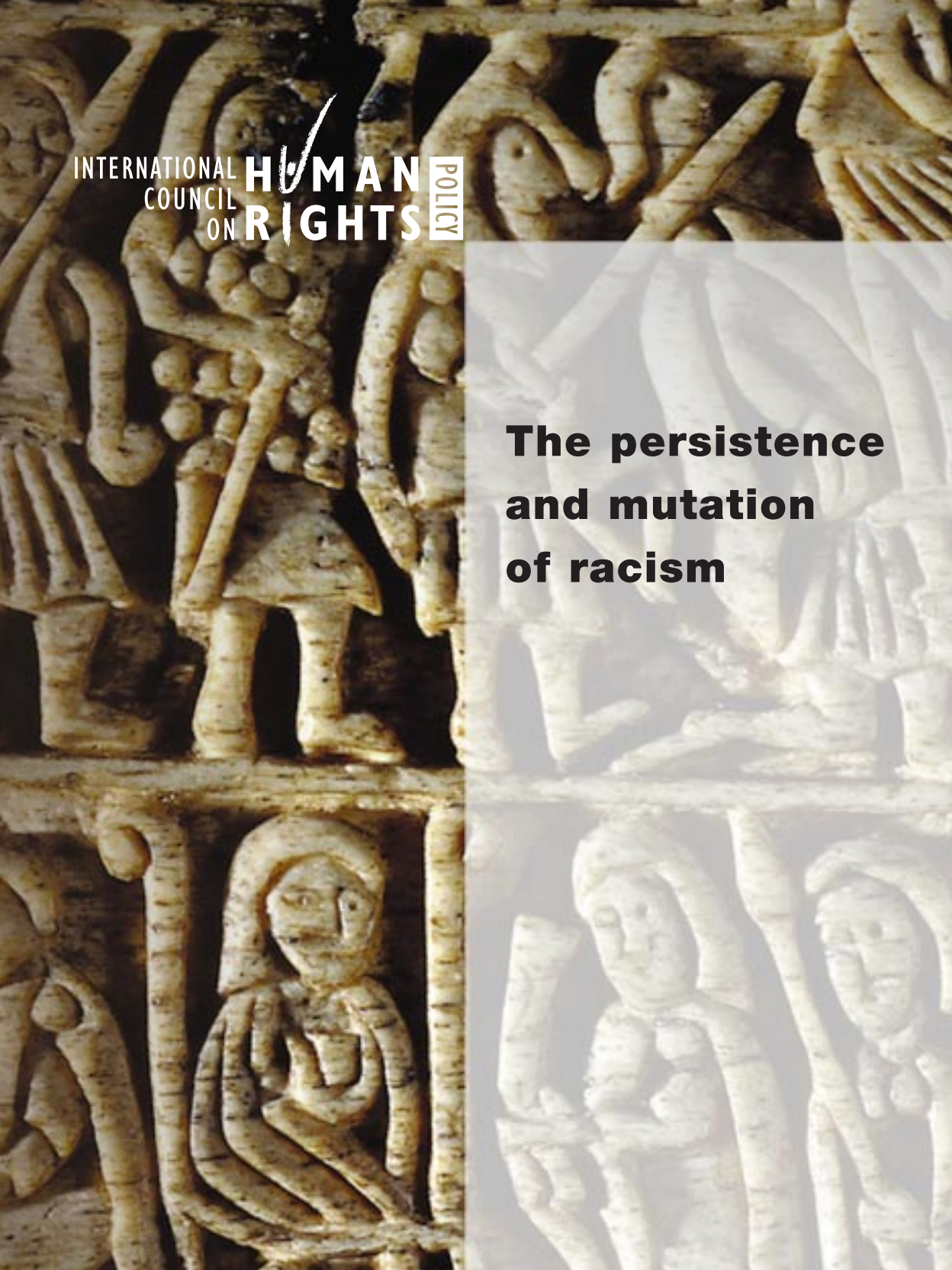


**The persistence  
and mutation  
of racism**



## **PREFACE**

This document does not claim to be a final or complete statement on racism. It is a brief survey of some of the main issues that currently preoccupy people who suffer from racial discrimination or who study its effects.

A word should be said about definitions. It is extremely difficult to define racism and racial discrimination in a relevant and precise way. There is not full agreement about how to do so. It is also difficult to name accurately in a general way the groups of people who suffer racial discrimination. We have chosen to avoid a legal or technical approach. We have taken the definition in the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination as one point of reference, and noted that terms like “racism” should not be over-used. Not all discrimination is necessarily racist. We have also used terms like “black” and “white,” aware that not everyone will recognise themselves in these names. Experts may therefore disagree with our language, which will be called loose by some and too restrictive by others. In a short document that attempts to be accessible we could not draw out conceptual issues in detail. Our aim was to identify a range of issues for debate, and since there is no agreement on where racial discrimination begins and ends, further discussion should determine their status.

