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**Formation and expressions of an "ordinary anti-racism"
according to a particular national context : a study of
the French case**

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► **To cite this version:**

Matthieu Mazzega. Formation and expressions of an "ordinary anti-racism" according to a particular national context : a study of the French case. Social Sciences Research Council / DPDF Fall Workshop, Sep 2010, Philadelphie, United States. halshs-00535543

HAL Id: halshs-00535543

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00535543>

Submitted on 11 Nov 2010

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Dissertation proposal

FORMATION AND EXPRESSIONS OF AN “ORDINARY ANTI-RACISM” ACCORDING TO A PARTICULAR NATIONAL CONTEXT : A STUDY OF THE FRENCH CASE.

Introduction

Since the Second World War, racism has largely been condemned from academic and politic spheres to the civil society in many Western countries. Indeed, the second part of the twentieth century has witnessed the formation and development of the issue of “anti-racism” across different segments of the society and following different orientations. In France, like in many other societies (Bonnett, 2002), the last two decades are characterized by a fragmentation of the anti-racist space. For example, this phenomenon appears through the autonomous formation of some mechanisms (such as the struggle against discriminations) or since the creation of public interventions in the sector (Halde), traditionally organized in an activist dimension. These collective transformations and renewal of the anti-racism have been largely analyzed and interpreted by sociologists and political scientists. In parallel, the phenomenon of racism has also been a central object of social sciences from psychological to economical or social approaches. Nevertheless, we argue that most of these studies of the two opposites were embedded in a subjective representation of the two objects : a collective anti-racism against an individual racism. Facing this pitfall, in our opinion largely inherited from common and symbolic representations of the conflict between racism and anti-racism, our doctoral dissertation aims at observing and analyzing the formation and the expressions of an individual ordinary anti-racism. Considering the contemporaneous multicultural aspects of our societies and some representations of the phenomenon of racism inherited from History, we postulate that individuals face a lot of everyday situations where they have to adopt a

specific posture, an “ordinary anti-racist stance”, organized from different elements and references inherited from a political, cultural and sometimes ideological context.

Our dissertation proposal aims at (1) presenting and describing the general context and configuration that theoretically enable to locate and think our object, (2) figuring out the main hypotheses and research orientations, shaped through an inductive reflexion, concerning the organization, expressions and evaluation of such an ordinary construction and then to a possible generalization of such an object, (3) describing the fieldwork and methodology chosen to empirically identify and unpack the object in the specific French context.

A/ Research context : Talking about “racism” in multicultural societies

After having completed some previous researches about anti-racism through an activist dimension, our doctoral dissertation aims at approaching and analyzing the object within an individual and pragmatic dimension. Indeed, we postulate that some contemporaneous elements and processes that influence the ways « racism » is discussed in an ordinary context, could lead us to identify and unpack a general model of an ordinary anti-racism. This assertion is particularly based on two elements that occur in both contexts : the ordinary representations and symbolism of « racism » and the polysemic dimension of the phenomenon.

Since the second part of the twentieth century, the phenomenon has been largely disqualified, first in the academic sphere and then within the civil society. As Jean-Paul Sartre explained about antisemitism, since the WW2, it was not an opinion anymore but it became a kind of crime. From this first try to oppose racism, the phenomenon has been defined through highly negative and depreciated categories and values. More broadly, the opposition to racism has been built and justified through the ambiguous notion of evolution and the necessity to break with some

past and/or « archaic » behaviors, kind of “original sin” (Bonilla-Silva, 1997), such as « racist » reactions. We can note that this representation of the phenomenon is still operating today, notably in the activist sphere where individuals sometimes subject their commitments through the idea of enlightenment¹. Moreover, concerning the overlap between racism/antiracism and the notion of evolution, individuals labeled as “racists” tend to be viewed as “unevolved” or irrational (Bonilla-Silva, 1997 and Taguieff 1985). More widely, the representations of the opposition between racism and antiracism are overlapped with several other couples such as bad/good, irrational/rational, conservative/progressive. To generalize, we can assert that in Western societies, this opposition is thought through the couple normal/pathological. This conceptualization can also explain the process of an “anti-racist norm” supported and justified by the modalities presented previously. If this norm could be juridically built, as in the French context, it is also, and maybe more, an antiracist social norm that defines the racial issue in both contexts. This norm is moreover sustained by sanctions (Goffmann, 1967) defined by the different characteristics inherited from the representations of “racism” and “the racist”. Then, within the public and ordinary scene, the charge of racism is highly prejudicial and could lead the incriminated individual to experience an important social disqualification, since he/she could be identified as an “irrational”, “archaic” and/or “uneducated” person. To summarize our different statements, more generally, in our Western societies, the “racist” and the “racism” embody a set of values that are opposed to the mainstream representations of the “good” values.

