL staff news, three terms were used to indicate the characteristics which gave the possibility for racial discrimination: Price used 'race' and 'birthplace', Hiranya Peiris and Maggie Aderin-Pocock used 'skin colour'. The two women didn't use the term 'race', which I find significant. Can we use the term 'race' when we want to talk about racial discrimination and its long painful history? Do we, by the use of the term in the context of anti-discrimination activities, stabilise the belief that there are 'races' out there, that humans can be grouped into this biological category?

The online Oxford dictionary counts 'race' under the 'Top 1000 frequently used words', meaning (besides the 'race' as competition between runners etc.) 'Each of the major divisions of humankind, having distinct physical characteristics'. Does that mean that there really are 'races' out there, that 'races' are natural facts like gravitation?

Who identifies the distinct physical characteristics and how?

Is it everyday perception of differences in skin colour, type of hair, the shape of eyes and noses? Is it everyday perception linking those physical features to social and economic difference, to different habits and ways of life, linking them to histories of prejudice, suffering, domination, to centuries old engrained social and symbolic ways of creating hierarchies between humans by declaring them different by nature?

Or - do the sciences like anthropology, zoology, genetics, evolutionary theory etc. tell us the distinct physical characteristics allowing the categorisation into 'races'? We know from history that there is no objective scientific knowledge with regards to 'race'. It is always a matter of decision, which traits are chosen to identify different groups, and, usually, no clear

¹ 'Daily Mail Accused of Insulting Top Female Scientists', The Guardian. 21 March, 2014; 'Daily Mail Slammed For "Profoundly Insulting" Column On Female Scientists Maggie Aderin-Pocock And Hiranya Peiris', Huffington Post UK, 21 March, 2014.

distinctions can be found between those groups.² Historians of science stress the historical changes in the scientific meanings of 'race'.³ They investigate how racial difference was identified and to what purpose, how it was contested, and changed – and how the sciences contributed to the creation and stabilisation of injustice, how they legitimised unequal social order, even leading to war, extermination politics and genocide, as in the case of Nazi Germany 1933-1945.⁴

There were also phases of critique, like the ones triggered by Nazi politics, when anthropologists and geneticists challenged 'Race' as a scientifically legitimate category; like Julian Huxley, Franz Boas, Ruth Benedict, and Claude Levi-Strauss, to name some prominent ones.⁵

Things have changed in the meantime. With the help of recent technologies of identifying genes, 'race' is back on the scientific and medical agenda.⁶ (See Sahra Gibbon's contribution at the JFIGS Friday Forum.)

2 Cf. the many different ways of grouping people using some arbitrarily chosen physical features: C. Kidd, *The Forging of Races. Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600-2000*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, Chapter 1; R. Hubbard, 'Race and Genes', *Race and Genomics*, 7 June 2006; A. Morning, 'On Distinction', *Race and Genomics*, 7 June 2006; Katya Gibel Azoulay, 'Reflections on race and the biologization of difference', in S. L. Gilman, ed., *Race in Contemporary Medicine*, New York: Routledge 2008, 50-76.

3 Cf. the classic books: N. Stepan, *The Idea of Race in Science: Great Britain, 1800-1960*, London: Macmillan, 1982; H. F. Augstein, ed., *Race: The Origins of an idea, 1760-1850*, Bristol, Thoemmes Press, 1996; F. Dikötter ed., *The Construction of Racial Identities in China and Japan: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, London, Hurst 1997; or the recent textbook: J. P. Jackson and N. M. Weidman, *Race, Racism, and Science: Social Impact and Interaction*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press 2006.

4 S. Friedman, *A History of the Holocaust*, London, Vallentine Mitchell, 2004; H. Friedlander, *The Origins of Nazi Genocide: From Euthanasia to the Final Solution*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press 1995; G. Mosse, *Toward the Final Solution: A History of European Racism*, New York, H. Fertig, 1997.

5 J. Huxley and A. C. Haddon, *We Europeans: A Survey of 'Racial' Problems*. With a Chapter on Europe Overseas by A.M. Carr-Saunders, London, Jonathan Cape, 1935; R. Benedict, *Race and Racism*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983; C. Lévi-Strauss, 'Race and History', *UNESCO, Race and Science, The Race Question in Modern Science*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1951, 219-259; E. Barkan, *The Retreat of Scientific Racism: Changing Concepts of Race in Britain and the United States Between the World Wars*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992.