For similar reasons, this document does not take adequate account of history. Numerous issues of substance arise here too, and many of them affect how we explain and understand the modern phenomenon of racism. Did the Atlantic slave trade and European colonialism create modern racism, or has it evolved from the many forms of slavery and bondage that have existed in human societies? Should racism be distinguished, as an ideology, from more ancient and universal forms of xenophobia? Such complex historical questions cannot unfortunately be addressed in so short a paper.

Finally, this document does not describe what it is to experience racism and racial discrimination. Perhaps only literature can do this adequately. We have looked at racism as an international phenomenon, because in one form or another it is to be found in almost every society on earth. It is deeply associated with certain forms of entrenched poverty and certain kinds of violence. No subject is rawer for those who suffer it, precisely because it is a denial of human relationship. Yet it is a feature of racism that, though widespread, for many people it remains unseen. When it is not physically violent, those who do not experience it often fail to understand how profoundly offensive it is. If this paper helps in any way to sharpen our awareness of the numerous and also subtle forms that racism and racial discrimination take in our societies, it will have served its purpose.

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Executive Director, ICHRP



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The International Council thanks all those who participated in the meeting and those who wrote papers for it. We particularly thank Professor Theo van Boven for chairing the event, and Douwe Korff who acted as Rapporteur and prepared the initial draft of this report. The participants and papers are listed at the end.

Mohammad-Mahmoud Mohamedou, Research Director at the International Council, edited this report.

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## **BACKGROUND**

In December 1999, the International Council on Human Rights Policy convened a meeting in Geneva to discuss contemporary problems and issues associated with racism. This report synthesises that discussion and draws upon several papers that were prepared for it. It is published in the context of the United Nations World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance, which will take place in September 2001 in South Africa.

The meeting did not seek to concentrate on the worst or most violent examples of discrimination or prejudice. It certainly did not address all the issues that arise in relation to racism and xenophobia. The aim was to survey some of the more important questions, including some that are less often discussed, and to prepare an overview document that might contribute to constructive debate during preparations for the United Nations World Conference. The participants (listed at the end of this document) reflected experience gathered in a variety of countries and disciplines and the agenda was intentionally wide-ranging and international. The emphasis was not on law, or close definition, but on new trends, issues of general concern and areas of difficulty.

This document draws extensively on the meeting. It nevertheless synthesises the discussion and is not a transcript. While we hope it is faithful to the spirit of what was said, it does not engage the participants individually.

A draft of this report was circulated for consultation during January and February 2000.

# **The persistence and mutation of racism**

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## Introduction

The modern movement against racism came into being to oppose “white against black” racism. Its historical roots are to be found in campaigns against the slave trade and colonialism. In more recent times, it was inspired by the civil rights movement in the United States of America and by resistance to *apartheid* in South Africa, where racism took a particularly explicit and institutionalised form. *Apartheid* has since been abolished and during the last thirty years many states have enacted legislation against racial discrimination. Yet racism has not disappeared, nor is it in the process of doing so. On the contrary, blatant and covert discrimination on grounds of race remain entrenched in almost all societies on the planet.

As recent increases in racial violence by extremists and by neo-Nazi supporters in Europe show, old and explicit forms of racism are still alive. Nevertheless, those who face discrimination increasingly confront forms of racism that are covert or more complex or are linked to wider issues, such as changes in the nature of the state, gender discrimination, or marginalisation due to developments in the global economy. These complex issues are more difficult to address, precisely because they are intricate and because the specific role racism plays is less apparent and can, consequently, be more easily be denied.

Those who suffer entrenched discrimination or complex forms of discrimination also respond in complicated ways. Discrimination may be systemic rather than personal, and is therefore less easily identified and understood. Where discrimination is deeply entrenched and internalised, some victims deny they are oppressed or at some level accept their condition; others oppress those who are lower than they are in the social scale; or oppress those who have oppressed them.

These wider issues need to be understood by governments and intergovernmental organisations that have a responsibility to end racial discrimination. After fifty years of action against racism under the United Nations system, it is clear that anti-discrimination legislation by itself will not eliminate racism or racial discrimination. Deeply entrenched social attitudes appear to drive the reproduction of racial prejudice, and successful policies will need to address these. In addition, powerful new forces associated with global economic change are creating conditions for the emergence of new forms of discrimination. These issues need to be analysed and brought into the debate.

