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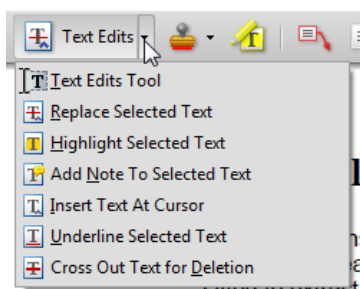
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## Beyond race and colour lines and scales in the twenty-first century?

AQ1

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 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.

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  
we all see different colours and different skin colours even though we  
60 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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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 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 clear in the article. Race and colour have in common to be social constructions about the understanding of which there are conflicting 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 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 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 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 to light, discuss how they should react to this adultery is very interesting. Actually, they debate about all the themes developed in 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 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 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  
to choose between colour line and colour scale as analytical constructs  
135 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  
examine the specificity of skin colour as a source of discrimination in  
social, economic and political life. On those two questions, the reading  
140 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, discrimination  
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  
155 of discontinuities seems more and more prevalent over the logics of  
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.  
160 More generally, national interests dominate the European Union  
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  
165 post-national Europe was a dream (Martiniello 2000). It has become a  
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  
170 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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usefulness of class as an analytical construction. The complex class 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 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 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 mobilization extremely difficult. However, the reproduction of tremendous social and economic inequalities calls for the inclusion of class in our analytical tools in articulation with ethnicity, race, colour, 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 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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