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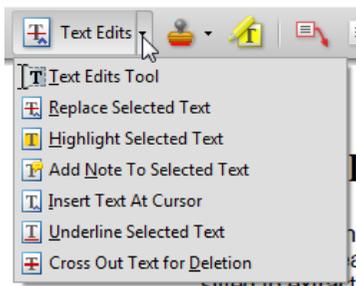
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Beyond race and colour lines and scales in the twenty-first century?

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5 As we move into the second decade of the twenty-first century, it is an appropriate time to look back and revisit how race, colour and the relationship between them were theorized and understood in the last century (and even before). Who is better positioned than Michael Banton to try this perilous exercise? Probably nobody. He is without
10 any doubt one of most important living scholars on these issues in the western world, at least since the publication of his seminal book *Race Relations* (Banton 1967), translated into French under the title *Sociologie des relations raciales* (Banton 1971). In this article, I will first discuss some of the key points developed by Banton, before introducing a very simple question: are we going to move or are we already moving beyond race and colour lines and scales in the present century and how would that move affect social and political life?

The article starts with a surprising statement, which will return several times in the text: men would prefer fair-complexioned women as sexual partners whereas women would not pay so much attention to the skin complexion of their sexual partner(s). This statement is very important for the architecture of the paper since it is the point of departure of the double argument it puts forward. To put it in a simple way, the first argument ends up advocating the abandonment of the concept of race as an analytical construction for sociological analysis and its replacement with the category of colour more suited to make sense of inter-individual relations and socio-economic status allocation processes in hierarchical societies. Banton discusses at length the difference between colour and race. Colour would be visible to all as a marker of social difference and measurable, whereas race would be invisible and not measurable as a marker of social difference. The second argument is that we should free ourselves from the colour line and the racial divide approaches characterizing the twentieth century since Dubois (2005) to consider more carefully the social construction of continuities of differences grasped by the notion of colour scale.

35 Let us start with the initial statement. At first sight it could be understood as a simple and obvious empirical consideration. Unfortunately, it is not. Do we have enough evidence to support the statement that men prefer fair-complexioned women as sexual

40 partners and that skin complexion is less important for women when
they choose a sexual partner? The answer is no. A first remark
concerns the idea implicitly present in the statement that there would
45 be a gender difference in the skin complexion preference. It is
interesting and would need to be explored further. A second point is
that Banton only considers heterosexual partnerships. How do skin
colour preferences play out in same-sex relations? Furthermore, skin
complexion preferences vary enormously. Today, the attraction of
AQ2 exotica is powerful not only in the area of cuisine, cloth and music but
also in the area of sexual encounters. The quest for exotic sexual
50 partners explains in part the economic strength of the global sex
business. For many 'white' women and men participating in what is
often called sex tourism, the ultimate exotic sex adventure is the one
AQ3 with a partner with the darkest skin possible. But we should not
generalize from that observation either and state that men prefer dark-
55 skinned partners. Here again, it would be an invalid generalization.

More generally, do we have enough empirical evidence to state that
humans generally use a colour scale to decide whom to associate with
and whom to develop all sorts of relations with? It is undisputable that
60 we all see different colours and different skin colours even though we
do not all see the same colours. Colour-blindness in a strict sense does
not exist for people who do not have visual problems. However, the
attention we give to skin colour varies enormously. Some people do
not use skin colour as a relevant criterion in their social interactions.
For many children, for instance, skin colour is irrelevant when
65 building friendships. They tend to divide the world into two categories:
those who belong to their circle of friends and the others. Skin colour
does not often play a role in the formation of these two categories.
Other people use interiorized and socially acceptable colour lines in
AQ4 their society and historical context. In Jim Crow United States for
example, the black and white divide was an obstacle to the develop-
70 ment of social interactions between individuals belonging to each
category. Finally, some people have a more sophisticated approach to
colour diversity and use, as Banton claims, a colour scale to classify
and rank individuals and to select their social relationships in specific
75 social contexts. The questions here are numerous: are these different
usages of skin colour in social interactions stable over time? Are they
socially and historically determined? Are they influenced by socio-
AQ5 economic, political and ethno-racial belongings as well as by age and
gender? What proportion of the population is potentially more
80 oriented towards one or the other of these approaches to skin colour?
All these empirical questions would need to be explored before giving
ex-ante too much weight to the colour scale approach either as a folk
concept or as an analytical one (Banton 1979).

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85 Turning now to the first argument he makes about the analytical
distinction between race and colour, Banton is quite convincing when
he draws a line (not a scale) between the two notions. It is indeed
correct that the notion of race recognizes discontinuities and sharp
90 distinctions between people and that the notion of colour opens the
way for recognizing continuity and fluidity both in belonging and in
classifications. But what do we gain with this analytical distinction
when, as Banton suggests, race and colour have for a long time been
conflated both in common and academic discourse? This is not quite
AQ6 clear in the article. Race and colour have in common to be social
constructions about the understanding of which there are conflicting
95 folk and analytical views. Implying that colour would be less subject to
distorted folk understanding because it would be obviously visible is
wanting. The long history of the invention of whiteness (Roediger
1994) teaches us that between objectively visible colours and their
social operationalization, there is as big a difference than between the
100 scientific non-existence of races and their social and political
relevance. In other words, the re-adoption of the discourse of colour
instead of race does not mean that we will necessarily pay more
attention to continuities instead of discontinuities of differences.
Colours can well be incorporated into the racial divide approach of
105 society. What is important, whether we use the analytical construction
of colour or of race, is to explain why many people seem more
comfortable with discontinuities than with continuities of differences.