6 S. Gilman, ed., *Race in Contemporary Medicine*, New York, Routledge, 2008; B. Koenig, S. Lee, and S. Richardson, eds., *Revisiting Race in a Genomic Age*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press 2008.

When I was appointed at UCL, some years ago, I was asked to fill in a form declaring my racial identity. Coming from Germany, and having worked on the history of genetics and racism in 20th century Germany,⁷ I found it rather strange to put myself somewhere into a racial category like White with the subgroups: British, Irish, or other. Biologically, these categories didn't make sense at all. Well, I did understand that this form was part of an effort to check if UCL appointments were systematically biased against certain people coming from the wide range of the old British Empire and other areas, sometimes called the 'rest of the world'. But why 'race'? Does the alertness against racism imply that there are 'races'? My first reaction facing the form was: 'Heavens! Where do they think I can look up my racial identity?'

If the question regarding my 'race' had been asked some decades back,

I would have had to look it up in a highly popular book, sold in the hundreds of thousands in the 1920s: *The Races of Europe*, by Hans Friedrich Karl Günther, the most prominent populariser of racial thought in pre-Nazi Germany and ardent racist. This historical example of a physiognomy-based racial categorisation, which looks rather absurd in today's eyes, should provoke you to imagine that today's everyday categories might become absurd as well. It should also underline that it is important to consider the historical context in which racial categorisation takes place. Günther's and Nazi racism is situated in a historical context where slavery and racial segregation were not dominant features of their society. Racial categorisation was used during the Weimar republic as a means to create and justify new hierarchisations within German and European people, based on descent and inheritance. It was part of a eugenic project with superiority claims for certain – biologically defined – people and the exclusion of others, who were equal citizens by law, most prominently Jews.

7 H. Satzinger, 'Racial Purity, Stable Genes, and Sex Difference. Gender in the Making of Genetic Concepts by Richard Goldschmidt and Fritz Lenz, 1916- 1936', in, S. Heim, C. Sasche, and M. Walker, eds., *The Kaiser-Wilhelm-Society for the Advancement of Science under National Socialism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2009, 145-170; idem, 'Weimarer Mischung: Drei Photomontagen von Hannah Höch und die biowissenschaftlichen Debatten um Geschlechter, Rassen und Gene', in *Feministische Studien*, special issue *Naturwissenschaften*, 2006, 24: 61-80; 'Equating Disease and Race. Political and Scientific Dimensions of a Biomedical Research Programme by Cécile and Oskar Vogt between Tbilisi and Berlin, 1919 and 1939', *UCL Centre for the History of Medicine*, accessed 11 Dec 2014.

A new order, and its creation using war and extermination policies, had to be justified, and as it happened in the 20th century, sciences played an important role in that justification.⁸ This historical configuration, creating races in a situation, where everyone had (at least on paper) the same civil rights, differs from the situation in countries with a long history of slavery and segregation, where skin colour and geographic origin were initially key differentiating features and the scientific category of 'race' was not necessary to legitimise the enslavement and death of millions of people from Africa. Here the science came in later, during the conflicting debates over whether slavery was to be discontinued and over who was supposed to be included as citizens in those European civil societies of the 19th century, which pursued their imperial and colonial project of global domination .

Günther published his books on the 'races' of the Germans and of the Jews, to educate people to see 'races' in their neighbours, their teachers, their artists, actors, authors etc.. Günther taught people to see particular hereditary types, which they did not necessarily do previously. I am afraid these books are not a thing of the past, even if science is discussing 'race' in a very different way today. The old Nazi racist publications are online on the internet, with annotations praising them as telling the truth about European history and continuing to claim superiority of certain people.

Günther developed a couple of racial categories for central Europeans: the Nordic, which he saw as the leading 'race', including some Scots, the 'Ostisch' (Easterners) with people from France, like the author Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850), people from the Black Forest in southern Germany, from Tyrol in Austria and from Berlin. Don't ask for geographic consistency, as Günther also thought of migration to get the different physiognomies of people into his categories. He also identified the Dinarish race– including the notable composers Carl Maria von Weber (1786-1826), Franz Liszt (1811-1886) and Anton Bruckner (1824-1896). Their rather big noses made them similar to the Jews, though, with the philosopher Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786), the grandfather of the composers Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy (1809-1847) and Fanni Hensel (1805-1847), whose music was subsequently banned in Nazi Germany.