Our second assumption regarding the contemporaneous aspects of “racism” concerns the overlap, and sometimes confusion, between the racial issue and several other phenomena. In other words, a lot of topics are interpreted through the issue of racism even if these topics are initially distinct from racism.

From the issue of discrimination to the issue of diversity, we postulate that in ordinary

¹ This is a remark I made from different previous fieldworks.

discussions a large scale of topics are interpreted within the common categories of racism and anti-racism. In trying to explain this statement, we can invoke two movements that occur in societies concerned by their multicultural aspects. First, regarding the phenomenon of racism, the transformation from a biological acceptance to a cultural one could match with the apparent “scattering” of the term and its definition. This movement, that means a change of “racialization model” (Bonilla-Silva, 2006) and the passage from a hierarchy built on the biological acceptance of “race” to a definitive and essentialist barrier between cultures, also means the transformation to the contemporaneous “covert” and “ambiguous” characters of the racist behaviors and thoughts that define this “symbolic” (Sears, 1987), “Laissez-faire” (Bobo, 1997) or “differentialist” racism (Taguieff, 1985. Balibar & Wallerstein 1988). Considering these elements, we argue that the lack of definitions and visibility of the contemporaneous form of racism leads actors to expect and identify “racism” in a large spectrum. In an other way, we can also point out the fact that today, in the contemporaneous Western societies, the issue of diversity and more “the management of diversity” are an important topic on the public scene, in the political area as in the ordinary one. In several spheres (Job market, Culture, Housing, Policies, ...) the issue of the treatment of the cultural and/or ethnic difference is largely discussed. The multicultural aspects of such societies, understood as a social and racial composition but also as a particular moment in the “racial formation” (Omi&Winant, 1994) with a specific “racial meaning”, tend to multiply the places and issues where the idea of “diversity” is mobilized and then where ordinary categories of racism and anti-racism could be applied.

To summarize this assertion, we can argue that in a large scale of everyday life situations, individuals have to cope with topics where they have to mobilize and express opinions and/or interpretations linked to the issues of racism and anti-racism.

Considering these two statements, the social disqualification of racism and the polysemy and

fragmentation of the issue of racism, we pose that “speaking the racism” is a frequent and hazardous ordinary situation. Then, in their daily life, individuals encounter a lot of public discussions where they have to cope with the issue of racism in expressing anti-racist stances and then avoid any suspicions and charges of racism. If we take in account the symbolic and social violence of such an accusation and the specificity of these situations defined through a common “thematization” (Schutz, 1966) under the issue of racism, we could argue that individuals who are involved in such a context develop a life-proof specific stance built under a specific social frame that defines norms and sanctions. Moreover, we can argue that common categories employed for interpretations and evaluations in these situations are built around a binary racism/anti-racism model. To say it differently, we postulate that in such situations, facing the risk of sanction, a “non-racist” posture is not enough and individuals have to express, in a way or another, their opposition to racism. Therefore, our main objective in this doctoral dissertation will aim at describing and unpacking this specific and contemporaneous stance, what we call the “ordinary anti-racism”, in considering its formation and expression through a pragmatic approach based on the specificity of the hazardous and frequent situations where this stance deploys. Also, taking in account the pragmatic sense of the actors, we postulate that, within these specific situations, the modalities of construction, expression and evaluation of individuals' anti-racist stances are organized and analyzable, notably from the idea of a “wide awakesness” (Schutz, 1966) maintained by actors who talk about the issue of racism.

Considering our object, we are now able to formulate several research questions concerning its context, construction/expression and consequences :

- *Ordinary context/situations* :

Which situations are concerned by the use and expression of an ordinary anti-racist stance ?

In other words, on which criteria individuals identify situations concerned by the issue of racism ?

Do individuals keep the same postures across different situations or how they negotiate and adapt their stances regarding the context?

- *Construction, justification and evaluation of ordinary anti-racist postures*

Concerning the ordinary anti-racist stance, through which elements, arguments and/or references is it built and expressed ?

Considering the risk of charge of racism and then the hazardous character of such situations, how individuals manage (or not) to build a legitimate and accepted posture and then avoid any suspicion of racism ?

In the same way, on which criteria do actors evaluate the others' arguments in such situations?

More broadly, what are the modalities and boundaries of the legitimate frame and the justification matrix (Boltanski & Thevenot, 1991) that organize and regulate such social interactions?

