Introduction

Situating race and the question of reality

> . . . and was it not truly interesting the way man uses words and how he makes thoughts of them! (Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus*, 1999: 112)

This book is not about race; it is about the belief in the existence of something called race. This distinction – between "race" and "belief in race" – forms the cornerstone of this book, and from it spring both our questions and our analyses. As a point of departure and basic hypothesis of our work, we argue that race exists only because people believe it exists. And while this distinction might seem pointless, we will show that, on the contrary, the confusion between the object and the belief in the object lies at the very heart of the difficulties encountered in the scholarly attempts to conceptualize race in the past century, and consequently in their failure to account for its persistence. The modalities of this double failure vary; however, we will try to read its deep consequences as one and the same: a resurgence, often hidden and sometimes unconscious, of the very racial essentialism that social science has sought to overcome. By keeping this distinction between race and the belief in race as the guiding line of our work, we will conduct a double project: a sociology of knowledge and a sociology of meaning. These projects lead us to pose two critical questions that we use to guide our own thinking about race: what are the conditions of possibility for our knowledge of the social world? And what are the conditions of possibility for social meaning? The former question pertains to the scholarly apprehension of race, while the second articulates the ways in which race becomes meaningful in society.

But before we further elaborate on this double project, we have to inquire more deeply into the modalities and consequences of the distinction that grounds our work. In a small book devoted to one of the most studied phenomena in social anthropology, totemism, Lévi-Strauss raised a problem that could also be applied to another well-studied phenomenon, race. He asserts,

To accept as a theme for discussion a category that one believes to be false always entails the risk, simply by the attention that is paid to it, of entertaining some illusions about its reality ... The phantom which is imprudently summoned up, in the hope of exorcising it for good, vanishes only to reappear, and closer than one imagines to the place where it was at first. (Lévi-Strauss 1963 [1962]: 15)

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, indeed, one of the major projects in the social sciences has been to refute the racial science of the nineteenth century. Quite paradoxically, this project has led, in particular since the 1960s, to a proliferation of scholarly discourses on race, whether in the form of books, articles, conferences, or courses. The paradox lies in the fact that this proliferation of discourses on race accompanies the general scholarly consensus that race is a fundamentally false category; and it raises the question, already posed by Lévi-Strauss, of the role such a proliferation might play in maintaining, or even creating, the illusion of the reality of race.[1]

That is not all. In their effort to both free themselves from racial science and show its negative consequences, scholars have unwittingly let the phantom of essentialism reappear. Despite the genuine intention of these scholars to either de-essentialize the concept of race or get rid of it altogether, we pose the hypothesis that essentialism has persisted, if only by taking a different form. In fact, this displacement has been made on the level of *reality*. No longer conceived as an innate reality or natural essence, race has become understood as a social construction. In other words, against the nineteenth-century belief that race was a *natural reality* was opposed the assertion that race is a *social reality*. This distinction is not problematic per se; but, in the form it has taken and in the way it has been conducted, it raises heavily consequential difficulties, which range from conceptual problems to the inability to renounce the category in the social world. We will argue that the two pivotal reasons for the scholarly failure to de-essentialize race are the confusion made between race and the belief in race on the one hand, and an almost pathological relationship between thought about race and the natural world on the other hand. The persistence, and even exponential increase, of academic discourses on race – although they disqualify it as a natural reality in their content – constitute race as an essential and incontestable social reality, by their simple overwhelming presence. In other words, if so many scholars study and write about race, and if so

[1] A question that, for instance, has been raised concerning the 2000 US census as well: how much does the use of racial categories in the census actually perpetuate these same racial categories? See, for example, Nobles (2000).

many university courses take it as their main focus, then how would it not exist? As Lévi-Strauss suggests, the simple fact that scholars continue to use the category, even while believing it to be false, might actually act to legitimate it as an empirical phenomenon in the social world – a strong paradox, since their goal is to bring about the demise of racial essentialism.

We believe that the issue of reality is crucial. Without confronting the paradoxical relationship of the simultaneous reality and unreality of race, contemporary discourses on race risk producing a new essentialism, which we will argue is a 'displaced phantom' that reappears at a different level: once living on the ground of nature, essentialism now haunts the realm of the social. In other words, discourses *on* race have unwittingly become discourses *of* race.

