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Africa e Mediterraneo
Cultura e Società

DOSSIER

Non nei nostri geni.
Usi e abusi della genetica

Racism after the End of the Race:
A Brief Epistemological Viewpoint
on Genomic Studies and Racism

Teorie razziste e studi antropologici
all'Università di Torino:
storie e memorie di un patrimonio
culturale sensibile

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Il grado zero del razzismo

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Foto di copertina
Peter Mukhaye,
Veiled to Fit In, BLM series 2020.
Courtesy of AKKA Project and the artist.

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Butcheca, *The Same Movement Behind a Dance*, 2022, oil, acrylic and charcoal on canvas, 160x140 cm. Courtesy of AKKA Project and the artist.
This artwork was featured in the "African Identities" Group Exhibition, AKKA Project, Venice 18 July – 29 August 2022.

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Cultural Evolution vs Racism. Cultural Transmission and Shared Background at the Core of Human Oneness

This paper argues that current cultural evolution studies lay down no support to racism or racial thinking. It shows that cultural evolution is not determined by, and does not determine, genetic evolution. Thus, differences in culture are not dependent on genetic differences.

by Ivan Colagè and Stefano Oliva

Racism, or "racial discrimination" should be regarded as a "modern" phenomenon originating in the post-discovery-of-America Europe: «Racism rests on two basic assumptions: that a correlation exists between physical characteristics and moral qualities; that mankind is divisible into superior and inferior stocks. Racism, thus defined, is a modern conception, for prior to the XVIth [sic] century there was virtually nothing in the life and thought of the West that can be described as racist." (Puzzo 1968: 579)

The issue is not in a contingent coupling between physical features and "moral" qualities, but assumes some kind of *dependence* of the latter on the former (Puzzo 1968: 581). In other words, a basic assumption of racism is that physical characters (such as a particular skin colour or eye shape) are strictly (and causally) linked to particular moral and/or cognitive characters. If in the 19th century (or earlier) the physical characteristics could only be morphological, with the 20th-century advent of genetics they potentially became *genetical* as well. This has been explored by those who wanted to advocate that humanity is divided into races. Reasons to do that might have been socio-political (e.g., related to nationalism or colonialism), but also scientific. Indeed, 19th-century anthropology did focus on the study of different cultures, and especially non-European ones, often considered inferior and labelled as "savagery." Thus, once genetics broke through the life sciences, a genetic ground for distinct human races was argued. Fortunately, genetics is an empirical discipline where controversies can be settled by data. Nowadays, there is general consensus that humanity can*not* be partitioned into races on genetic grounds.

"Race" is an informal taxonomical classification in biology. The closest term with a formal definition is "subspecies." A subspecies is one of two or more groups within a species that is morphologically and phylogenetically distinguishable, but not reproductively isolated, from other such groups. Now, available molecular data show that humanity cannot be divided into subspecies. There is huge genetic variation among humans, but this variation cannot be structured in any reliable way (Barbujani and Pigliucci 2013). This means that individuals from one supposed "race" may be overall more similar to individuals in another supposed "race" than to other individuals in the same "race" - e.g., an African individual can genetically differ less from an East Asian individual than from another African one.

