

PAUL GILROY

# AGAINST RACE

IMAGINING POLITICAL CULTURE  
BEYOND THE COLOR LINE



# **AGAINST RACE**

Imagining Political Culture  
beyond the Color Line

**PAUL GILROY**

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## INTRODUCTION

At first thought it may seem strange that the anti-Semite's outlook should be related to that of the Negrophobe. It was my philosophy professor, a native of the Antilles, who recalled the fact to me one day: "Whenever you hear anyone abuse the Jews, pay attention, because he is talking about you." And I found that he was universally right—by which I meant that I was answerable in my body and my heart for what was done to my brother. Later I realized that he meant, quite simply, an anti-Semite is inevitably anti-Negro.

—FRANTZ FANON

The modern times that W. E. B. Du Bois once identified as the century of the color line have now passed. Racial hierarchy is still with us. Approaching that conundrum, this book addresses some of the continuing tensions associated with the constitution of political communities in racialized form. It considers patterns of conflict connected to the consolidation of *culture lines* rather than color lines and is concerned, in particular, with the operations of power, which, thanks to ideas about "race," have become entangled with those vain and mistaken attempts to delineate and subdivide humankind.

*Against Race* should be read as a cautious contribution to another larger task that often seems impossible and misguided. This involves the slow work of making black European mentalities equipped for the perils of the

twenty-first century. That grand-sounding but ultimately parochial obligation is complemented by some conjuring with the transitional yearning for what we should probably call a “planetary humanism.” Elements of that elusive mindset have been allied to nonracial, transblack histories and are imagined here from an assertively cosmopolitan point of view that challenges the version of these themes currently being offered by occultists, mystics, and conspiracy theorists. Perpetual peace is off the menu for the time being; nonetheless, racial difference provides a new and timely test for the democratic character of all today’s cosmopolitan imaginings.

I have had to recognize personal motivation for turning to the relationship between “race” and fascism. I was born in 1956, the year of British folly in Suez and of the Hungarian uprising against Soviet tyranny. My first real geopolitical apprehensions came one fateful morning in 1962 when I sobbed into my cornflakes because I thought the world would end in a nuclear fireball before I could get back home after school. At that point, I was, I thought, exactly as old as the cold war itself. Britain’s strict rationing of food had ended by that time, but the shadows cast by the war and by the unfulfilled promise of a comprehensive welfare-state that followed it, were enduring.

As children, we could still see where the bombs had fallen. My own memory tells me that I was a militaristic child, but this must have been a wider generational affliction. I certainly spent much of my childhood re-enacting the glories of the Second World War. The leafy fringes of north London provided the battlegrounds across which I marched my troops and flew my imaginary Battle of Britain aircraft. We preferred these games to alternative pastimes like cowboys and Indians because we savored the fact that we always had right on our side. Our faceless, unremittingly evil enemies were Hitler’s Nazis and, inspired by what we read in comics like *Eagle* and *Swift* as well as the stronger fare to be found in places like the barbershop, we harried and slaughtered them wherever they could be located: in parks, gardens and wastelands, or the disused air-raid shelters that were unearthed all around us. This may seem to have been an eccentric pursuit for a black boy, but it was entirely unproblematic. No white playmate ever questioned the right of us not-yet-postcolonials to play that game.

I knew from an early age that West Indian and other colonial service personnel had participated bravely in the anti-Nazi war. I admired and ap-

preciated the portraits of my uncle and his wife in their wartime uniforms, which hung, enshrined, in one corner of their sitting room. I knew that he had crewed a bomber, but my sense of the romantic potential involved in that heroic history was more likely to have been supplied by Capt. W. E. Johns and his ilk. It remained uncomplicated by the details of the conflict itself. I didn't dare to ask these real veterans much about what their wars had entailed. They did not usually speak about that time to children.