⁸ It is a long, complicated and contested history how this Nazi racism and its 'racial hygiene' is connected to older ideas of eugenics and European superiority claims, as introduced by Francis Galton in the late 19th century.

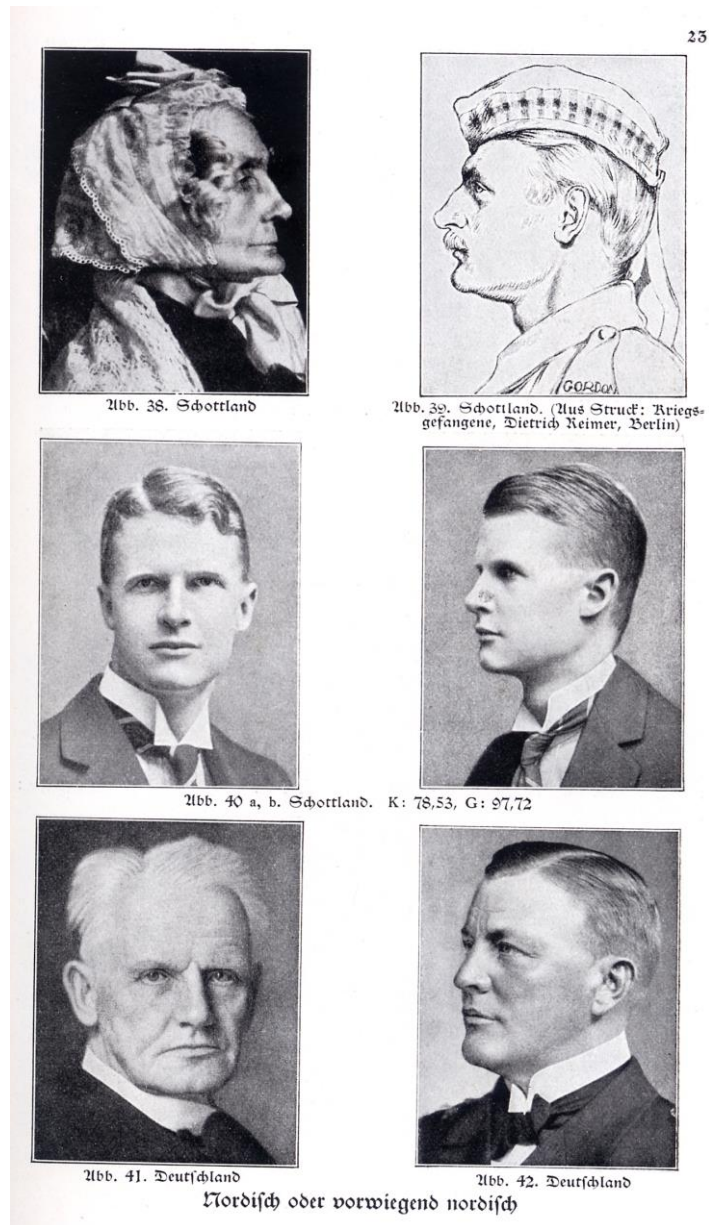


Figure 1: The 'nordic'



Figure 2: The 'ostisch'