So far, we have ascribed race to a spatial binary of nature or society; and we have implied that race was situated either on the side of nature – as in nineteenth-century racial science, which took race as an innate quality of human beings – or on the side of the social – as in, for instance, social constructionism, which holds that race has no existence per se, and is an ideational construct. Both nature and society can be considered a reality. The proponents of a social conception of race do not claim that race is unreal, but rather that race is not natural. In other words, the social world is taken as a reality, different than the reality of the natural world but, nonetheless, real.

Racial science treats the social world as a reflection of the natural world. While there are consequences of race in society – such as natural hierarchies existing between different "races" – racial science understands them as the product of biology. This view clearly denies the *sui generis* quality of society; it also emphasizes a strictly biological quality of race. On the other hand, in the second half of the twentieth century, most of the social science research on race has situated race exclusively within the social world, and erected a clear distinction between nature and society (see Wade 2002: 112). Therefore, while in the case of racial science race was unproblematically real (it is a natural fact, with possible social consequences), in the case of social science a problematic paradox arose: on one hand, it denies the natural reality of race and, on the other, it has to assert the social reality of race. As long as this paradox is held in place, racial essentialism is unavoidable: race is fixed on the social body and on the bodies of individuals who comprise racial groups.

The sociological object of this book is precisely this paradoxical insistence that race is not real and that race *is* real in the social sense. We approach this paradox from a sociological point of view that recognizes that race is neither real in nature nor in society, but that it does exist as

the (fantasized) object of a belief. However, the social sciences have made race real through the binary opposition of nature and society that is employed to analyze the reality of race. This view, which invokes the paradox with greater insistency, makes race real only in the form of this paradox. Our goal is to make sense of this paradox in the social scientific study of race and to break with the structure of such paradoxical thinking about race.

It would be too simple to stop here. While social scientists have come to focus on the social reality of race and to simultaneously deny its natural or biological reality, they also seem unable to formulate a definition of race, even when it is construed as a discourse, which would not imply phenotypical diversity. Peter Wade is right to point out this constant reference to phenotype (2002: 4–6). So we have here a second paradox: race becomes an exclusively social fact that nonetheless remains linked to nature. It is at this very level that Wade's agenda is situated: his criticism of most social theories of race concerns this vague but continuous presence of the reference to phenotype in the very midst of the denial of any biological reality of race. We agree with Wade: not only are racial classifications, often made on the basis of phenotype, a social construction, but our very perception of the phenotype is a social construction as well. In other words, the existence of a racial system of representation, through which meaning is assigned to physical differences, has an influence not only on how we classify and interpret, but also on the very way we perceive others.[2]

However, we believe that Wade does not go far enough. There is something more to say, which pertains to the way in which the scholars he criticizes – and maybe Wade himself – are confounding the perception of the object and the object itself. We assert that race is not, *in the first instance*, based on phenotype, but rather it is based on social representations that are attached to physical differences. Our position is that phenotype is not the primary characteristic of social constructions of race. Distinctions in phenotype and the recognition of phenotype itself form a second-order mental/discursive operation that occurs on the side of the social, but it is an operation that takes place *on something*, on physical bodies whose diversity is not predicated on the perception of phenotype. The first-order mental/discursive operation, therefore, entails the recognition of physical diversity, while the

[2] In contrast to Wade, Lawrence Hirschfeld (1986: xii) argues that human beings are "susceptible" to race because it is rooted in human cognitive endowment: "arguing that we have an inborn susceptibility to race does not mean that race (or racism) is innate. Rather, like smallpox or tuberculosis, race emerges out of the interaction of prepared inborn potentialities and a particular environment."