- *Consequences on the general definitions and boundaries of racism/anti-racism*

Considering the different types of anti-racist stances, how the categories of “racist” and “anti-racist” are shaped and negotiated?

How these different acceptations of the term are confronted and in the case of a conflict, which mechanisms and/or configurations decide the success of one meaning over another?

B/ Hypothesis and research orientations

According to our several research questions and previous preliminary researches, we can address some hypotheses that match with the different “compartments” of our object. Moreover,

these hypotheses, formulated through an inductive way, will allow us to shape our doctoral research towards several research orientations and then to unpack this idea of ordinary anti-racism across different variables, from a particular to a general level.

HYPOTHESIS 1 : Any argumentation, reference and even word expressed by individuals participating to situations concerned by the issue of racism are pertaining to a broader ordinary anti-racist stance.

According to the idea of Schutz of “wide awakness” and social anti-racist norm , we make the hypothesis that in these specific situations, individuals adopt “*an attitude of full attention of life and its requirement*” (Schutz, 1966) and therefore their expressed discourses could be viewed and analyzed under this assumption. Note that such an attitude is not necessarily understood as a conscious one but rather routine pertaining to a common sense (Garfinkel, 1967). Moreover, concerning this point, we want to break out with the idea of a (full) conscious and strategical attitude and then avoid the ambiguous notion of “politically correctness”. In fact, we are more interested in interpreting and analyzing the ordinary use of this argument (to accuse someone of “political correctness”) than its (pseudo) scientific use. Finally, in this large acceptance of the object, we also identify as an ordinary anti-racist posture the fact that people avoid talking about racism and/or deny the existence of racism (Bonilla-Silva 2006, Van Dijk 1992) In this first orientation, we will focus our work on the linguistic and discursive aspect of the interactions that happen in these situations. Following some previous works that linked the ideology of racism with the area of linguistic (among many other Colette Guillaumin, Bonilla-Silva, Van Dijk), we plan to carefully observe and analyze the different ordinary discourses expressed and unpack them through the mechanisms of legitimation and justification inherited from an ordinary anti-racist posture. For example, in this first step, we plan to examine the process of categorization, and its different modalities (for example in the French context, “noir”, “black” (the anglo-saxon term), “arabe”, “beur”, ”rebeu”,...), through the analysis of the structure of legitimacy that order these term along

the common categories “racism”/”anti-racism”. Furthermore, we will continue this work of mapping and unpacking across larger part of discourse such as self-presentation, references and argumentations (i.e. the grammar). The objective of this work concerning this first hypothesis will be to identify and map a large scale of variables that are at stake in the construction and in the legitimacy of an ordinary anti-racist stance.

HYPOTHESIS 2 : The majority of the contents of individual anti-racist postures and categories are shaped and expressed, implicitly or not, through particular uses and references of a larger national “model”.

Considering the preliminary research we conducted in our MA thesis about the same object, it figured out that most of the arguments expressed by the actors within these situations of “talking about racism” are shaped by references to a national “model”. In the French context, within conversations that happen in such situations, we often observe the use of expressions such as “republican model”, “republican principles”, “French values”, “laïcité” in the different actors' argumentations. In an other direction, we also observe argumentations that criticize the model but that are also shaped by these references. According to this statement, we could argue that the frame that organizes and regulates ordinary argumentations linked to the issue of racism, in its construction as in its evaluation, is strongly shaped by references and elements inherited from a national “model”. Considering the quest of legitimacy and the conflictual dimension of such interactions, these uses of a “national model” are still problematic and also conflictual. Indeed, we can argue that the research of a consensus between the actors goes through the process of shifting in a higher level of generality (Boltanski & Thevenot, 1991), but the numerous significations given to this model lead to particular “problematizations” (Fassin & Fassin, 2006) that, contrary to a consensus, also come out in opposition and reproduce a conflictual area. In fact, in a primary use, the expression of common references to the national “model” could act as a consensual process but

when the actors have to express their own definition and meaning of the contents of such a “model”, the interaction can easily become conflictual as the significations used might be strongly different². For example, in the French context, two individuals can reach a consensus through the following assumption : “Racism is pernicious because it is in opposition to republican principles”, but then enter in conflict because their acceptations of the republican contents are different, even contradictory. Eventually, as the common definitions of racism, the acceptance and signification of a “national model” are also largely polysemous. According to this hypothesis, our work will first consist in identifying and making a typology of the different conceptions of such a model that are embedded in the different anti-racist postures. More broadly, we would like to figure out the elements and cleavages that organize the variations and oppositions between ordinary perceptions of a national “model” when these are used to interpret and evaluate a situation linked to the issue of racism.