Although genetics clearly claims that human races do not exist, racial thinking is still present even in the educated and scientific milieu (Keita and Kittles 1997), and "racism" (i.e., the intent of *discriminating* human groups) is still active in many social sectors (e.g., Balibar 2008). This may be due to "cultural" reasons. Indeed, "genetic racism" has been "just" a recent and short-lived stage in the history of racism: it could not emerge before the 20th-century raise of genetics; after its proposal, genetic data soon disproved it. When racism emerged as a post-discovery-of-America European mindset, it was superficially based on morpho-phenotypic considerations (e.g., skin colour). However, at a closer look, the real ground for the origin of racism was the difference in culture and "civilization" of non-European people. In the 19th century, "savage" generically referred to an individual from an uneducated, pre-industrial, pre-scientific population. Not by chance, during the second half of the 20th century, what has been called "cultural racism" begun to spread (Mukhopadhyay and Chua 2008; Rodat 2017). This new racial logic is no longer based on morpho-phenotypic traits or on genetic differences, but on cultural distinctions (Chua 2017). Cultural racism emphasized the cultural superiority of "the Europeans." Two points should be clarified (see also Blaut 1992). First, on the surface, cultural racism seems not to separate human races as it does not focus on the cultural *capacity or potential* of different peoples, but on what different peoples have been able to *realize concretely* in their cultural history. Thus, though peoples can be distinguished on the basis of their cultural achievements, they cannot be separated because of "essential" differences in their constitution. Second, in depth, cultural racism implies «some quality of mind or spirit, some "rationality," peculiar to Europeans» (Blaut 1992: 295), and that such European peculiarity emerged at some time and kept operating all along Europe's history, so that a kind of specific "cultural gene or mutation" is posited. It is this second aspect that makes cultural racism a truly racist theory.

Armand Boua, *Les Nangobokos*, 2016, acrylic and tar on canvas, 100x100 cm. Ivory Coast Pavilion, Venice Biennale 2022. © Armand Boua.

In this paper, we will argue that current cultural evolution studies lay down no support to racism or racial thinking. We will show that cultural evolution is not determined by, and does not determine, genetic evolution. Both dimensions - genetic and cultural - have their own dynamics that cannot be entirely reduced to one another. This does not imply that genes and cultures cannot interact in some way. The genetic endowment (or constitution) of a species certainly constraints the cultural expressions realizable by that species (to use a clear and extreme example, if our species were lacking a developed visual system, which in turn depends on our biological and genetic evolution as primates, we would not probably have invented writing as a cultural innovation). Conversely, there are well documented examples of cultural strategies affecting the genetic evolution of a population. However, what we will argue for in the following is that current cultural evolution studies are not coherent with the idea of a one-to-one correspondence between steps in cultural evolution and steps in genetic evolution. In this sense, differences in culture cannot be deemed dependent on genetic differences.

Genuine cultural evolutionary dynamics, however, trigger cultural differentiation. Thus, granted that genetic racism is ungrounded, what would prevent anyone to argue for forms of cultural racism? Differences in culture may stem from a variety of factors, mostly environmental in character. Especially in recent evolutionary time, they may also stem from - broadly understood - human agency (innovations, social "choices," etc.). This means that the state of a given historical and/or geographical culture does not depend strictly on particular changes in the genetic constitution of the individuals composing the population expressing that culture. Rather, it depends on environmental contingencies and on goals more or less explicitly set by that population.

We will then briefly present insights from the philosophy of Wittgenstein and Searle that might help conceptualizing the dynamism between unity and difference in human cultures. Hence, a hard core shared by all human cultures will be proposed. Importantly, such shared hard core will not be made of specific contents or strategies; rather, it will be found in a *dynamical* structure characterizing culture as a human phenomenon.

Further on, culture's constants will be sketched. These con-

stants, too, will be dynamical: they will be found in the fundamental forces animating cultural evolution. Teaching, learnability, and exportability will be the key culture's constants.
Such key culture's constants, by their very nature, will offer a hint to the idea that the oneness of humanity is certainly a matter of past shared origins, but is perhaps even more a matter of shared, convergent, future perspectives.

Culture and evolution

Any discourse about culture nowadays must consider that culture evolves. Culture can be generally and basically defined as «Information capable of affecting individuals' behavior that they acquire from other members of their species through teaching, imitation and other forms of social transmission» (Richerson & Boyd 2005). Cultural evolution can simply be intended as the change of culture in time. A key feature of cultural evolution is that it brings about the emergence of cultural innovations, i.e. novel cultural items that gain some level of social acceptance or spreading within a population, also thanks to dedicated transmission efforts.
The relationships between biological and cultural evolution are essential to understanding human evolution and culture. Biology and culture have interacted a lot throughout human evolution, and the more so, the earlier the stages of hominin evolution. We will focus on the irreducibility of cultural to biological – namely, genetical – evolution. As we will see, this irreducibility does not imply complete independence or disconnection. The key question we will deal with is: if humanity cannot be distinguished into races or subspecies, what is the root of the astonishing cultural richness we see today across humanity? And, what is the root of the variety in cultural expressions we see in the archaeological and historical record?