second-order operation entails a recognition of phenotypical differences as essential characteristics of this underlying physical diversity. This is an absolutely crucial point, because only the distinction between the object and the perception of the object, that is to say between physical differences and the perception of these differences, can allow for a non-paradoxical conceptualization of race. We need to acknowledge the existence of physical differences that are independent of the collective representation of race. Race is a social reality that *coincides* with a natural reality – physical difference. In other words, race is not produced by nature. However, there cannot be an efficient system of representation without a referent. What is repressed by the insistent social constructionist vision of race, the reality of physical differences among human beings, returns in the form of the paradox that perceptions of phenotype and the system(s) of collective representation of race seem to refer only to themselves and not to any reality that stands apart from them. In our view, the acknowledgement of the independent reality of physical difference does not lead back to scientific racism but, on the contrary, liberates social construction from this fatal paradox; however, it does indicate the limits of social construction: ideas are limited by bodies. In other words, there is a reality of physical difference, but this reality is not equivalent to race in either the biological or social sense. Social and biological constructions of race coincide with, but are not causally dependent upon, these physical differences.[3] Once liberated from the obsessive need to repress "nature," the study of race can focus on a fundamental question: why do people remain ascribed in a system of racial representations that have no reality apart from the social constructions? To foreshadow the second part of the book, we will show that race is pure meaning, that physical differences become racially meaningful through processes of belief, memory, and desire.

Our discussion of reality, illusion, and belief might leave the impression that we are writing in the spirit of Freud's classic critique of religion (1927). While Freud hoped that religious illusions might give way to scientific reason just as each individual is compelled to give up infantile wishes in the course of acquiring psychological maturity, he recognized the practical difficulties involved for the believer and for the mature individual. We proceed from a slightly different premise. Unlike

[3] The absence of a causal link but presence of a coincidental tie will prove to be absolutely crucial in order to explain the persistence of race in the social world; we will return to this point later. Our conceptual frame is constituted by the hypotheses developed by Marcel Mauss in his essay *Seasonal Variations of the Eskimo* (1979 [1906]).

Freud, we find it unnecessary to take a clinical or prescriptive position on the fact that people believe in things that are not real. This belief itself is the positive fact that orients our inquiry. Moreover, because we hold that the only reality of race is the belief in race, unlike Freud's account of religion, we do not need to define race. "Race" is whatever people take to be race at a given time and in a particular place. Therefore we shall discuss what different fields of inquiry have taken race to be at different points in the twentieth century in order to illustrate the logic of social thought on race and to propose an alternative logic by which to account for the reality of race as the belief in race. However, our initial position requires further justification.

What justifies our assertion that the phenomenon that is called race is nothing else than the belief in race that varies in time and space? If, as we have just argued, collective representations of race have a referent that is not "race" as a sort of primordial essence but rather physical difference, is it not still possible to define race with respect to social experience? Do not instances of racial subjection in the form of slavery, segregation, lynching, and forms of symbolic violence constitute the reality of race? Are these instances not a matter of belief but rather a matter of experience? Again, Lévi-Strauss's small book on totemism is good to think with; he begins with the following observation:

> Totemism is like hysteria, in that once we are persuaded to doubt that it is possible arbitrarily to isolate certain phenomena and to group them together as diagnostic signs of an illness, or of an objective institution, the symptoms themselves vanish or appear refractory to any unifying interpretation. (Lévi-Strauss 1963: 1)[4]

The point of departure of Lévi-Strauss, indeed, is the conceptual fragmentation, multiplication, and atomization found in the definitional attempts of both hysteria by psychoanalysts and totemism by anthropologists. This fragmentation, which he demonstrates throughout the book, is linked to epistemological errors, in particular the bending of empirical reality for the sake of theory (Lévi-Strauss 1963: 77).[5] This level of criticism leads Lévi-Strauss, at the very beginning of his text, to

[4] "Il en est du totémisme comme de l'hystérie. Quand on s'est avisé de douter qu'on pût arbitrairement isoler certains phénomènes et les grouper entre eux, pour en faire les signes diagnostiques d'une maladie ou d'une institution objective, les symptômes même ont disparu, ou se sont montrés rebelles aux interprétations unifiantes" (Lévi-Strauss 1962: 5).