HYPOTHEISIS 3 : The confrontation between a large scale of different ordinary anti-racisms built through particular representations and problematizations lead to a totalizing and dynamic conflict across the boundaries of the categories of “racism” and “anti-racism”.

As we will shape progressively the main types of ordinary anti-racism, from their own grammar and words to their particular uses and representations of a “model”, we plan to broadly focus on the confrontation between these large and organized systems. Through our inductive approach, we argue that these various ways of interpretation and expression of the racial issue are in concurrence regarding the common definitions and uses of the categories of “racism”/”anti-racism”. Indeed, we make the hypothesis that this confrontation leads to a constant move, and sometimes an overlapping, of these categories across others and in a broader way to a mechanism of “totalization”

2 In our opinion, here is one of the major differences between the ordinary and the official anti-racist stances. If politicians, activists and academics can use such references without justifications and definitions, the difference in term of authority, legitimacy and hazard on the ordinary scene concerning the issue of racism lead to more complex processes of justification.

of the racial issue. As a first consequence, this mechanism of “expansion” of these categories could enlighten the formation and process of what we call the “whiteness”. Indeed, in examining the different ways white people talk about racism, we could observe and understand how the categories of “racism” and “anti-racism” could create and shape the subjective boundaries of such a group. This statement is inherited from some previous works about the ordinary anti-racism but also some anti-racist organizations in which the majority group is divided and defined along these categories. This doctoral research will try to go further in the analysis of such boundaries and more broadly in the general formation and self-interpretation of the whiteness within these situations. Secondly, our research aims at understanding and analyzing how some arguments or “problematizations”, apparently non legitimate, could reach a certain legitimacy through their development and expression within a particular configuration of anti-racism. For example, we argue that the current French argument of “anti-white racism”, that currently tends to reach a certain visibility and legitimacy, is developed and presented through a specific use and interpretation of the republican model (namely in opposition with the polemical idea of “communautarism”) embedded in a larger particular anti-racist orientation. Then, this ambiguous and ideological argument, that operates an overlapping between the categories racism/anti-racism and minorities/majority, tends to appear more acceptable, or at least more “neutral”, because of its presentation through a specific anti-racist configuration. Indeed, our last hypothesis about the “totalization” of ordinary anti-racism, notably through the moving boundaries of the categories racism/anti-racism, also consists in figuring out the permeability of the object concerning ideological tools. Facing that, our doctoral research will try to map the development of such elements and the general patterns and variables that enable their visibility and legitimacy in public discourses.

C/ Methodology

Regarding the specific characters of our object, such as the risk and maybe the “taboo” that could define it, the issue of the fieldwork is not easy as most of the studies that plan to focus on the “common sense”. Notably, in such a case, the interaction between the researcher and the subjects present some difficulties, mostly in terms of authority and legitimacy. Nevertheless, using some different contemporaneous social spaces to conduct such a study, we postulate that the object can be closely approached and a large scale of ordinary anti-racist constructions can be identified and verified in the French context. As a consequence, we will focus our fieldwork on three different spaces : readers' comments on press websites, participants to anti-racist workshops organized by public institutions, and then the organization and analysis of focus groups.

In our previous work, we situated our study on the collection and analysis of data extracted from users' comments on press websites. Indeed, most of the national newspapers currently own a website where they maintain a space dedicated to users' comments for each article. These recent spaces seem to be largely occupied by internet users as shown by the importance and frequency of messages. Moreover, in observing these areas, we can note that users do not simply post comments related to articles but they often engage each others in discussions and then make these spaces interactive and dynamic. Concerning our object, these spaces present some benefits concerning the visibility and the analysis of discussions about the issue of racism. First, in opposition to frequent assumptions, users can not write everything they want in their comments. The regulation or “moderation” of internet expression spaces are designed to prevent the evocation of some arguments, or words, linked to non acceptable phenomena and/or ideologies in contemporaneous societies. Indeed, concerning racism, virtual discussions are also controlled and regulated according to the same criteria of the juridical anti-racist norm. Nevertheless, sanctions linked to the virtual application of the norm are different as the incriminated user will just have his/her comment deleted from the board³. Even if the presence of norms concerning discussions about racism suppose the

3 Note that in France, this regulation tends to be widened as incriminated internet users could be also identified and sanctioned in “real” life.