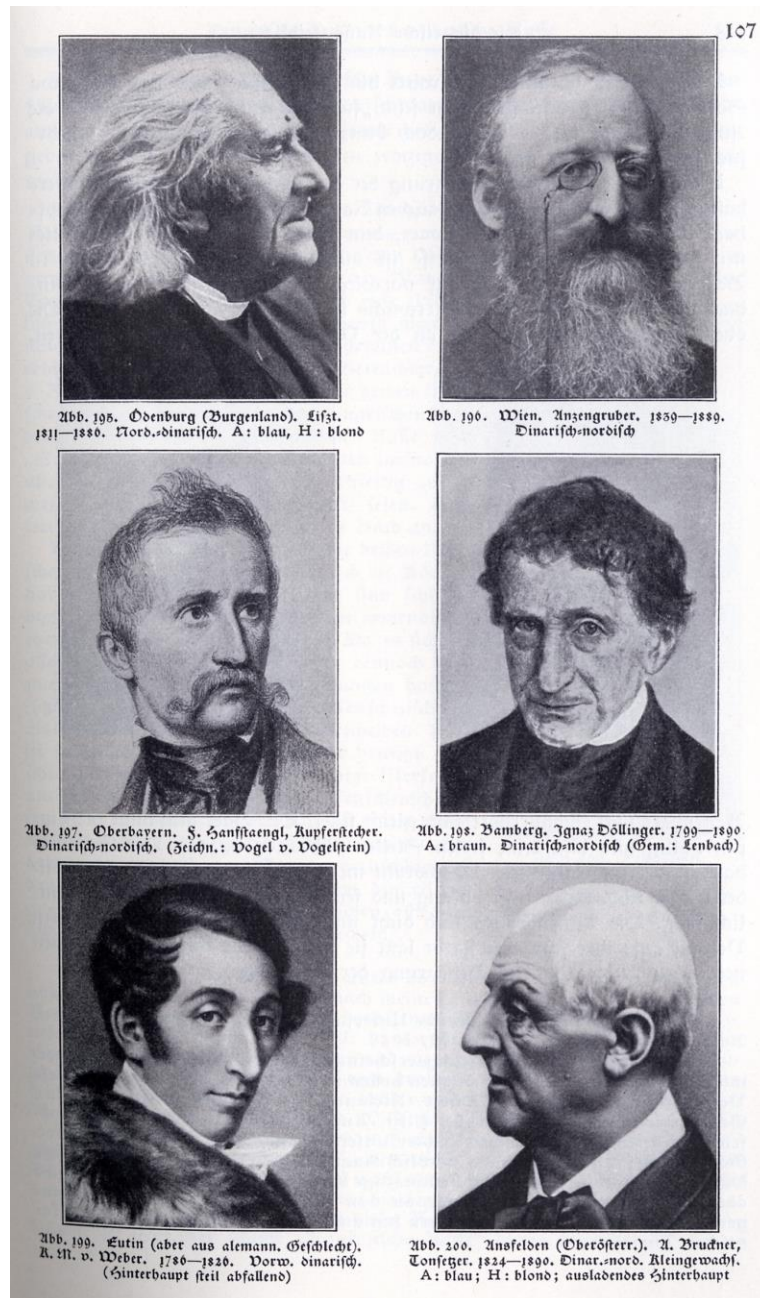


Figure 3: The 'Dinarish'

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Abb. 167. Jude aus Deutschland
Moses Mendelssohn, Philosoph



Abb. 168. Jude aus Österreich



Abb. 169. Jude aus Deutschland



Abb. 170. Jude aus Frankreich. Saint-
Saëns. Tonsetzer



Figure 4: the 'Jews'