Do genes drive the process?

When genetics emerged in the central decades of the last century, it soon appeared as a powerful science. Given such powerfulness, and the many successes it promptly earned, biology soon became "gene-centred." The three key steps of biological evolution – i.e., production, transmission and selection of variation – where essentially understood in genetic terms.
In the last decades, however, gene-centrism has losing ground. Emergence of biologically relevant novelty is acknowledged to happen properly at the phenotypic level, including also behaviour and cognition, without necessarily requiring gene change (West-Eberhard 2003; Moczek *et al.* 2011). Transmission of biological information is not only genetic inheritance, but also behavioural and symbolical (Jablonka and Lamb 2014), as well as environmental (Odling-Smee 1988) – i.e. organisms pass to future generations not just genes, but also behaviours, information and knowledge, and a modified environment. Natural selection is still considered in terms of the environment eliminating unfit organisms, but the environment is now regarded as something that organisms actively modify and that can induce relevant novelty in the organisms dwelling in it (Laland *et al.* 2016).
Overcoming gene-centred approaches to biology and evolution is one of the most important emphases of the so-called Extended Evolutionary Synthesis (Laland *et al.* 2015). These developments have, and will have, momentous and widespread consequences in biology. They are relevant for anthropology as well – especially because, roughly speaking, the human species finds in behavioural, cognitive, and cultural innovation and transmission the keys of its life form (Laland 2017).

For our present context, it is important to stress that cultural evolution is not driven by *genetic* evolution: gene change is not the cause of culture change. Innovation on phenotypic, behavioural, cognitive or cultural level, as well as the time pattern and pace of their evolution, does not strictly follow evolution and change in the underlying genetics (Colagè and d'Errico 2018).

Gene-culture co-evolution

Gene-culture co-evolution (Laland *et al.* 2010) shows culture's relative autonomy from, and irreducibility to, genetics. It occurs when a cultural strategy affects the genetic evolution of a population.
Gene-culture co-evolution strengthens the idea that cultural strategies are not direct effects – or mere epiphenomena – of genetic evolution, as it is the cultural strategy that drives the process and not the other way around. Gene-culture co-evolution has theoretical and historical merits, as it prompted major attention to the *biological* relevance of cultural strategies for human evolution. It should however be clarified that gene-culture co-evolution is an instance of "classical" population genetics (how natural selection in a certain environment drives the distribution of genetic variation within a population), where the cultural strategy concerned can be conceptualized as a further "environmental" factor relevant to natural selection. In other words, gene-culture co-evolution explains genetic evolution also considering the presence of cultural strategies, but does not elucidate how and why the cultural strategy emerged and stabilized.
There are recent interesting approaches to creating a "unifying evolutionary framework" to study cultural evolution to the advantage of social science disciplines (e.g. Mace & Holden 2005; Mesoudi *et al.* 2006; Mesoudi 2021). In these proposals, gene-culture co-evolution plays a central role. However, these attempts are far from failing to notice the important differences between biological and cultural evolution, especially at the level of the underlying *mechanisms*, whereas the more striking similarities are emphasized at the level of the research *methods* in evolutionary biology that can often be successfully applied to the evolution of cultures.
We now turn to a more comprehensive approach showing that cultural evolution has its own *mechanisms* and processes.

