

## Anthropologists, Italians and “human races”

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### Summarizing the debate

In Italy, Anthropology developed as an academic discipline in the second half of the nineteenth century. Paolo Mantegazza (1831-1910) started his Anthropology courses at the University of Florence in 1869. A year later, in the same University, he obtained the first chair in Anthropology in Italy, which was followed by that assigned to Giuseppe Sergi by the University of Rome in 1884. At that time and for many decades to come, the term “race” was widely used in scientific publications and in the public interventions of Italian Anthropologists. This prepared the ground for the sad “racist turn” which, during the Fascist regime, culminated in the well-known “Manifesto della razza” of July 1938, a document signed by 10 scientists which prepared the promulgation, three months later, of the racial laws (Israel, 2007).

Historians of Italian anthropology from the Unification of Italy to the Second World War have highlighted the complexity of the discipline in its various fields and in relation to different theoretical approaches (e.g. Fedele & Baldi 1988; Alliegro 2011; Puccini, 1991, 2007). More often in physical anthropology, but not only, the term “race” became a pillar for taxonomic formulations and scientific dissertations.

Following the second world war, racial concepts and terminology have been progressively abandoned by Italian Anthropologists, both from a biological and cultural point of view. However, the

use of “human races” as categories which describe biological and/or cultural variation remains in the media and also persists in popular discourse. Alleged behavioural differences linked to human races are often brought into play by right wing political parties to support their fight against immigrants and refugees (see below), although the term race is not always explicitly used. No doubt, this same scenario can be seen in other European countries.

More specific insights come from the discussion concerning the persistence of the word “race” in the founding principles of our Constitution (article n. 3<sup>1</sup>). As described in a previous contribution to this Journal (Destro Bisol & Danubio, 2015), this debate was triggered by the appeal for the removal of the word race launched by the Anthropologists, Gianfranco Biondi and Olga Rickards, on October 14<sup>th</sup> 2014 (Biondi & Rickards, 2014). This marks a significant difference from what happened in France, where the former President of French Republic, Francois Hollande, took the initiative during his successful campaign in the presidential elections in 2012.

While accepting the intrinsic fallacy of the concept of human races, not all Italian anthropologists share the same position regarding the best way to fight racism. Essentially, there are three main standpoints. The proponent of the above-cited appeal

<sup>1</sup> “All citizens have equal social dignity and are equal before the law, without distinction of sex, race, language, religion, political opinion, personal and social conditions”

stated that the role of Anthropologists should be only to advocate the non-existence of human races, being aware that eradicating or, at least, weakening the prejudices in matters concerning human diversity cannot be achieved by simply erasing the term race from the Constitution. Furthermore, they sustain that Anthropologists cannot contribute to the fight against racism differently from any other citizen given that such behaviour is related to the emotional sphere and is not subject to any kind of experimental analysis. However, interdisciplinary approaches are welcome. Biological and cultural anthropologists should cooperate in the analysis of language and morals, along with geneticists, primatologists, ethologists, neuroscientists, philosophers and linguists.

An alternative view was sustained by Luigi Capasso, President of the Italian Anthropological Association from 2013 to 2016 (Capasso, 2017). More in particular, he was concerned with the usefulness of maintaining the distinction in human races as predictors of patients for medications, in line with some previous pharmacogenetic studies (e.g. Tang *et al.*, 2005).

Another position has been taken by the Italian Institute of Anthropology (see Destro Bisol & Danubio, 2015), which was endorsed by some members of the ANUAC (Associazione Nazionale Universitaria degli Antropologi Culturali) including two authors of this paper (S.A and C.P.). Three points are worth recalling here.

Firstly, simply removing the word race from the Constitution is of no real help, since we could miss an indispensable hook for laws concerned with racism. Rather, we should be able to introduce an alternative phrase that: (i) can express the concept of diversity without forgetting all the various aspects of its meaning (biological and cultural, above all); (ii) in no way evokes a hierarchy of values. To make it more effective, the amendment must be accompanied by an explicit statement that race has no meaning for the human species and that any discriminatory view based on such an invalid assumption must therefore be rejected<sup>2</sup>.

Secondly, overcoming the old, but still existing, dichotomy between “physical” and “cultural” anthropology, is an absolute necessity in every discussion about the “human races”. In fact, the term race is also used to stigmatize cultural differences, as if they were the product of different intellectual skills or moral predispositions. Achieving a synthesis between the biological and cultural dimensions of race is a preliminary step to effectively counter the dangerous links between new forms of intolerance and the resurgence of genetic determinism.