[5] "We shall never get to the bottom of the alleged problem of totemism by thinking up a solution having only a limited field of application and then manipulating recalcitrant cases until the facts give way, but by reaching directly a level so general that all observed cases may figure in it as particular modes." Lévi-Strauss speaks here mainly in reference to Firth and Fortes.

question the reality of totemism; he quotes Robert Lowie's general analytical premise: "We must first inquire whether . . . we are comparing cultural realities, or merely figments of our logical modes of classification" (Lévi-Strauss 1963: 10).[6] The language used in the original version of Lévi-Strauss's text, in which Lowie is quoted in French, is significant, in that it refers explicitly to psychoanalysis: instead of "figments," Lévi-Strauss uses "fantasies" (*fantasmes*), a term that has, in French, an explicit psychoanalytic nuance. He then boldly asserts that "totemism is an artificial unity, existing solely in the mind of the anthropologist, to which nothing specifically corresponds in reality" (Lévi-Strauss 1963: 10).[7] The foundation of his book is therefore a double pillar: first, he parallels the conceptualization and definition of totemism in the field of anthropology with that of hysteria in psychoanalysis; second, "so-called totemism" (1962: 26) is viewed as, or at least suspected to be, the product of the ethnologist's thought and nothing else.

Can an analogy be drawn from this characterization of totemism studies to the field of race studies? We will do so not in the form of analogy but as a schematic frame, using Lévi-Strauss as a point of departure to question the reality of race, and its articulation with both practice and the ideal. Could it be that race is in fact a concrete experience simply represented in diverse ways in popular and scholarly thought? Or could the social knowledge of race be the product of fantasy, of ideational processes – in a manner similar to totemism? Or finally, could we go as far as to ask whether it could be that ideational processes create the feeling of concrete experience?

These three questions form the backbone of our inquiry into race, in particular the third one, which bears witness to the unavoidable answer made to ideal or discursive theories of race: the reality of race has to do with the reality of its consequences *in practice*. One goal of this book is to address the relentless use of experience to prove the reality of race; scholars as different as Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and Howard Winant assume that the very existence of *racial experiences* implies a correspondent *racial object* that can be treated as a theoretical concept.

And hence, the concreteness of experience overshadows the ideal or ideational character of race, which becomes insignificant in the sense that it is not considered modifiable. We shall address the internal

[6] "Il faut savoir si nous comparons des réalités culturelles, ou seulement des fantasmes, issus de nos modes logiques de classification" (Lowie in Lévi-Strauss 1962: 18).

[7] "De même, le totémisme est une unité artificielle, qui existe seulement dans la pensée de l'ethnologue, et à quoi rien de spécifique ne correspond au dehors" (Lévi-Strauss 1962: 18).

contradictions found in theories of race in Chapter 5. It suffices for now to address the broader problem of articulation between the concrete and the ideal, the tangible and the intangible, which forms a very complex theoretical problem in the case of race.

It might indeed be suspected that beneath the level of fantasy lies the tissue of reality. After all, if one could trace the emergence of race back to an epoch, to an event of culture contact, the subsequent profusion of racial discourses and imagery would indeed be shown to have a basis in concrete experience. Although race might not have a biological reality, it surely has a historical reality that runs from the discovery of the New World for Europe, the conquest of African lands, the importation and incorporation of indigenous peoples within the modern world system. This reality led to the generation of different forms of knowledge of the Other (from the European perspective), some classificatory of observed differences, others justificatory of domination. However, did the diverse versions of this event of culture contact bring about a social experience that can be called race? Does the experience of culture contact directly call into being a racial experience? The claims for experience become questionable when one considers that everyday sociability bears the mark of culture contact; every encounter with an Other brings with it multiple forms of difference. Ordinarily, these conditions of sociability do not generate racial experiences. If this is the case, then an explanatory conundrum arises: how are representations of race related to experience if a direct causal link between culture contact, experience, and representations of experience does not exist?

Again, the question calls for an account of processes that generate the *fantasy* of race, *apparently* in connection to experience. Freud's study of hysteria provides the schematic frame that shows the links between fantasy and experience. In the first report on hysteria of Freud and Breuer (1895), the onset of hysterical symptoms was bound up with seduction theory: a real experienced sexual event in childhood was held to produce symptoms of hysteria in adults which were viewed, originally, as "direct derivations of repressed memories of sexual experiences in childhood" (Freud 1905b: 5); in other words, when confronted by the reality of the historical experience (i.e., the hysterical symptom), Freud assumed that there must be a necessary correspondence between this symptomatic experience and some real event in the past. A few years later, Freud not only revised his theory, he completely reversed it; the implications of this reversal are of tremendous importance for the study of race. Freud ceased to assume that a real experience (i.e., the hysterical symptom) must be produced by a real event. It is not a seduction event that produces, almost mechanically, the real experience