I read the piles of literature that my parents had accumulated on the war, its causes, conduct, and consequences. I did this, not to play better wargames, but because I felt an obligation to know. Knowledge of that war and its horrors was central to an unspoken compact that we made with the adult world. The memory of the conflict was one of the first places where the edge of childhood could be detected. Following these studies, often conducted in secret, I felt confident in a brash, ten-year-old way that I understood what had happened. I remember being especially perplexed when, on one weekend historian's walk through the desolate and bomb-damaged riverside areas of the old City of London, my father and I encountered the encircled lightning-flash insignia of the British Union of Fascists painted carefully on a wall alongside the, by then, traditional injunction to Keep Britain White. Weren't fascists the same as Nazis, I asked him? What were they doing here? Were they still around? How could *they* be English people? How could *English* people be Fascists? Was their exciting lightning-flash the same sort of thing as the hated but fascinating swastika?

My father's attempts at comprehensive reassurance did not convince me. At that point, I felt a little disadvantaged when other children proudly recounted their parents' wartime exploits. My father, a twenty-year-old student when war was declared, had chosen another testing path. He said that no government could compel him to kill another human being and became a conscientious objector undertaking various types of decidedly unglamorous war-work that made him vulnerable to the hatred and resentment of many. His principled stance was interpreted as cowardice, and he was informally punished for it. He and I finally glimpsed a Gas Identification Officer's badge, like the one he had worn while checking bomb-damaged buildings for evidence of chemical attack, in a dusty glass case upstairs at the Imperial War Museum. At the time, I mistakenly felt that it compared poorly with the German helmets, daggers, and bullets

that were the most prestigious trophies in the symbolic economy of remembrance. My mother, in any case younger, was equally unsatisfactory as a source of war lore. The conflict had certainly been registered in what was then British Guiana. Although the idea that a German victory would mean the reintroduction of slavery had been circulated there, along with the imperial propaganda newsreels, the war was not central to her life prior to migration.

The world of my childhood included the incomprehensible mystery of the Nazi genocide. I returned to it compulsively like a painful wobbly tooth. It appeared to be the core of the war, and its survivors were all around us. Their tattoos intrigued me. Their children were our playmates and school friends. It was they who counseled our carless family against the pleasures of riding in Volkswagens and they who introduced us to the subtle delights of poppy-seed cake. It was clear, too, that some Jewish families had opened their homes to West Indian students who had been shut out from much commercially rented property by the color-bar. I struggled with the realization that their suffering was somehow connected with the ideas of "race" that bounded my own world with the threat of violence. Michael Franks, my school friend who wore a prayer shawl under his clothes in spite of the ridicule it brought upon him when we changed for P.E. class, was especially acute in diagnosing the casual anti-semitism of some of our teachers who had, of course, all distinguished themselves in the real manly business of war against the evil Germans.

I now know that these contradictions were the first puzzles from which this project stemmed. They were supplemented and refined when, as part of the new, global media constituency for black America's civil rights struggles, we saw that familiar swastika flying again: this time alongside the Confederate flags and burning crosses of affirmative but declining segregationism. This too was an interpretative challenge. What "theory" of racial difference, of racial prejudice, could explain these transcultural patterns of identification? The teddy boys who terrified me as a child and their successors, the skinheads who hounded me through my teenage years, did not invoke Hitler's name or cause. To have done so then would have been an unthinkable treason to the concentrated English identities they were celebrating and defending against alien encroachments. They spoke and acted in the name of another belligerent nationalism, but it was only later, in the 1970s, that conditions changed and a new skinhead chant of "Sieg



heil” made their unanimist hopes explicit if not exactly clear. By then the cosmopolitan landscape of my London childhood had expanded to include substantial numbers of South African refugees and exiles whose stories of antiracist activism brought new twists into my bewildered understanding of raciology. In what sense, we wondered, was Hendrik Verwoerd a fascist? While that question hung unanswered in my adolescent mind, the outer-national energy of black power and the momentum of late-1960s counterculture loudly and plausibly leveled the charge of fascism yet again, this time against American imperialism and domestic policy.

