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Our diversity and the Italian Constitution: do we really need human races?

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We anthropologists do not always think in the same way. There is nothing strange in this. Integrating different lines of evidence - whether it be paleontological, genetic or cultural - is necessary to really understand human evolution. Considering how ambitious and sophisticated this approach is, it is hardly surprising there are gray areas which, inevitably, will give rise to different views. However, we all agree on one important point: the biological diversity that we observe today within and among human populations not only provides us with an opportunity to study some fundamental processes of evolution, but may also reflect our social organization and its changes over time. Is this nothing but a scientific theory? It does not seem so if you consider that an explicit reference to human diversity can be found in the most important part of the constitutional charter (the general principles), whose article 3 reads:

“All citizens have equal social dignity and are equal before the law, without distinction of sex, race, language, religion, political opinion, personal and social conditions”

A strong stand against any form of discrimination, of course!. However, don't you find the word “race” a little out of place in this context? We all know that an apparently simple and effective idea underlies the term: human diversity can be divided into a few groups, such as Whites (Europeans), Blacks (Africans) and Yellow (Asian); there is little variation within each group, but substantial diversity among them. According to some people, this pattern might not only describe hereditary characteristics such as blood groups or skin colour, but also more complex traits including cognitive and moral qualities.

Does all this still make any sense today? We are naturally not contesting those who wrote the Constitution, particularly if one considers that the choice of the term race was absolutely in line with the times in Italy in 1947. However, a great deal has changed in science as well as in society in the last 68 years, so we feel that the time is finally ripe to reconsider this issue and, possibly, make a change.

Italian Anthropologists have long been questioning this awkward presence, their reasoning being ever more supported by new knowledge on genetic variability. A decisive push to finally extend the debate beyond the borders of the academic setting came with the demographic and social change brought about by migratory flows in recent decades. At the end of 2014, this debate was sparked again by a call for the abolition of the term race in the constitution launched by our colleagues Gianfranco Biondi and Olga Rickards. In late January, the same proposal was renewed by Sapienza of Rome, the largest Italian University.

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On the wave of this debate, the board of the Italian Institute of Anthropology has tried to redefine the issue, radically changing the current perspective. We thought it necessary to consider the scientific aspects and the cultural and social matters together, rather than thinking about each of them separately. For this purpose, it was necessary to split the essential question – whether to abolish or retain the word race in the constitution - into 3 separate points.

Does “race” adequately describe the structure of human diversity?

No! because it conveys an idea of human genetic diversity that no longer has any form of scientific basis (Barbujani & Colonna, 2010; Pigliucci, 2013; but see Sesardic, 2013 for an opposite view). However, there is more to it than this: it brings together concepts which may also be misleading for our idea of cultural diversity. Thanks to the significant and continuous progress of scientific studies in genetics and genomics, it has been established that the (very reduced) diversity which is found in our species cannot be described by using a limited number of exclusive and homogeneous groups such as races. The evolutionary units may be better identified in many sets of individuals who share a space, a time and a social system: the populations. Due to Italy’s genetic variation between groups which is in some ways comparable to that observed in Europe as a whole, our country exemplifies how any attempt to describe human diversity using a few simple labels may be deceptive (Capocasa *et al.*, 2014). Equally important, however, is the fact that current knowledge regarding the effects of natural selection in shaping human genetic structure reveals that those physical traits which inspire any form of “racial” perception, such as skin color, are the result of adaptations of specific genes to environmental pressures (Wilde *et al.*, 2014). Their differences have, however, no relation with cognitive abilities, social behavior or moral qualities. This finding is particularly important if we consider that the term race is not infrequently used to stigmatize cultural differences, as if they were the product of different intellectual skills or moral predispositions. Given the growing multicultural characteristics of European societies, it is clear how important it is to counter these dangerous links between new forms of intolerance and the resurgence of genetic determinism.

What are the *pros* and *cons* of an initiative to amend the Constitution?

Even when scientifically supported and culturally well founded, any appeal which calls for an infrastructural change of our constitutional principles has, at least, two important grey areas. First, we should consider the procedural difficulties and also the fears that a possible change in the fundamental principles of the Constitution could trigger among politicians and the public. Second, the initiative could be perceived as a boring idea, that focuses purely on terminology, and which does not alter the heart of the problem. Are we still convinced we want to play the game? Yes, but there are two conditions. The first is to be fully aware of the importance of the objective. Eliminating a racial vision of human diversity from the document that inspires our civil life is certainly important symbolically. However, even more important, perhaps, is the fact that such an incisive act may help reduce the negative impact of a term that conveys prejudices and which is “protected” by a pseudo-scientific

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standpoint. The second is to bear in mind that launching initiatives of this type is not enough: our commitment does not end simply by signing a document. On the contrary, it starts from there. In our educational and training activities, we must seek to involve wider audiences and provide them with the best tools so they can look at human diversity with no preconceptions. It is important to raise awareness of the need for a change among all those who, for various reasons, are involved in scientific and cultural dissemination. Certainly, as already pointed out by Claude Levi Strauss (1952), we should be able to discuss together biological and cultural diversity if we really want to get our message across... Therefore, overcoming the old, but still living, dichotomy between “physical” and “cultural” anthropology, is an absolute necessity in our case (Descola, 2005).

Should the term “race” be simply abolished or replaced?

A closer look at this question suggests that the presence of the term race in the Constitution may be read in two different ways. On the one hand, it might be a means to establish the principle that diversity among human groups cannot be a reason for discrimination among peoples. Try re-reading article 3 without the term race. By eliminating it, you could obtain a paradoxical result: the term “race”, now missing from that list, could again become an element of discrimination. On the other, its presence implicitly reaffirms the validity of the concept of race, “but how can you deny the existence of races considering that the term can even be found in the Constitution?”. To escape from this dilemma, it is necessary to introduce an alternative phrase that can express the concept of diversity without forgetting all the various aspects of its meaning (biological and cultural, above all) and which, in no way, evokes a hierarchy of values. To make it more effective, the amendment must be accompanied by an explicit statement that race has no meaning for the human species and that any discriminatory view based on such an invalid assumption must therefore be rejected.

In conclusion, our proposal is as follows:

“All citizens have equal social dignity and are equal before the law, regardless of their physical appearance and cultural traditions, gender, language, religion, political opinion, personal and social conditions . The Republic does not recognize the existence of alleged human races and fights all forms of racism and xenophobia”

We consider this as a first, but necessary, step in order to help promote the concept that diversity can be a factor of civil cohesion and mutual growth, and fully in line with the values established in our Constitution.

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