Cultural evolution and its mechanisms

Recent approaches to cultural evolution support the idea that the emergence of modern culture and behaviour cannot be regarded as the outcome of a speciation event, or as the consequence of key genetic mutations in our lineage. Rather, emergence of modern culture likely follows genuinely cultural dynamics that can sustain the gradual accumulation in time of substantial cultural innovations. For example, several elements once maintained to be peculiar to our species have indeed been developed independently by other hominin species outside of Africa (e.g., Villa & Roebroek 2014; Colagè & d'Errico 2018).
These novel approaches also unveil possible mechanisms underlying cultural evolution. A specific model (d'Errico & Colagè 2018) proposes that cultural evolution happens through repeated cycles of cultural exaptation, development of dedicated transmission strategies, and cultural neural reuse. Cultural exaptation (e.g., d'Errico *et al.* 2017) refers to the reuse of previously-devised cultural features for new purposes. Cultural neural reuse (e.g., Dehaene & Cohen 2007; see also Colagè 2013) refers to cases in which exposure to cultural practices induces the formation, activation, and/or stabilization of new functional or structural brain networks during individual lifespan. The overall process does not generally require genetic evolution even if cultural exaptation brings about changes in cognitive faculties (e.g., improvement of social cognition ensuing the symbolic use of ochre pigments), and cultural neural reuse induces reorganization of brain networks (e.g., the specification of the so-called "visual word from area" in the left fusiform gyrus when one learns to read).
For the purpose of our discussion, this model of cultural evolution implies, quite generally, that cultural developments are not determined or induced by any change in the constitution (be it genetical, as we have seen, but also anatomical or cognitive for what matters here) of the individuals in the populations devising them. Quite the contrary, such cultural developments often have the potential to modify the constitution of those individuals and populations.

Cultural contingencies, environment and agency

The above-sketched understanding of cultural evolution raises interesting questions. If cultural evolution is not driven by genetic evolution, what does drive the process? And, what does sustain cultural innovation and differentiation? In other words, although we have mentioned that the genetic constitution of a species or population can indeed constrain the range of cultural innovations possibly devisable by that species or population (this is one sense in which genes and culture can interact), we have also seen (in the previous section) that cultural innovations are not caused (determined, induced) by genetic changes. This specifically poses the question of what can sustain cultural evolution and spur the emergence of cultural innovations.
The drive of cultural evolution can hardly be found in just one factor. The emergence of substantial cultural novelties often involves factors related to:

- the natural environment (Banks *et al.* 2006) – what it affords and the challenges it poses;
- the social set (e.g., Gelfand *et al.* 2011) – different institutional frameworks, especially related to cultural transmission, either promoting, or hindering innovation.

On top of such kinds of factors, what we might call "cultural contingencies" may play a very relevant role: particular natural happenings, accidental discoveries, errors, or even individual "invention."
The latter category (individual invention) deserves clarification. A cultural innovation indeed is an invention that gets stabilized in a group. Likely, history and prehistory are full of inventions that never became innovations. This suggests that individual inventions do not, alone, make a cultural innovation. However, this does not exclude that they can be – together with other factors and conditions – key elements in cultural evolution (Colagè 2020). In historical time this is evident in any innovation strictly linked with its inventor's name (e.g., Gutenberg's moveable-type printer, Darwin's natural selection, or … Zuckerberg's Facebook). Similar processes may well have played a role in much more ancient innovations. Moreover, such individual inventions may often stem from personal interests, desires, or aspirations that cannot, sometimes, be reduced to needs and problem-solving (Colagè 2020).
Putting together the observations made so far, one can argue that cultural evolution is a very complex process in which several factors play a role: interaction between genetic background and cultural strategies, environmental factors, social elements, past historical vicissitudes, as well as a number of "cultural contingencies" including individual inventions. This, in our view, makes it quite difficult to think in terms a "cultural gene" or a "cultural mutation" capable of setting a specific culture apart from all others or, even less, of singling out a definite cultural history or tradition whose trajectory would be qualitatively different from others. Things are simply too complex to be understood in such simple terms.

Unity and difference in human culture(s)

In the previous section we have seen how current perspectives on cultural evolution make it difficult to imagine linear and well-defined paths of cultural development to be assessed one against the other and eventually ranked from superior to inferior. Cultural evolution is a highly dynamical and interactive process where the rule is mutual exchange and innovation and not closure and stability. This does not amount, however, to denying the existence of "specific cultures" with characterizing aspects implemented in particular historical times and/or geographical areas. Such specific cultures can be identified on a very fine-grained level: subsequent stages in the history of a people, or different cultures expressed by peoples sharing the same territory. For such fine-grained distinctions, moreover, language often is a social-identity factor: the web of linguistic meanings and uses of the peoples expressing such specific cultures capture fundamental cultural peculiarities.
About this level of analysis, two points are worth to be stressing. First, it is too fine-grained to look for superior and inferior cultural traditions implying distinct "races" *sensu* racial thinking. Secondly, even at such a fine-graded level a hard core common to specific cultures can be identified: we will do that via insights by L. Wittgenstein and J. Searle.