Political battles over the significance of local neo-fascists and their ultranationalist ideology surfaced again in the mass antiracist movement of the 1970s. It seems extraordinary now, but the opposition to them was deeply divided by disagreements over the place of “race” in their thinking. To make matters worse, the populism of what was after all an anti-Nazi league, seemed to play down the routine racism of the British state and its institutional agencies: police, housing, and education. That imaginative intervention broke the potential bond between Europe’s young people and a mass racist movement. The neo-fascists were relegated to the fringes, but they are now once again on the march across Europe. Outside its fortifications, authoritarian irrationalism, militarism, and genocide have become part of how desperate people answer the destructive impact of globalization on their lives.

As living memory dies out, the idea of just, anti-Nazi war is being recovered, commemorated, and struggled over, but we must ask hard, uncomfortable questions about the forms this commemoration takes. Is the presence of nonwhites—West Indians, African Americans, and other colonial combatants—being written out of the heroic narratives that are being produced in this, the age of apologies and overdue reparations? Before that memory dies, we must inquire what impact the war against fascism and Nazi race-thinking had upon the way that black intellectuals understood themselves, their predicament, and the fate of Western culture and civilization. What role might their stories have if we could write a different history of this period, one in which they were allowed to dwell in the same frame as official anti-Nazi heroism? This book is not yet that history, but I hope that it will be a part of its precondition.

Even more important, what place should the history and memory of past conflicts with fascism have in forging the minimal ethical principles

on which a meaningful multiculturalism might be based? Answering that question takes us into an initial confrontation with the idea of “race” and the racialological theories to which it has given rise.

Indirectly, then, this essay seeks to engage the pressures and demands of multicultural social and political life, in which, I argue, the old, modern idea of “race” can have no ethically defensible place. If that line of argument sounds overly familiar, I should note that it concludes, though it cannot complete, the critical consideration of nationalism and its modes of belonging that was conducted in some of my earlier work. This time it is intended to clarify and build upon the discussion of intercultural histories that was offered before in a provisional form. These long-standing interests have had to be combined with more urgent priorities. In particular, they have been transformed by my apprehensions about the growing absence of ethical considerations from what used to be termed “antiracist” thinking and action. Revitalizing ethical sensibilities in this area requires moving away from antiracism’s tarnished vocabulary while retaining many of the hopes to which it was tied.

This mixture of concerns is part of the answer tentatively offered below to the authoritarian and antidemocratic sentiments and styles that have recurred in twentieth-century ultranationalism. I am prepared to accept that they have figured even in the black political cultures constituted where victimized people have set out in pursuit of redress, citizenship, and autonomy. Too often in this century those folk have found only the shallowest comfort and short-term distraction in the same repertory of power that produced their sufferings in the first place. My enduring distaste for the ethnic absolutisms that have offered quick ethnic fixes and cheap pseudo-solidarities as an inadequate salve for real pain, means that I do not see contact with cultural difference solely as a form of loss. Its inevitable interactions are not approached here in terms of the elemental jeopardy in which each sealed and discrete identity is supposedly placed by the destructive demands of illegitimate “transethnic” *relation*. I borrow that critical term from the work of the Martiniquean writer, Edouard Glissant. His creative use of it brings a concern with what has been relayed together with a critical interest in relative and comparative approaches to history and culture and attention to what has been related in both senses of that word: kinship and narration. Approaching the issue of relation in this spirit requires a sharp departure from all currently fashionable obligations to cele-

brate incommensurability and cheerlead for absolute identity. The preeminent place of black cultures in the glittering festivities that have been laid on to accompany recent phases in the globalization of capital and the entrenchment of consumerism is not for me either a surprise or a source of unalloyed joy. I argue that this apparent triumph clearly exhibits patterns that originated in European fascism and that it remains tainted by the same ambiguities, especially where “race” is invoked. I suggest, not only that these formations need to be recognized as having been marked by their frightful origins in the aestheticization and spectacularization that replaced politics with easier, unanimist fantasies, but also that they retain the power to destroy any possibility of human mutuality and cosmopolitan democracy.