interpretation and expression through this ordinary anti-racist norm, the virtual character of such interactions tends to soften the charge of racism. Nevertheless, the accusation of racism could be also more frequent in a such a space because of its less strengthened representations. Anyway, the reproduction of these elements in the virtual space organized by users' comments (discussions about the issue of racism, the anti-racist norm and accusations of racism) enables us to observe and identify the constructions that pertain to different ordinary anti-racism stances in a large scale of cases. Then, according to the concept of grounded theory and more specifically the idea of “theoretical saturation” (Glaser & Strauss), our fieldwork will consist in taking in account a large amount of articles⁴ that concern in a way or an other the issue of “racism”, and in mapping the different comments, that often present a type of “problematization” of the article, through codes and categories linked to our theoretical model of ordinary anti-racist stance. In the same way, in taking in account a large scale of articles, we plan to more understand which criteria define a situation concerned by the uses of ordinary anti-racist stances. Also, focusing on users' comments will enable us to observe and identify the mechanisms that operate during interactions and confrontations between ordinary anti-racist constructions. As a last point, a large part of press websites are currently trying to update their interface into the formation of a virtual community where all users can inform others about some characteristics. We plan to take advantage of such implements to go deeper in the unpacking of our object in such spaces. For example, in analyzing comments, we also plan to focus on these different virtual information (used “nickname”, the profile page and/or the job etc...), as elements and processes to shape one's virtual identity and also as mechanisms to improve the legitimacy of the comments. More broadly, this first and major part of our fieldwork will try to identify and unpack the different orientations of the object in approaching and shaping this specific fieldwork within its own characteristics.

Simultaneously, we plan to develop a fieldwork through recent and frequent workshops organized by several institutions around “sensibilization about discriminations”. Based on a first

4 Note that depending on the press websites, the articles and comments are archived up to seven years.

experience in one of these courses organized by the “Préfecture de l’Isère” and “Mairie de Grenoble”, this kind of workshop consists in a meeting and debates with facilitators, experts or officials and a group of participants often pertaining to a specific professional sphere (social workers, school personnel, health practitioners,..). Along our work on internet users' comments, this space, that is organized within “real” social conditions (closer to our theoretical model), could inform us about the translation (or not) of some elements from the virtual to the real space. In another way, this part of the fieldwork could enlighten some specific questions of our research such as the confrontation between “ordinary” and “official” anti-racist postures and also the relationship between a professional status and a specific anti-racist orientation. Concerning this last point, it would be interesting to focus on this specific variable to observe and analyze its influence through the construction of an individual anti-racist posture and the structure of legitimacy and arrangement of the “model” embedded in such a stance.

After having completed those two parts of the fieldwork and having built an effective map of the object through several main types of ordinary anti-racist stances, we plan to check and complete our first typology through the organization of several focus groups and collective interviews. In taking advantage of some findings inherited from the first steps, we would like to organize and conduct discussions about specific cases or events that implicitly focus on particular types of ordinary anti-racism, and then to observe the role-plays, argumentations and confrontations between participants considering they share common characteristics (age, job, gender,..) or not. More than simply verifying the effectiveness of our mapping within a “normal” and “ordinary” interaction frame, this last step would enable us to go deeper in the observation and identification of particular processes concerning the expression and the confrontation of anti-racist stances.

In operating through these three social spaces, notably through reflexions about the possibility of translation from one to another, we argue that we will be able to shape an effective

and strong conceptualization of our object in its ordinary dimension. In other words, we think that the comparison and examination of our object through a crossing fieldwork could lead us to demonstrate the effectiveness and processes of the ordinary anti-racism into an empirical way.

Conclusion

To conclude, we would like to summarize the different theoretical debates concerned by this doctoral research and its object. First, considering the literature about racism, through this approach we would like to insist and demonstrate the “social construction of racism” (Balibar) but also the pragmatic aspects of anti-racism within the ordinary scene regarding the current focalization of our societies on the racial issue. Secondly, concerning the idea of national “models”, this research could also bring a new and original innovative approach in defining the uses of these “models” in an ordinary and pragmatic way. About this issue, these ordinary references, pointed in our research, seem to be also polysemic and sometimes “performative” as their uses in academic or politic spheres (Bertossi) but the specificity of ordinary situations concerned by the issue of racism have the advantage to “force” individuals to explain and justify their arguments. As a last point, this research can also enlighten some elements that pertain to the study of ideology. Built on the pragmatic and common senses of individuals, this ordinary anti-racism is strongly permeable to ideological contents, as every discourses or postures built by and for tensional and ambiguous topics. Our research would enlighten the processes of formation and inclusion of ideological constructions in ordinary discourses and opinions.

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