With this question we have already entered the discussion about
Banton's second argument. We all remember Spike Lee's film *Jungle*
110 *Fever* in which he stages an improbable love affair between a white
working-class Italian American young lady and a middle-class dark-
skinned African American married man. The scene in which the
abandoned fair-skinned African American wife and her friends, also
African American but with different skin complexions from very dark
115 to light, discuss how they should react to this adultery is very
interesting. Actually, they debate about all the themes developed in
AQ6 Banton's article. They disagree on different points but there is a
consensus about the existence of a colour and racial line, the crossing
of which is highly problematic. But they also recognize the existence
120 and the relevance of a colour scale, when for example the darkest-
skinned woman remembers how difficult it was for her to attract the
attention of black men or when they blame a fair-skinned lady for
trying to pass for white. However, the colour scale is relevant only
within the socially accepted racial divide. The white Italian American
125 mistress is out of it. In other words, for the actresses in the film, as for
many social actors in real life, the colour continuity subjectively stops
at one point whereas objectively it of course does not. That point is the
racial frontier. Skin colour is simultaneously racialized and used to

130 make status distinctions within each racial group. These processes of
social construction of skin colour have very little to do with the
objective skin colour spectrum. Therefore, the question is not so much
135 to choose between colour line and colour scale as analytical constructs
but to examine how skin colour is socially and politically constructed
to account for or to legitimize discontinuities and continuities, and
hence to classify individuals in groups characterized by more or less
crossable external identity borders. Another crucial question is to
140 examine the specificity of skin colour as a source of discrimination in
social, economic and political life. On those two questions, the reading
AQ6 of Banton's article does not provide clear answers.

145 But the article involuntarily pushes us to address other important
issues: are we going to move or are we already moving beyond race
and colour lines and scales in the present century? What would be the
consequence of this move on social and political cohesion and on the
folk and analytical conceptualizations of continuities and discontinuities
150 in the global village? Entering seriously into this debate would
need more time and space. The election of Barack Obama in 2008 was
seen as the sign of a beginning of new era, a new post-racial society in
the USA that could spill over into other parts of the world. Today, the
idea of a post-racial society is seen as a myth (Kaplan 2011) or as a
dream (Tesler and O'Sears 2010). In the USA as elsewhere, discrimi-
155 nation on the basis of skin colour and race does still exist. But, from a
European perspective at least, there is more. In the wake of 11
September 2001, and later of the financial crisis of 2008 and the
subsequent economic, social and political crisis in Europe, the logics
of discontinuities seems more and more prevalent over the logics of
160 continuities in at least three important domains. First, the ideas of
nation and nationalism have not at all disappeared in Europe. In
several countries such as Belgium, Spain and Italy, sub-national
political mobilization has been serving real nation-building processes.
More generally, national interests dominate the European Union
165 political life. Colour does not seem to play a central role in these
processes but nevertheless they construct lines, barriers and a
discontinuity between those who belong to the national group and
those who do not, the first clearly enjoying a privileged status. The
post-national Europe was a dream (Martiniello 2000). It has become a
170 myth. Second, the reintroduction of religion in public and political life
in Europe, through Islamophobia on the one hand and religious
claims on the other, have re-injected another process of discontinuities
building in the European social fabric. As a matter of fact, neither
colour nor scale plays a role here but the construction of religious lines
and divisions are important to consider in order to make sense of how
European societies are changing. Finally, the social and economic
impact of the global financial crisis encourages us to reconsider the

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175 usefulness of class as an analytical construction. The complex class
 180 structure most liberal democracies had managed to construct is
 rapidly being transformed into a bipolar class structure with the
haves on one side and the *have-nots* on the other, as a consequence of
 AQ3 the shrinking of the middle classes. Here too, the idea of continuity
 present in the idea of a social ladder is being replaced by the
 185 construction of a discontinuity between two classes, as social mobility
 is increasingly a dream and maybe also a myth. These classes are
 heterogeneous in terms of race, skin colour, ethnicity and religion. The
 class-consciousness of the *have-nots* is very weak, making global
 AQ7 mobilization extremely difficult. However, the reproduction of tre-
 mendous social and economic inequalities calls for the inclusion of
 class in our analytical tools in articulation with ethnicity, race, colour,
 AQ6 gender, religion and so on. Unfortunately, Banton's article, by focusing
 on the race colour debate, does not address these other major domains
 of discontinuities building that as seriously as them harm social
 190 AQ7 cohesion. Clearly, we do not seem to have entered a post-racial or
 post-colour era but a chaotic era in which principles of discontinuities
 of differences are diversified and combined.

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