This interest in the latent and often unrecognized legacies of fascism’s great cultural revolution is a major theme in what follows. It is but one example of how the argument below is directed toward a number of more general political problems not usually associated with the critical theories of “race.” I oppose the fashionable reluctance to face the fundamental differences marked in Western history and culture by the emergence and entrenchment of biopolitical power as means and technique for managing the life of populations, states, and societies. I suggest that this damaging refusal has been closely associated with an equally problematic resistance to any suggestion that there might be links between those characteristically modern developments and the fundamental priority invested in the idea of “race” during the same period. By challenging the dismissive responses, which would disregard the full, constitutive force of racial divisions, I have tried to place a higher value upon the cosmopolitan histories and transcultural experiences whereby enlightenment aspirations might eventually mutate in the direction of greater inclusivity and thus greater authority. My fundamental point is that the promise of their completion in happily non-Eurocentric forms can be glimpsed only once we have worked through the histories of extremity associated with raciology’s brutal reasonings.

This essay is divided into three overlapping sections. The first part deals with the key abstractions, “race,” belonging, and identity, which organize the argument as a whole. It has a utopian tone, but that should not disguise its practical purposes. It departs from the idea that genetic determinism and the nano-political struggles of the biotech era have trans-

formed the meaning of racial difference. This new situation demands a renewed critique of race-thinking. It also requires ethical resources that can be drawn from histories of suffering, in particular from the memory of the 39–45 war, reconceptualized on a different scale. The modes of belonging articulated through appeals to the power of sovereign territory and the bonds of rooted, exclusive national cultures, are contrasted with the different translocal solidarities that have been constituted by diaspora dispersal and estrangement.

In Part II, attention turns toward cultural aspects of the fascist revolution. The reader is asked first, to consider some of its disturbing traces in the present, and second, to see where and how they have entered black Atlantic cultures in motion toward globalization. This commercial and political order is decreasingly amenable to the racial codes of earlier times and has unexpectedly given the black body a new prestige. Black Atlantic cultures are not being singled out for harsh and negative evaluation; indeed, their vernacular forms have supplied a joyful, playful, and vulgar opposition that fascism cannot subordinate. My point is different: if ultranationalism, fraternalism, and militarism can take hold, unidentified, among the descendants of slaves, they can enter anywhere. Past victimization affords no protection against the allure of automatic, prepolitical uniformity.

Part III inquires into the components of a cosmopolitan response to the continuing dangers of race-thinking. It argues that the occult, militaristic, and essentialist theories of racial difference that are currently so popular, should be seen as symptoms of a loss of certainty around “race.” Their powerful appeal can be repudiated only if we break the restraining hold of nationalist history and its frozen past upon our political imaginations. Only then can we begin to reorient ourselves toward the future.

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**RACIAL OBSERVANCE, NATIONALISM, AND HUMANISM**

Since race is not a mere word, but an organic living thing, it follows as a matter of course that it never remains stationary; it is ennobled or it degenerates, it develops in this or that direction and lets this or that quality decay. This is a law of all individual life. But the firm national union is the surest way to protect against going astray: it signifies common memory, common hope, common intellectual nourishment; it fixes firmly the existing bond of blood and impels us to make it ever closer.

—HOUSTON STEWART CHAMBERLAIN



# 1

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## THE CRISIS OF "RACE" AND RACIOLOGY

It is indeed the case that human social and political organization is a reflection of our biological being, for, after all, we are material biological objects developing under the influence of the interaction of our genes with the external world. It is certainly not the case that our biology is irrelevant to social organization. The question is, what part of our biology is relevant?

—RICHARD LEWONTIN

A genuine revolution of values means in the final analysis that our loyalties must become ecumenical rather than sectional. Every nation must now develop an overriding loyalty to mankind as a whole in order to preserve the best in their individual societies.

—MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

It is impossible to deny that we are living through a profound transformation in the way the idea of "race" is understood and acted upon. Underlying it there is another, possibly deeper, problem that arises from the changing mechanisms that govern how racial differences are seen, how they appear to us and prompt specific identities. Together, these historic conditions have disrupted the observance of "race" and created a crisis for raciology, the lore that brings the virtual realities of "race" to dismal and destructive life.