Thirdly and finally, we should be aware that our commitment must not end simply by signing a document. On the contrary, it must start from there. In our educational and training activities, we must seek to involve wider audiences and provide them with the best tools so they can look at human diversity with no preconceptions. It is important to raise awareness of the need for a change among all those who, for various reasons, are involved in scientific and cultural dissemination. To this purpose, members of the *Istituto Italiano di Antropologia* (ISItA) have promoted and sustained initiatives addressed to the general public aimed at presenting, explaining and interpreting human cultural and biological diversity. It is worth mentioning the international exhibitions “*Homo sapiens. The Great History of Human Diversity*” (Rome Nov. 2011-June 2012) and “*DNA. The great book of life from Mendel to genomics*” (Rome Feb.-June 2017), during which distinguished scholars gave a number of lectures open to the public. Furthermore, the ISItA has organized several meetings in collaboration with the *Istituto Italiano di Paleontologia Umana* (IsIpU) and the *Associazione Nazionale Universitaria degli Antropologi Culturali* (ANUAC). These initiatives were designed for high school students and teachers and were open to the public and science communicators (see ISItA annual meetings, Info on the web). From

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and cultural traditions, gender, language, religion, political opinion, personal and social conditions. The Republic does not recognize the existence of alleged human races and fights all forms of racism and xenophobia”

<sup>2</sup> “All citizens have equal social dignity and are equal before the law, regardless of their physical appearance

an empirical point of view, one of us (M.E.D.) participated in an ample study regarding the knowledge of evolution and human diversity carried out among the high school students in Rome (Rufo *et al.*, 2013; Capocasa *et al.*, 2015).

In an aim to reach a consensus view, the members of the Associazione Antropologica Italiana and of the *Istituto Italiano di Antropologia* participated in a meeting organized in the Department of the University of Florence (Palazzo nonfinito) on May 7<sup>th</sup>, 2016. After a long discussion and common elaboration, an appeal was finalized and signed by the Presidents of the two associations, Luigi Capasso and Bernardino Fantini, on behalf of their respective boards:

*“to the President of the Italian Republic, the Senate, the Chamber of deputies and of the council of Ministers:*

*In the light of the scientific achievements subsequent to the publication of the Italian Constitution, the concept of “race” has been proved to be inappropriate to describe the biological diversity within our species (Homo sapiens). Reiterating that the equality of individuals, regardless of their biological diversity, is a fundamental right to be guaranteed, above all in today world where the biodiversity of the Italian population is increasing, the Italian anthropologists belonging to A.A.I. and ISItA formally request that the term “race” be substituted in the Italian Constitution and in all Officials acts of the Republic. To this end, they hope that the institutional initiatives regarded to be the most appropriate will be undertaken in order to replace “race” with a term that correctly and scientifically expresses the biodiversity diversity amongst individuals and populations, and which, at the same time, consider the dignity and social equality due to all people, regardless of the anthropological features of each one.”*

Italian cultural anthropologists have also been involved in the debate on whether or not to remove the term “race” from the Constitution. Among those interested in the social practices and cultural expressions of human beings, there is a

general consensus on the lack of scientific validity of the term “race” which, accordingly, has been completely abandoned in social sciences. However, this does not mean that the issue is no longer worth discussing. Being scholars of social practices and representations, cultural anthropologists emphasize that the term “race” may be seen in two different ways. On the one hand, it feeds and legitimizes intolerance and discrimination. However, on the other hand, it allows social actors to use a pragmatically “useful but raciological” lexicon which can be utilized to highlight violations of rights and subalternities. More specifically, anthropologists who are closer to the perspective of “Postcolonial Studies” (Mellino, 2013) point out that the term “race” is instrumentally useful in denouncing the cultural classifications already in existence in society, which are characterized by racist considerations. Using the term “races” would not, therefore, be a way of describing and classifying human diversity through an erroneous scientific concept or a means to support racism but, on the contrary, it would be a way to fight racial discriminations in the world.

Moreover, jurists have been even more cautious about the opportunity to remove the term “race” from the Constitution. They emphasize the risk that, paradoxically, legal and social actions against racism might be weakened by removing the term.

In conclusion, from the humanistic point of view (i.e. among jurists and cultural anthropologists), while there is no discussion about the scientific value of the concept of race (thought to be useless and obsolete), attention is given to the social, political and legal implications of the use of the term “race” by individuals or groups involved in tensions in social relations.

