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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Gerry van Houten: Reflections on the Canadian Left Today	5
Teun van Dijk: Theses on European Racism	17
Book Review: Fool For Christ	25
Paul Phillips: Why I Object to Gambling	29
Learned Societies Conference 1993: Preliminary Program	33
News about the Society for Socialist Studies	45
Financial & Membership Reports	49
Order form	53

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THESES ON THE RISE OF EUROPEAN RACISM, AND HOW TO COMBAT IT

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After the rabid racist attacks against refugees, immigrants and other minorities in Germany, international public opinion finally seems to be awakening to the fact that European racism has become a serious social and political problem. Whereas political debate and media coverage in Europe until recently rather focussed on real or alleged problems caused by immigration and the presence of minorities, critical voices that had earlier warned against the problem of xenophobia, discrimination and racism are finally beginning to be listened to. Unfortunately it is too late for the many victims of racist arson, attacks, pogroms and assassinations.

Examining public debate on racism in Western Europe, we find that this debate is often characterized by a lack of knowledge about the nature of racism, which in turn prevents instituting effective measures against it. The following theses on the present rise of racism in Europe summarize these shortcomings, and will be followed by some general suggestions for a successful struggle against racism. Although the horrors of "ethnic cleansing" in Bosnia and ethnic oppression elsewhere in Eastern Europe are obviously part of the larger problem of ethnic conflicts and majority-minority relations in Europe, we shall confine our theses to Western Europe.

Thesis 1. German Racism is European Racism

Because of the particularly aggressive nature of racist attacks in Germany by skinheads and other extremist young men against refugees and other minorities, world attention is particularly focussed on Germany. The Holocaust of the Jews and other Nazi crimes have sensitized international opinion to a specific "German Problem". The present events in Germany seem to vindicate such worries and justify the international critique of the German authorities. However, we should realize that current German racism is a more blatant expression of racism and anti-semitism in post-War Europe in general, an insight which obviously should not be abused to excuse or mitigate German racism.

Similarly, we should not forget either that, despite its specific social and historical nature, this postwar European racism continues a long tradition of eurocentrism and racism, which goes back to the role of Europeans in the conquest, enslavement, colonization and genocide of Africans, Asians and other indigenous peoples.

At present, most countries in Western Europe have right-wing, racist parties, whose electoral support reaches the double digits in some cities and regions. Especially in France, the Front National is a very influential political force, bigger than all

right-wing parties in Germany put together. Their xenophobic slogans are adopted even more broadly, also by the "respectable" parties. Daily and sometimes deadly attacks, arson and harassment against immigrants and minorities occur in many European countries. Whereas in Germany (registered) racial attacks add up to more than an awesome 2500 this year, Greater London alone had the same number of attacks against minorities last year.

Thesis 2. Racism is also Elite Racism

Another misconception about racism is that it is largely limited to the "lower" levels of the social hierarchy, viz., to skinheads, unemployed youths, the poor white inner cities, or the frustrated or threatened lower middle class. True, racist attacks have often been perpetrated by socially marginalized young white males, and "popular" xenophobia and resentment against immigration are widespread. However, further analysis of the causes, conditions and manifestations of ethnic prejudice and discrimination also points to a major role of the elites, such as leading politicians, journalists, scholars, police officers, judges and corporate managers.

Elites control the access to, and the content and style of public discourse in parliament, the media, textbooks, television programs and movies. Research shows that in many ways they thus "pre-formulate" many of the tenets of "popular" racism, though often in more moderate terms. Thus, the racist attacks in Germany are also conditioned by the continuous bickering of politicians in the Bundestag on controversial changes in the constitutional articles on refugees. Similarly, the frequent negative remarks on refugees and immigrants by conservative German politicians were dramatically amplified by tabloids like Bild. Racist parties are hardly grassroots movements. They are usually led and funded by well-educated or well-heeled citizens. Nor are the numerous neo-nazi and racist publications usually written by hooligans. On the contrary, they may be inspired by reactionary scholars who defend white supremacy, extremist nationalism or cultural apartheid.

Given the power of the elites, racism is largely "top-down". It is this more or less subtle elite racism that also has a more serious impact on the public at large, given the privileged access of the elites to the mass media. This in turn allows elites to deny their own racism by typically attributing it "downward" to ordinary people. Since they also control virtually all resources, elites are also responsible for ethnic inequality in many decisive life situations of minorities, such as those of immigration, residence, employment, education, health care, welfare, culture, and so on.