Any opportunities for positive change that arise from this crisis are circumscribed by the enduring effects of past catastrophe. Raciology has saturated the discourses in which it circulates. It cannot be readily re-signified or de-signified, and to imagine that its dangerous meanings can be easily re-articulated into benign, democratic forms would be to exaggerate the power of critical and oppositional interests. In contrast, the creative acts involved in destroying raciology and transcending "race" are more than warranted by the goal of authentic democracy to which they point. The political will to liberate humankind from race-thinking must be complemented by precise historical reasons why these attempts are worth making. The first task is to suggest that the demise of "race" is not something to be feared. Even this may be a hard argument to win. On the one hand, the beneficiaries of racial hierarchy do not want to give up their privileges. On the other hand, people who have been subordinated by race-thinking and its distinctive social structures (not all of which come tidily color-coded) have for centuries employed the concepts and categories of their rulers, owners, and persecutors to resist the destiny that "race" has allocated to them and to dissent from the lowly value it placed upon their lives. Under the most difficult of conditions and from imperfect materials that they surely would not have selected if they had been able to choose, these oppressed groups have built complex traditions of politics, ethics, identity, and culture. The currency of "race" has marginalized these traditions from official histories of modernity and relegated them to the backwaters of the primitive and the prepolitical. They have involved elaborate, improvised constructions that have the primary function of absorbing and deflecting abuse. But they have gone far beyond merely affording protection and reversed the polarities of insult, brutality, and contempt, which are unexpectedly turned into important sources of solidarity, joy, and collective strength. When ideas of racial particularity are inverted in this defensive manner so that they provide sources of pride rather than shame and humiliation, they become difficult to relinquish. For many racialized populations, "race" and the hard-won, oppositional identities it supports are not to be lightly or prematurely given up.

These groups will need to be persuaded very carefully that there is something worthwhile to be gained from a deliberate renunciation of "race" as the basis for belonging to one another and acting in concert. They will have to be reassured that the dramatic gestures involved in turning against racial observance can be accomplished without violating the pre-



cious forms of solidarity and community that have been created by their protracted subordination along racial lines. The idea that action against racial hierarchies can proceed more effectively when it has been purged of any lingering respect for the idea of "race" is one of the most persuasive cards in this political and ethical suit.

Historians, sociologists, and theorists of politics have not always appreciated the significance of these sometimes-hidden, modern countercultures formed by long and brutal experiences of racialized subordination through slavery and colonialism and since. The minor, dissident traditions that have been constituted against the odds amid suffering and dispossession have been overlooked by the ignorant and the indifferent as well as the actively hostile. Some initiates, who should certainly know better, have even rejected and despised these formations as insufficiently respectable, noble, or pure. Nonetheless, vernacular cultures and the stubborn social movements that were built upon their strengths and tactics have contributed important moral and political resources to modern struggles in pursuit of freedom, democracy, and justice.<sup>1</sup> Their powerful influences have left their imprint on an increasingly globalized popular culture. Originally tempered by the ghastly extremities of racial slavery, these dissident cultures remained strong and supple long after the formalities of emancipation, but they are now in decline and their prospects cannot be good. They are already being transformed beyond recognition by the uneven effects of globalization and planetary commerce in blackness.

Where the dangers represented by this historic decline have been recognized, the defense of communal interests has often mobilized the fantasy of a frozen culture, of arrested cultural development. Particularity can be maintained and communal interests protected if they are fixed in their most authentic and glorious postures of resistance. This understandable but inadequate response to the prospect of losing one's identity reduces cultural traditions to the simple process of invariant repetition. It has helped to secure deeply conservative notions that supply real comfort in dismal times but do little justice either to the fortitude and the improvisational skills of the slaves and their embattled descendants or to the complexities of contemporary cultural life.

We need to understand the appeal of the idea of tradition in this context. Where it is understood as little more than a closed list of rigid rules that can be applied consciously without interpretation or attention to particular historical conditions, it is a ready alibi for authoritarianism rather