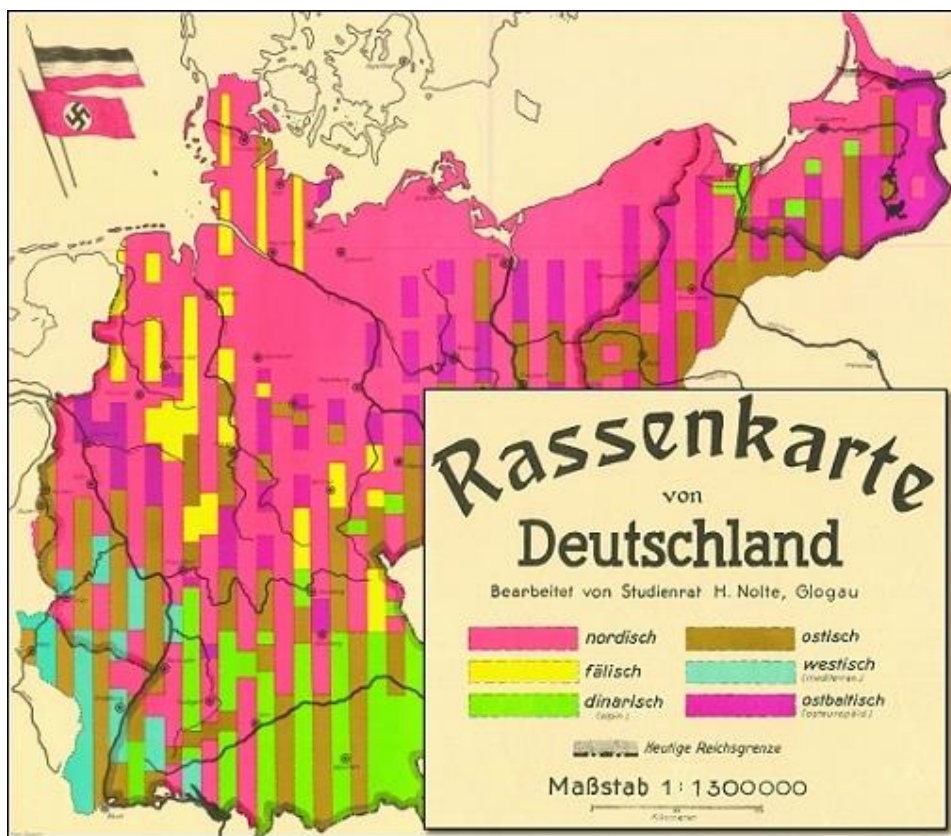


Figure 5: Map showing distribution of German 'races'

The distribution of these groups was shown in maps like this one (Figure 5), published in 1934, the second year of Nazi rule.⁹ It shows the distribution of the Güntherian German 'races'. The Jewish people are already missing on this map – the map precedes the politics of extermination by eight years.

Faced with the racist and antisemitic developments in Germany after 1933, the British zoologist Julian Huxley and the ethnologist Haddon, published their book *We Europeans: A Survey of Racial Problems*. They challenged the approach to identify racial types which could be spotted easily by everyone on the street, as well as the hierarchalisation, which they saw as pseudoscientific. They questioned the idea that 'race' was a useful category and developed a new, population-genetics-based concept of the genetic difference of certain populations. This concept became the basis of UNESCO's post-1945 campaign against racism.¹⁰

The key points of the post-1945 concept of population genetics were:

There are no 'races', as racial typology claimed, there are only different populations, who are geographically identified, or characterised by common family ties, and a difference in the prevalence of certain genes. Basically, all people have the same genes, they are only distributed differently in different groups. Those population genetics defined groups were, e.g., immigrant religious groups in the US, like the Mormons, Amish, Ashkenazi, who practice endogamy.

Nazi racism drew heavily on a line of thought already developed in the 19th century according to which nature, the inborn qualities of humans, created culture, racial identity

⁹ This map is documented on a website of the German Research Foundation, investigating their predecessor's involvement in Nazi racism: 'DFG - Ausstellung: Wissenschaft, Planung, Vertreibung. Der Generalplan Ost Der Nationalsozialisten', accessed 11 December, 2014.

¹⁰ J. Huxley and A. C. Haddon, *We Europeans: A Survey of 'Racial' Problems*, With a Chapter on Europe Overseas by A. M. Carr-Saunders, London, Jonathan Cape, 1935; UNESCO, ed., *Race and Science: The Race Question in Modern Science*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1951.

defined the social standing of people and determined history.¹¹ The post-1945 population genetics critique of racism postulated that human nature was the product of social practices. Different human populations with their specific gene pools were now a fluid product of human history, of migration and marriage practices – and of the effects of their environment.

The post-1945 reformulation of biological 'race' into a historically made population is my starting point for further research into some geneticists' pursuit of an anti-racist agenda. My questions are: How did they interweave history and biology, how did they define racism, and what were the problems of racism they couldn't solve? What did they gain from the rejection of 'race' as a scientifically useful category? One special point to consider here is the issue of marriage bans. Since such bans draw a line between different groups of people, they are central in all racist policies. Take, for example, the marriage bans in the tradition of slavery in the US, before the civil rights movement, in the apartheid state of South Africa, or in the anti-Semitic Nuremberg Laws of 1935 in Nazi Germany.