### **Political and cultural points of tension, or “hot spots,” with regard to race and racism**

As discussed above, the notion of race has lost credibility in the scientific field. However, the racial issue is still alive and kicking in the Italian political

and public debate, fuelled by the pervasive perception of insecurity at many levels, even though the term race is not often used explicitly. The fear for personal safety and security tends to increase in spite of the statistics showing a decline in the number of crimes, highlighting a contradiction between public perception and statistical data. This is due to many factors, among which migratory flows is one of the most important. Italy has become a land of immigration only relatively recently, since the 1980s, and the number of foreign residents has progressively increased since 2008, following the widening of the borders of the European Union.

The arrival of thousands of immigrants in Italian ports, predominantly from Sub-Saharan Africa, Syria and Libya in the last four years, has accentuated the fear of migrants, often considered to be hostile, dangerous and “different”. These include especially Gypsies, Romanians, Albanians, and Arabs, who arrived in our country in different migratory waves. Increasingly frequent episodes of intolerance against “others” in everyday life are legitimized in different contexts: from the media to some political forces that are fuelling fear by evoking racist practices, solutions and interpretations of reality. Real problems of great complexity, from unemployment to the reduction of social protection, are put down to a single cause: uncontrolled and unregulated migration, of which the “honest” Italian citizen appears to be the innocent victim.

With this background in mind, we may understand why the deputy of the Lega Nord, Matteo Salvini, suggested a few years ago that specific carriages on the underground should be provided for Milan citizens, a proposal echoed by a political campaign of his party asking “for underground carriages only for non-EU citizens”. It is also worth mentioning the Vice-President of Senate Roberto Calderoli, who, in 2013, compared the Minister Cécile Kyenge, of Congolese origin, to an orangutan. From time to time, “diversity” is naturalized and racialized to separate some people from the others and deny citizenship rights, thus generating inequalities and discrimination.

Two levels can be identified in the political debate, which has become particularly intense in

the last few months. The first regards the ways in which the migration emergency, which tends to become structural, should be tackled concerning the assessment of the adequacy of the structures provided to receive the immigrants and how these people are welcomed, the strategies for the future, the capacity of Italy to welcome them, and the lack of solidarity of other European countries. The second is both political and cultural, and adapts more or less explicitly to hostility and racism towards immigrants present in a part of the public opinion. “Let’s help them at home”, is the password that tends to spread within the Democratic Party, the main party in the country’s government. It is a way to take advantage of and manipulate fears and legitimize “politically correct” exclusion policies and, ultimately, pave the way for the closure of borders. In this context, the proposal under discussion at the Chamber of Deputies, which wants to provide citizenship to persons born in Italy but with foreign parents, has little chance to be transposed into national law. However, this proposal is likely to be used as an object of exchange in a forthcoming electoral campaign in which the “racial issue” will be one of the main themes.

### Q&A to deepen the discussion

The debate on whether and how to eliminate/replace the term human races in the Constitution had an echo well beyond the anthropological community. We report here some of the most interesting observations and our responses in the form questions and answers.

*When rejecting the existence of races, do we not risk denying the existence of differences between human groups and thereby fail to acknowledge the value of the diversity within our species?*

No, the two things must be kept separate. Denying the existence of diversity within and among human groups would be wrong and counterproductive as well. Those who sustain racist arguments could easily say: “how can one give credibility to those who deny such an evident fact as the differences among humans?”. While

acknowledging human diversity, Anthropologists and Geneticists seek models that describe the genetic structure of our species better than races. Our ultimate goal is to define the evolutionary scenarios that have shaped the genetic structure of different human groups. By eliminating rigid and unrealistic schemas such as human races, we can better understand demographic events and adaptive processes which have made us so apparently diverse and yet so genetically similar.

*Are you aware of the danger that can come from stating that human dignity and individual rights depend on biological factors? If we attach a moral value to a scientific perspective, what if that perspective changes?*

We all subscribe to the idea that the recognition of full dignity and individual rights should be extended to every human being, regardless of what our biological knowledge about diversity tells us. This consideration must precede any discussion about human races. Having said that, the question brings with it a doubt: does it still make sense to continue the debate on races? Would it not be better to stop and avoid worse problems, as the question implies? We believe that the risks of such a position are far greater than those we might escape. We would end up by ignoring a very extensive and robust body of scientific data accumulated over more than 40 years (Lewontin, 1972), corroborated by the latest genomic data (Barbujani *et al.*, 2013) as a benevolent concession in the name of good feelings. What's more, public perception and the attitude of society towards diversity can change more easily and quickly than scientific paradigms, especially in a period of rapid demographic changes. By refusing now to discuss the issue of human races, we could be less prepared in the future to sustain scientific motivations behind the concept of universality of the human condition and fight against the attempts of racialism and discrimination of the "others". We would end up reducing our scope to academic discussions, dismissing that non-written, but vital, contract between Science and citizens for which all the positive impacts of new knowledge should be explored and implemented at social level. It is a bit like saying: "play but stay in your nursery".