of the symptom; it is the ideation of that seduction event – whether the latter actually existed or not. Hence, Freud is arguing that one concrete experience does not have to be produced by another concrete experience; it can also be the product of ideational processes. As a result, the structural relationship of symptoms and reality is other than what it appears in the self-report of patients: "Hysterical symptoms are not attached to actual memories" of events, but rather "to phantasies erected on the basis of memories" (Freud 1900: 529–530). It is the form taken by the relationship between symptoms, fantasies, and "screen memories" (Freud 1899: 4) that is of interest with respect to understanding the relationship between representations of race and experience. In the case of hysteria, traumatic events of seduction in childhood are not held to be the necessary causal factor that generates symptoms of hysteria in adolescents and adults. In fact, these events might not have existed at all. In a similar way, we would argue that the existence of racial experiences does not presuppose that a racial reality exists. Consequently, the process by which historical and contemporary social interactions are perceived as racial experiences is what matters and what needs to be explained. To reformulate the psychoanalytic frame in terms of the race problematic: fantasies (i.e., social beliefs) about race, which coincide (and *only* coincide) with physical differences between individuals, are attached to experiences that are perceived as racial.[8] A concrete, lived experience that one feels as a racial experience can actually be produced by ideational processes and not only by concrete reality. In other words, it is not because we experience race that race is real; it is because we hold beliefs about race, and because these beliefs coincide with real physical differences, that we perceive racial experiences as being caused by race – and therefore as proving the existence of race as an object.

Our purpose here is not to provide a psychoanalytical account of race. However, there lies in Freud's account of the work of the unconscious the discovery of a mechanism that will prove very precious to us, and to the conceptualization of race: if there is an ideational process that links

[8] We are not positing an exact analogy between race as a system of collective representations and hysteria for the following reason: while it is tempting to describe systems of racial representation as symptoms of collective hysteria, it would appear risky to attribute to societies a form of psychic abnormality (related to the repression of libidinal energies) solely on the level of the psychical. On the other hand, the obverse course of explanation that seeks a causal relationship between social structures and social-psychological phenomena as the source of racial representations again places undue emphasis on actual experience. Here, we maintain that there is no direct experience of race. Rather, representations of racial experiences arise from fantasies (or beliefs) about social experiences that are made available to individuals and groups.

the symptom – the epitome of reality, felt not only in daily life but also in the very flesh of the individual – with an event that might not have existed in reality, then it means that *there can be no assumption that a concrete experience necessarily implies the existence of a foundation in reality*. We can locate this mechanism at the level of the social through a consideration of the sociology of Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss. We want to repeat here that we do not make a correspondence between the individual and the social, which operate in different, although related, spheres. But the structural process that links representations and reality at the social level is enlightened by the structural process that links the symptom and the event in hysteria. For example, building on Hubert's work on calendars (1905), Mauss asserts that while representations of time and calendars may *seem* to originate in climatic, seasonal changes, there is in fact no direct causal relationship between the latter and the former:

> Instead of being the necessary and determining cause of an entire system, true seasonal factors may merely mark the most opportune occasions in the year for these two phases to occur. (Mauss 1979: 79)

Mauss's hypothesis, hence, is of a *coincidence* found between seasonal change and the year calendar in the Eskimo society, that is, a coincidence between the physical world and a system of representation, as opposed to a causal relationship that would consider the calendar as being *produced* by seasonal change. The coincidence amounts to a sort of fortuitous convenience that legitimizes a system of representation that, nonetheless, would still be able to survive without it. While systems of representation are not produced by the natural world, they remain linked to it, and one could argue that they cannot last (and be efficient) without some sort of adequation with the natural world.

This hypothesis has several fundamental ramifications for the conceptualization of collective representations, to which we shall return in due time; but at this stage the most interesting of these ramifications concerns the reversal, similar to Freud's, that Mauss operates in his understanding of the relationship between "material reality" and "ideal representation." If we formalize the elements of this reversal, we find a highly complex system of understanding the natural and social spheres, and the relationship between them; and we also find a system that provides a new way to look at representations and thought that is useful for the study of race.

First, *the representation is independent from the natural object, and belongs to a sphere that lies outside of, and distinct from, the sphere of the natural world*. The representation of time, and the modalities of the time