My questions and the way I am analysing the scientific creation of racial difference is of course strongly influenced by my own situatedness in the world's racial orders. Born as a child to parents which were not racially prosecuted in Nazi Germany, my motivation to study 'race' is based on this particular legacy and the 'never again' agenda. I want to understand the use of the sciences in the creation of racial differences and discrimination in history and how to prevent a possible new racialisation of people. The case of Günther's work can teach us, how powerful and detrimental the creation of racial differences can be.

But what to do with the term 'race' now? It is in use; it seems obvious; racial difference is a social reality, and too often deadly. There is also a current strong scientific agenda using genetic differences to recreate racial difference. I think we have to be very cautious and observe carefully what is happening here. Others have pointed out that racial prejudice is

¹¹ There was also the Neo-Lamarckian concept, which was used by the political Left on the European continent. It claimed that the natural environment and living conditions formed the inheritable properties of humans. This theory was discredited by the end of the 1920s, but it reappeared, in the USSR, in a modified form, under the name of Lysenkoism. The British Left, though, did not follow Neo-Lamarckian thought. For them, it was important that the poor conditions in which the proletariat was living did not change its genes in any degenerative way.

again and again influencing, in a deep, subtle and unconscious way, the understanding of genetic differences, lumping them all together in very plausible sounding 'racial' differences.

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We need a multiple strategy, depending on the context in which 'race' plays a role. We need the term 'race' for our well-intended and necessary anti-discriminatory practices. We need it to identify racial discrimination, as we need the categories female and male and others to identify sexist discrimination. But we don't have a term for 'race' analogous to 'sex-gender' with 'gender' to indicate its social construction, and 'sex' left to indicate the biological (which is nevertheless also configured by the social). 'Race' is the term we use for both, the social and the biological, and this melange contributes to its stability.

One step would be – in the context of the sciences – to develop a new scientific and everyday language for embodied differences, or, as Anne Fausto-Sterling called it, for embodiment as a dynamic system of biocultural formation.¹³ We can also borrow from Pierre Bourdieu and his concept of habitus to account for this mysterious blend of nature and culture in humans - without all the baggage and implications the category 'race' entails.

I think we also need to develop *a sort of* 'colour blindness'. Is it conceivable that today's everyday classification into people of different 'races' can be regarded as absurd, like the Güntherian 'races' of Europe of the 1920s and 30s? Can we learn not to see those differences in skin colour, hair, eyes and noses, which seem to indicate so easily that these differences are significant, that they make a difference?¹⁴ Let me give an example to show what I mean with 'colour blindness'.¹⁵ In a group of children with all sorts of skin colour one child was asked to give his toy to a girl, which, usually, would be called black. As the name of

¹² See note 6.

¹³ A. Fausto-Sterling, 'The Bare Bones of Race', *Social Studies of Science*, 2008, 38: 657-694.

¹⁴ A different way to popularize the con-fusion of racial difference, see 'Morphing Faces', in *Michael Jackson: Black or White*, 1991, accessed 11 December 2014.

¹⁵ This is different from the 'colour blindness' Elizabeth Anderson criticizes as blindness for systematic racial discrimination in E. Anderson, *The Imperative of Integration*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2010.

the child was not known, there were several options how to identify the girl: skin color, hair texture – the full repertoire of racial typology was available. It would have been easy to ask the child to give the toy to the black girl. But the girl also was the only child wearing blue trousers, and this feature was now used to identify the girl. The boy was asked to disregard the skin color and not to use racial criteria.

There is no yes-or-no-answer to the question whether we should get rid of the category 'race'. It depends on its meaning, on who needs it for what purpose. Similarly, there is no yes-or-no-answer in the case of sexist discrimination. When some people asked for the abandonment of the category male or female in passports, I thought, well, this is a good idea – but, as gender identity is always created and recreated in social interaction – will we then lose an important tool to keep the problem of discrimination and hierarchisation on the critical political and scientific agenda? I also see the possibility of a transformative appropriation of racial stereotypes, analogously to the transformative queering of genders to subvert the derogative classifications made by the dominant culture.

In any case, I think we should talk about our different histories without deducing them from the shape of our noses, the colour of our skin, our hair and eyes and to focus our attention on the function of racial difference as an allocator of a social position, of power, authority, responsibility, or subordination etc. – to overcome it.