Wittgenstein's language games and form(s) of life

In the classical philosophical debate, one finds several antinomies (i.e., pairs of opposing theses) whose tension seeks to shed light on specific human aspects. On the one hand, the fact that all human beings share common characteristics by *nature* leads to the assumption of *universally* valid transcultural invariants; on the other hand, single *cultures* present such a variety (linguistic, ethical, aesthetic, religious) that it is reasonable to think of them as *particular* expressions irreducible to a common background. "Natural" and "universal" are thus opposed to "cultural" and "particular"; the valorisation and absolutization of the latter leads to forms of idealism and *relativism*. These orientations have characterised a philosophical season (still somehow influent nowadays) often labelled, according to their early proponents, post-modernity (Lyotard 1979) or weak thought (Vattimo and Rovatti 1983). Ludwig Wittgenstein is frequently mentioned among the advocates of such philosophical stance. Precisely because Wittgenstein has been considered – mistakenly, in our view (Oliva 2013; 2021) – an ex- ample of contemporary relativism, it is important to take his thought into account as we search for insights into shared, back- ground aspects beneath cultural differences. Finding common elements in the human "form of life" even in a philosopher attentive to cultural differences would help overcoming theoretical po- sitions about the irreducible variety and difference of cultures from which cultural racism can stem.
The accusation of relativism levelled against Wittgenstein is commonly based on his conception of *language games* (Wittgenstein 1953): activities carried out in and with language that reach far beyond language's declarative function. A huge array of language games exists and progressively expands; no unambiguous definition can be provided for language games since they

do not share an "essence" but only entertain a variety of family resemblance relations. As Wittgenstein writes: «Here the term *"language-game"* is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life» (1953: I, §22). The variety of language games is linked by Wittgenstein to the variety of *forms of life*, in a pluralist view that has frequently been interpreted as an opening to cul- tural relativism (Tonner 2017), according to which truth or false- hood would only have a "local" value, within single language games and in the context of a specific life form.

However, Wittgenstein seems to respond to this very objection in the following passage: «So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?–It is what human beings *say* that is true and false; and they agree in the *language* they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life» (1953: I, §241). As belonging to a form of life, the language game is not infinitely open to manipulation of truth or falsehood, but simply shows that language is the place where the speakers realize a *vital* agreement. Notwithstanding the differ- ences between communities of speakers playing different lan- guage games, the fact that language is the place of agreement, of the true and the false, of the expression of a form of life, seems to be a uniquely human cross-cultural characteristic.

Let us introduce two more concepts Wittgenstein uses in his last collection, *On Certainty* (1969). Propositions can be distinguished into "empirical" (relating to observable facts) and "grammatical," also known as "hinge propositions," i.e., truths taken to be stable that represent the background speakers usually do not doubt. A conflict over the validity of grammatical propositions, Wittgen- stein argues, implies a conflict over the worldviews of different communities. Here, too, the possibility of a relativist interpreta- tion (each community has its own hinge propositions) comes up against a common element beyond cultural variations, namely the very distinction between dubitable (empirical) and (tenden- tially) indubitable propositions (the grammatical ones). Thus, though there is room for culturally specific viewpoints, different cultures share the same linguistic scaffolding, based on the dis- tinction between classes of propositions (empirical and grammat- ical): this appears to be a characteristic of the human form of life.