*The association between human dignity and biological homogeneity could become a trap: only those who are sufficiently similar to myself, who are part of my family, my tribe, must be respected.*

Not at all. Respecting only those who are "enough equal" to me is precisely the central element of racist ideologies and religious fanaticisms. On the contrary, the natural development of critics to the concept of race is the replacement of a model that bases the definition of human categories on the opposite criteria of diversity and similarity with the one that reconciles the concepts of diversity and unity of all human beings. Of course, we need to go a long way if we want "unity in diversity" not to be perceived as mere utopia. The time we live in gives us the feeling of walking on a treadmill that goes in the opposite direction to our beliefs and expectations. Therefore, the time has arrived to intensify our efforts to understand, discuss and communicate the nature and the sense of human diversity.

*Using the expression "cultural traditions" in your proposal for constitutional change, do we not also support unacceptable social practices, such as combined marriages or infibulation?*

Constitutional principles assume their real meaning only when seen as a part of an articulated and interconnected structure of values, and not as single precepts. In such a system, the principle of equality is inseparably linked to those of secularism, pluralism and democracy. Hence, "cultural traditions" may be regarded as such only when they are in harmony with the respect for self-determination of the individual in a balance between rights and duties. If we want to move from the concept, a bit odious, of tolerance to the one of coexistence, we cannot do so without sharing principles and rules, no matter what country we come from and the religion we believe in.

*Is it feasible to intervene on the principles of the Constitution?*

There are different opinions here. Some people say that there is no possibility to change the principles. Because, in their opinion, "principles" are the



“sacred and inviolable” essence, the crucial point of a complex architecture that needs stable foundations. However, this is not explicitly laid down in the Constitution, but is merely assumed by a large number of Constitutionalists, seemingly encouraged by some Constitutional Court judgments. It is no surprise, then, that from a legal point of view, some have seen the possible change as little other than smoke in the eyes, a wicked act of irresponsible people. However, another view is possible, at least for those who are not prejudiced against any change. What we want to propose regarding art. 3 is to create an effective correspondence between formal dictate and its underlying principles, that of equality. Why lock the Constitution within an ivory tower, avoiding facing a proposal that wants to make its message stronger? Moreover, what is the real possibility of adapting the Constitution to any changes in knowledge, if not even a proposal that is based on well-established scientific evidence and which carries with it a civil and social value may be taken into account?

However, this reasoning can be taken one step further. Recalling the metaphor of the finger and moon, the issue of “human races” can be seen as the tip of the iceberg. It is far from unfounded that an overly conservative attitude could expose the “source of law” to great risks. Let us imagine what would happen when powerful instances of change come, such as a request for limitations of personal freedom for alleged security reasons, a possible event in our present world. Assuming that the principles cannot be altered could give an alibi to those who want to force the situation and reshape review procedures and the contents of the Constitution. So, why should we not begin to consider instances of change that do not alter the sense but bring words closer to their inspiring idea?

*Might we simplify rather than rewrite the Article 3 of the constitutional principles?*

Among the various comments concerning the proposal launched by the *Istituto Italiano di Antropologia*, one might seem, at a first glance, particularly effective: why not simply say: “All citizens have equal social dignity and are equal before the law, without any discrimination.” Apparently,

in this way, we seem to have reached the objective without any complications. Why did we not think of it before? Simple, because it does not work! Those who have a bit of familiarity with the Constitution know that any change in the principles may have substantial consequences on other parts of the system. Thus, by eliminating any possible reference to the term “race”, we would end up, for example, emptying the meaning of Article 1 of Law 205 (June 25, 1993), which deals with “Discrimination, hate or violence due to racial, ethnic, national or religious motives.”

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### Info on the web

<http://aai.unipr.it/cgi-bin/home.pl>

*Official website of the Associazione Antropologica Italiana.*

<http://www.anuac.it/>

*Official website of the Associazione Nazionale Universitaria degli Antropologi Culturali.*

<http://www.isita-org.com/isita/index.htm>

*Official website of the Istituto Italiano di Antropologia (in English).*

<https://sites.google.com/site/annualmeetingisita/>

*Programmes, summaries and videos of the Annual Meeting (2014-2016) of the Istituto Italiano di Antropologia.*

<http://www.isipu.org/>

*Official website of the Istituto Italiano di Paleontologia Umana*

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