Thesis 3. Racism is also Everyday Racism

The common perception of racism identifies it with segregation, apartheid, overt discrimination, racial violence, blatant prejudices, white supremacism or extremist right-wing activism. This, indeed, seems to be the Real Racism for the dominant majority. However, by exclusively identifying racism with the extreme right, attention is deflected from racism elsewhere in society. That is, it is conveniently overlooked that European racism is a much more general system of inequality between majority and minorities. In this sense, the extreme right in many aspects plays the role of useful idiot.

The overall system of ethnic or racial inequality we call 'racism' can be sustained only when large parts of the majority actively or passively implement, support or tolerate it. Experiences by people from minority groups and scholarly research show that racism is exhibited in many daily acts of discrimination and prejudice, viz., in processes of marginalization, exclusion or problematization. The daily interaction between "whites" and "blacks" (or other minorities) in public places, businesses, factories, offices, police stations, court rooms, class rooms, news rooms and other locations, is riddled with the micro-inequities that characterize ethnic or racial subordination. Aggression, abuse, lack of respect, indifference, exclusion, underestimating, accusations and discrediting are some of the many daily manifestations of racism. Many of these forms of everyday racism are neither intentional nor even acknowledged by many white Europeans. For minorities the everyday nature and the accumulation of such incidents mean a serious infringement on their well-being and a violation of their civil rights.

Thesis 4. Racism is Usually Denied

One of the hallmarks of European racism is its denial. This is especially true among the elites, left or right, whose self-image as moral guardians of society is felt to be inconsistent with being seen as engaging in racist talk and action. Even the most right-wing extremists consistently insist on the fact (or rather the fiction) that they are not racist: They are "only" nationalists.

Everyday talk and institutional discourse about minorities routinely invokes the disclaimer "We have nothing against them, but...", where the "but" is always followed by derogatory remarks about "them". Similarly, all studies on the representation of minorities in the press, and especially in the conservative tabloids, show that newspapers selectively focus their "ethnic" coverage on threatening immigration, violence, crime, drugs or cultural deviance by minorities, immigrants or refugees. Research also shows that such news bias may induce or confirm ethnic prejudices in the readers. Yet, when confronted with such research results, the press typically denies that such coverage has anything to do with racism.

The same is true for politicians who will emphatically deny that they spread stereotypes or prejudices about minorities in order to enlarge their white constituencies, e.g., when trying to legitimate immigration restrictions. Similarly, scholars may prefer to study the "strange habits" or alleged deviance of minorities (typically so of Muslims), rather than the causes, forms and consequences of ethnic inequality, which they may fail to see as manifestations of racism in the first place. That is, not only elite forms of racism are reproduced from top to bottom, also the elite denials of racism are thus spread throughout society.

This widespread denial of racism shows two things. Firstly, as we have suggested above, it shows that many people hardly know what racism is exactly. Knowing that racism is wrong does not necessarily imply knowledge of racism. Secondly, the emotional force of such denials shows that powerful underlying norms are at stake: Decent modern citizens all know and agree that racism is wrong. Hence the important face-keeping move of denying, minimizing, or otherwise rejecting one's association with racism. This is also the reason why scholarly or other analyses of racism are seldom taken as credible conclusions of research, but rather as intolerable moral accusations. Typically, such "accusations" are often denounced and resisted more energetically than racism itself.

In sum, racism in the perception of most white Europeans is always elsewhere: abroad, in the past, among right-wing extremists, within the lower classes, among the less educated, among one's customers, next door. Hence, we need to learn to recognize both the blatant as well as the more subtle and indirect manifestations of ethnic inequality in everyday life. The opinions of minorities about the nature and consequences of racism should be listened to. If anything, their personal experiences and insight make them the real experts on racism. Finally, we should realize that those responsible for offences are not generally the most credible judges of their own actions.

What must be done?

Once it has been accepted that racism in multicultural Europe is a widespread and serious problem in everyday situations, and in all organizations and institutions, we are ready to look for solutions. Indeed, what are the strategies of change? What must be done?

Obviously, inadequate analyses of racism lead to ineffective measures. If politicians, judges, the media and scholars -- and not only in Germany -- think that "real racism" is only at the extreme right, among violent youths or in the streets, they should not be surprised that little will change. Hence, all measures to combat racism should be as wide-ranging, complex and comprehensive

as ethnic inequality itself. Given the special responsibility of the elites, as explained above, we focus on the necessary changes of the elites.