Searle's deep and local background

Another way to grasp a hard core shared by the many different human cultures may be focusing on Searle's notion of "background" that he introduces in his *Essay in the philosophy of mind* (1983: Ch. 5) to ground mind's intentionality and the way linguistic expressions (namely, "speech acts") are properly understood. Searle claims that any intentional state (i.e., a state of a subject that is directed to, or about, something specific, e.g., a particular object, desire, plan, fear, belief, etc.) is what it is because it is framed within a "network" of other intentional states. However, he crucially adds that an intentional state cannot be entirely resolved into the relationships it has with the other elements of such network of intentional states. Any attempt at analyzing an intentional state and its network inevitably fades into «the entire congeries of relations which each biological-social being has to the world around itself» (Searle 1983: 154), i.e., the "background."

> The Background, therefore, is not a set of things nor a set of mysterious relations between ourselves and things, rather it is simply a set of skills, stances, preintentional assumptions and presuppositions, practices, and habits. (*ibid*.: 154)

Searle also states that the "background" has to do both with "how things are" - which points to a knowing attitude towards the world - and with "how to do things" - which points to a prac- tical and manipulative attitude towards the world (*ibid*.: 144). These two aspects can be distinguished but are strictly connected and, for the purposes of this discussion, capture the fundamental dimensions of culture: knowing and making. Interestingly, moreover, Searle also articulates the "background" into two levels:

> we need to distinguish what we might call the "deep Background," which would include at least all of those Background capacities that are common to all normal human beings in virtue of their *biological makeup* [...] from what we might call the "local Background" or "lo- cal *cultural practices*," which would include such things as opening doors, drinking beer from bottles, and the preintentional stance that we take toward such things as cars, refrigerators, money and cocktail parties. (*ibid*.: 143-44, emphasis added).

Thus, following Searle's reasoning, we might conclude that all human cultures stem from a common "deep background" (which is biological and social - where social is not yet the institutional organization, but the basic sociality of human beings), and begins to specify at the level of the "local background" - which however still maintains an important cross-cultural dimension. Once the fully-intentional level is reached, fine-grained distinctions appear within specific cultures, and also at the individual level. But such distinctions remain grounded in the (deep and local) "background." Similarly to what we have seen with Wittgenstein, the key point is that, besides the fine-grained distinctions emerging at the fully-intentional level, human culture finds a key common element in the very articulation of different levels, the deepest of which has to do with the "human bio-social makeup."

Cultures' shared hard core

Wittgenstein and Searle have helped us to glimpse at the shared hard core of the diverse cultural manifestations expressed by humanity. In spite of the differences in the detailed positions of these two important contemporary philosophers, such a cultural shared hard core can be envisaged in the articulation of different levels displayed by every human culture. Importantly, among such different levels, one is found that concerns the human form of life (expressed by Wittgenstein's "language games"), or the human bio-social makeup (Searle's "deep background").

Culture's constants

The idea that the many historically and geographically-realized human cultures share a dynamic hard core can be expanded by considering the forces animating cultural evolution. Any cul- ture is not, by and large, a static corpus of practices and knowledge remaining identical to itself but a changing and permea- ble system also capable of integrating "foreign" inputs. Thus, culture's constants can be found in what makes culture such a dynamic phenomenon.

The forces beneath cultural evolution

Human culture is *cumulative* in character (Tennie *et al*. 2009). Every known human culture accumulates innovations over innovations, practices over practices - and even notions over notions. The key point, however, is not just amassing items, but in building novelty upon pre-existing achievements. This is an

The Human Faces of Asia, first published in the first edition (1876-1899) of *Nordisk Familjebok*.
Wikimedia commons, CC BY-SA.

essential prerequisite for cultural evolution. Moreover, a great part of cultural innovations involves a strong *social* component. Complex tools, languages, and institutions at all levels seem to require so-called shared intentionality (Tomasello & Carpenter 2007), which is indeed regarded as key for the «human adaptation to culture» (Tomasello 1999). Shared intentionality is the ability and motivation to engage others in collaborative activities with joint goals and intentions. This psychological attitude transforms social-cognitive skills widespread in the animal kingdom into «human-typical versions» (Tomasello & Carpenter 2007). In particular, gaze following is transformed into joint attention, social manipulation into cooperative communication, group activity into real collaboration, and social learning into instructed learning (teaching).