Politics

If politicians truly accept a multicultural society, and recognize equal rights and opportunities for all citizens -- not only in democratic theory but also in their daily discourses and practices -- then their decisions and laws will need to reflect such principles. International conventions for the reception of refugees must be respected, and clear and humane conditions for immigration should be formulated. We especially need energetic legislation against all forms of discrimination, incitement to racial hatred, xenophobia and racism. This means that any organization, group, party or institution that breaks such laws, or otherwise threatens multicultural democracy and ethnic peace, should be prohibited. Obviously, the courts have to change accordingly, and start to take racist crimes seriously, instead of treating discrimination or incitement to racial hatred as a minor offense.

Arguments against such energetic measures should be critically examined. For instance, if it is said -- as is often the case -- that prohibition of racist parties or organizations will "make them go underground", then this is often a rather transparent strategic move of those for whom such organizations are useful. If such an argument were true, we should also legalize the Mafia. Or are racist crimes different from "real" crimes? Prohibiting racist organizations essentially means discrediting or preventing the public actions and propaganda of their leaders.

The media

Protected behind the wall of freedom (read: power) of the press, and (rightfully) opposed to any form of censorship, journalists have often shown that they are the only professional group that is exempt from public criticism in the media. The result is that many journalists, also because of their liberal self-image, still resist changes in ethnic affairs coverage. Yet, as long as the media are reluctant to employ (many more) minority journalists, and as long as editors -- especially of the conservative press -- fail to self-critically examine their news, opinion articles and editorials for ethnic stereotypes, prejudices and the preferred use of white elite sources, and ignore the possible consequences of such biases among the public at large, they will continue to play a major role in the reproduction of racism.

News values, reporting practices, programming, advertising, films and other media should reflect the presence and the contributions of all groups of a multicultural society. Explicit codes of reporting, advertising or entertainment may have to be adopted, and breaches effectively sanctioned, as is the case for other

professions. This does not mean (self-)censorship, but decency and quality. Since in modern societies the media play a key role in informing and shaping public opinion, their active commitment to a racism-free society is also the key to the solution of the problem of European racism.

Business

Managers will eventually realize that, in the long run, racism is bad for business. Organizations are unable to function adequately in a multicultural society without an ethnically diverse workforce. Therefore, managers should acquire the skills to energetically combat all forms of bias in recruitment, hiring, promotion and customer service, and to counter ethnic harassment at all levels in the organization. It is necessary that organizations implement policies that guarantee that minorities are treated like all other employees. Research and experiences have shown that if the leadership is serious about combatting discrimination and prejudice, the other employees will also tend to act accordingly.

Other domains

Similar remarks may be made for the many other social domains in which change is imperative. Law enforcement should avoid seeing minorities -- and especially men of African descent -- as violent criminals, who can be harassed at will, nor should it treat refugees or undocumented immigrants as a threat to national security. Teachers may have an extra look at their textbooks and lessons and eliminate eurocentric stereotypes and prejudices about other peoples and minorities. Similarly, professors may be expected to design curricula that are interesting and relevant for all students in a multicultural society. And so on: for union leaders, writers, civil servants, doctors, lawyers and others whose actions have a crucial impact on other people. In sum, in all social domains, elites have a vast task to adapt their knowledge, attitudes and practices to the new demands of an increasingly diverse society, with equal rights and justice for all.

Giving the good example

We may conclude that if our main hypothesis is correct, viz., that much racism operates top-down, then also combatting racism is effective only if the elites take the lead. Hence, the first rule for all those who are prepared to seriously ask "What must be done?" is this: Begin the change in your own department or organization, and always begin at the top. No policy will be credible if it is not implemented by those who have the power to formulate it.

The second rule is this: If you do not change by your own decision, social events will ultimately make you change. The Civil Rights Movement and other forms of protest and resistance of minority groups have shown that ethnic oppression, marginalization and inequality will only be tolerated for a while by those who are its victims: eventually they will resist, and demand changes.

Focus on other problems

These suggestions do not imply that if racism is effectively combatted, there are no problems left in the multicultural societies of Europe. Nobody denies that large-scale immigration, and the integration and acceptance of many "different" people is difficult. At the same time, however, we should realize that it is mostly more difficult for "them" than for "us". Racism will neither make these problems go away, nor make them easier to solve. On the contrary, racism, ethnocentrism or ethnic intolerance aggravate virtually all social, cultural and political problems.

If we are able to eliminate ethnic prejudice, discrimination and racism, the problems of a multicultural Europe will be reduced to their real social and political proportions, viz., those of international refugee or labor migration, housing, employment, education, welfare or health care, among many others. We then will be able to focus on the true problems and conflicts of society, such as poverty, class and gender inequality, or the environment. These problems are formidable enough.

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