Both cumulative culture and shared intentionality point to the relevance of *transmission strategies* as a fundamental force behind cultural evolution. The literature about social learning is vast and cannot be discussed here. However, there are reasons to think that sophisticated transmission strategies co- evolved with culture and the progressive complexification of the cultural knowledges and practices to be passed on from genera- tion to generation (Kline 2015). Teaching (i.e., a dedicated trans- mission strategy where both expert(s) and beginner(s) are aware of the ongoing process and of their respective roles) seems to be peculiar to our species - at least in its most sophis- ticated forms - and momentous for human cumulative culture. For the purpose of our discussion in this paper, there are two points to be emphasized. Firstly, the cumulative character, shared intentionality and sophisticated transmission strategies up to proper teaching seem to lie behind any human culture. This reinforces the point that, at the fundamental level, there is no specific "cultural capacity" characterizing one culture over another. Secondly, we have seen that cultural racism focuses on the concrete results achieved by a culture (and not on the cultural capacity) to discriminate among cultures and their ranking. Thus, common fundamental cultural capacities seem unable to overcome cultural racism. However, such fundamental cultural capacities essentially concern *sharing*, *transmitting*, and *joining* cultural items (innovations, practices, notions, etc.). Therefore, if culture is characterized and made possible by such kinds of fundamental "forces," deeming a culture superior to another because of the achieved results makes little sense: these results come from previous ones and will prompt future adds-on. And this, often irrespective of boundaries one can draw between peoples, geographical areas, or specific traditions.

Learnability and exportability

Following from the previous point, it is worth mentioning two additional features of cultural innovations: learnability and exportability. Exactly because transmission is so momentous for culture and cultural evolution, cultural innovations are devised to be learnable by the members of the community: they must be compatible with the cognitive capacities of the individuals that *will* acquire them. However, learnability is a process. Cultural innovations may not emerge as already adequately learnable, but become so in the course of generations (Smith & Kirby 2008).

Learnability also ensures exportability, i.e., the ease with which a cultural practice can pass through the boundaries of societies and peoples to spread across different cultural groups. We would like to mention two key cultural innovations as to this: agriculture and farming (domestication of plants and animals), and literacy (writing systems). There are, at present, human populations that do not have such cultural practices. However, soon after their invention, those cultural practices saw a significant spreading in neighbouring areas. This was likely due to both their learnability and their relevance for improving life conditions, or allowing further cultural evolution.

Moreover, it is worth stressing that both agriculture and literacy were *not* invented once and within a single culture. There is evidence that domestication independently originated at least ten different times in Southeast Asia, all the way to the Americas in a period ranging from 10,000 to 5,000 years ago (Price & Bar-Yosef 2011). Writing is now known to have developed independently at least four times (Olson & Torrance 2009) - in Mesopotamia (5,400 years ago), in Egypt (5,250 years ago), in China (3,200 years ago) and in the Americas (2,500 years ago). Thus, also such substantial cultural innovations (without which, not even the "European culture" would exist as we know it) were invented more than once in various cultural traditions - and then exported into others.

It is worth stressing that learnability and exportability might be rooted in the deepest levels we have seen in the previous section: Wittgenstein's human form of life and Searle's deep background.

Conclusion: oneness up- and down-stream

In this paper, we have tried to show how current understandings of cultural evolution makes it difficult to adhere to racial thinking, even in the terms of cultural racism. The image of cultures as discrete, distinct and well-identified timelines has little empirical and theoretical ground. Cultural developments and innovations - at both archaeological and historical scales - do not depend only on the constitution of the people(s) expressing them, but on a variety of factors. This is a first hindrance to pursuing cultural racism (and racial thinking more generally). The evident differences among diverse cultural traditions seem to be on a too fine-grained level to qualify as relevant for racist arguments. Moreover, a hard core shared by specific cul-

tural traditions can be envisaged in their (common) internal organi zation: there are multiple levels mutually interacting, the deep- est of which points to universal human features. This is a sec- ond hindrance to advocating cultural racism. Finally, key forces behind cultural evolution (cumulativeness, shared intentionality, transmission strategies, learnability, and exportability) emphasize culture's tendency towards innovation and mutual contamination, so that strong and strict cultural identity might turn out to be a rather illusory way to look at culture(s). This counts as a third hindrance to claim the existence of "cultural races."
In sum, therefore, we argue for a fundamental oneness of humanity. One that does not eliminate or disrespect dif- ferences; one, however, that emphasizes a common ground up- stream cultural differentiations, and a convergent future down- stream cultural variety, rooted in the innovative and sharing attitudes characterizing human culture and its evolution.

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ABSTRACT | ENG

Based on current cultural evolution studies and philosophical insights, this paper argues for the existence of a fundamental cultural hard core unveiling culture's constants. The paper shows how the current understanding of cultural evolution not only debunks the idea that different (or superior) cultures stem from different (or superior) people, but also contrasts the idea of sharply distinct cultural traditions that can be deemed qualitatively superior or inferior as such.

Keywords: Cultural evolution, cultural racism, Wittgenstein's grammatical/empirical propositions, Searle's deep/local background, transmission strategies

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Evoluzione culturale contro razzismo. Trasmissione culturale e background condiviso sono alla base dell'unicità umana

Recenti sviluppi negli studi sull'evoluzione culturale offrono solidi argomenti contro il razzismo, inteso come l'idea che l'umanità possa essere suddivisa in gruppi distinti e che questi possano essere classificati in superiori ed inferiori. La varietà delle culture umane è impressionante. Tuttavia, l'antropologia fisica, l'archeologia (cognitiva), e gli stessi studi sull'evoluzione culturale suggeriscono che questa varietà assai raramente dipende da differenze genetiche. Piuttosto, possono essere specifiche strategie culturali che inducono cambiamenti genetici nelle popolazioni che le mettono in atto – e tali cambiamenti a livello genetico possono persino essere irrilevanti per l'emergere e il fissarsi delle strategie culturali. Il presente contributo discute questi sviluppi, presentando le elaborazioni teoriche e i dati empirici a sostegno.
In seguito, le differenze e le varietà delle culture umane sono concettualizzate sulla base di alcune intuizioni di Wittgenstein e Searle. In *Sulla certezza* Wittgenstein distingue tra proposizioni "grammaticali" e proposizioni "empiriche". Le prime costituiscono il sistema di credenze sulla base del quale le seconde acquisiscono il loro significato. Le proposizioni empiriche si riferiscono a fatti osservabili che possono essere verificati, mentre le proposizioni grammaticali dirigono tacitamente le azioni all'interno di una data comunità culturale, e vengono solo raramente messe in questione al suo interno. La dicotomia tra proposizioni empiriche e grammaticali cattura una invariante culturale. Anche le nozioni di "local background" – pratiche e atteggiamenti a proposito di elementi socialmente e culturalmente caratterizzati – e di "deep background" – abilità radicate nella costituzione bio-sociale della nostra specie e negli aspetti fondamentali del mondo – aiutano a far luce sul fatto che le culture possono differire in molti dettagli importanti, ma nondimeno si basano sulla costituzione umana comune. Sulla base delle intuizioni, appena accennate, di questi importanti filosofi contemporanei, sarà sottolineato come ogni cultura umana condivide un nucleo fondamentale che svela delle costanti culturali.
Quel nucleo e queste costanti riguardano soprattutto l'innovazione, la trasmissione, la condivisione e la diffusione culturale. Pertanto, la considerazione attenta dell'evoluzione culturale suggerisce che sembra avere molto poco senso asserire l'esistenza di tradizioni culturali lineari e ben definite tali da poter essere distinte da altre tradizioni e giudicate superiori. In sintesi, dunque, il contributo mostra come l'attuale comprensione dell'evoluzione culturale non soltanto scalza l'idea che culture differenti (e superiori) sgorgano da popoli differenti (e superiori), ma si contrappone anche all'idea di tradizioni culturali radicalmente distinte che possono essere ritenute qualitativamente superiori o inferiori.