In recent years, no doubt for various reasons, public and institutional interest in racism has seemed to weaken. Though there is institutional activity, in industrial societies there is less sense of urgency or public outrage. No doubt the abolition of *apartheid* was itself a factor in this. At the same time, however, governments

in the industrialised world (particularly in Western Europe, North America, Australasia, Japan and New Zealand) and beyond (Eastern Europe, South Africa, Tanzania) have adopted much stricter policies to curb migration. These policies, which particularly target immigrants from the poorer South, are themselves open to the charge that they are racist. In addition, governments and inter-governmental institutions have become deeply engaged in “new wars”, particularly in Eastern Europe and sub-Saharan Africa, which have spawned a vocabulary of “ethnic cleansing”, “tribalism” and “ethnic conflict”. While seeming to be more specific, this vocabulary has often obscured the racial or racist dimensions of such conflicts and thereby confused discussion of racial discrimination in general.



## The concept and nature of racism

A victim of racism experiences the deepest feelings of offence, humiliation, shame and pain. It is a denial of his or her claim to be fully human. In this sense, those who suffer racism are in a privileged position to say when behaviour or language is racist or not. Standards and laws to address racial discrimination that failed to reflect the experience of those who are its victims would not be appropriate or effective. At the same time, objectivity in setting standards is essential. It would be equally inappropriate to set legal standards that could invite subjective definition. While it is not feasible to give detailed attention to the technical and legal aspects of definition in this short paper, when speaking of racism and racial discrimination, to what are we referring?

Individuals naturally identify themselves by reference to the group to which they belong. They think in terms of family and “us” and learn to see others as foreigners, strangers, guests or enemies. From taking pride in the achievements of “our” nation, clan or football team, it is but a simple step to see others in opposite terms – and another step to see different groups and their members as less deserving, inferior, less human, not truly human. At this point, the projection of a natural sense of identity to exclude others and deny their humanity becomes pathological.

Various religious and academic theories have been developed to support racial worldviews. Racist philosophies underpinned slavery and colonialism. The idea of a *mission civilisatrice* justified religious and cultural oppression. Both Nazism and *apartheid* reconstructed the entire state around a racist ideology. Similarly, in many places, anti-colonial nationalism was also framed in ways that created and perpetuated discrimination on grounds of race.

Racist theories are still widespread. Legally and illegally, particularly in the United States but also in Europe, numerous racist Internet websites spread propaganda cheaply and globally. Most proponents of such theories – whether they are white supremacists in the United States, Hindu conservatives in India, Hutu extremists in Rwanda or Tutsi extremists in Burundi, or supporters of policies that discriminate against the Roma in Hungary or against Haitians in the Dominican Republic – tend to construct a pseudo-scientific version of history that justifies their claim to superiority. At the same time, they dehumanise those they believe are less equal. The group that is discriminated against is said to have genetic predispositions towards criminal tendencies, to be feckless sexually or financially, to be less successful academically, to be unemployed by choice and so on. In extreme cases, the victims are described as more animal-like than human. Because racial discrimination directly or indirectly prevents groups that are discriminated against from getting equal access to essential services – housing,

education, employment, health facilities, marriage across the line of discrimination – these claims in time become partially fulfilled wherever the group that discriminates achieves a measure of power. At the extreme, such systems can produce systemic discrimination that covers every aspect of life, including religion, as in the Hindu caste system, which has socially isolated – and impoverished – Dalits (“untouchables”) for over one thousand years. Once such systems are established, they are complete worlds and it is exceptionally difficult to change them consensually.

Overcoming racist behaviour (and eventually racial discrimination) therefore requires addressing attitudes at all levels: personal feelings of individual and group superiority, expressed privately, within the family, and socially (at school and in college); institutional cultures, which comfort, justify and perpetuate racism in the workplace, the school, or place of worship; and attitudes in institutions of the state – in the offices of ministers and judges, in universities and police stations and barracks. Racist views are deeply entrenched in the values of many societies, in their ideology and their religious, political and cultural assumptions. The caste system is one example. Nazism and *apartheid* are other obvious cases. But societies in the Caribbean – or Madagascar, Brazil, or China – also face a difficult problem of general cultural attitudes, which cause many people to deny the equal status of those darker than themselves.

These examples demonstrate that in many cases race is made use of, or even invented, to justify discrimination. Race or a myth of race serves political ends. In the Dominican Republic, the status of “native” (Indians) was invented and officially given superior status – even though the original population of the Dominican Republic and Haiti was eliminated during the initial occupation by Europeans – because this supported the political claim that (allegedly) paler, straight-haired Dominicans were superior to (allegedly) darker-skinned Haitians. In India, Dalits are not physically or racially distinguishable from members of higher castes, but are treated as distinct and inferior to such a degree that they are not allowed to touch a higher-caste person or drink from the same cup. In Rwanda, the alleged racial difference between Hutus and Tutsis, which was originally advanced by German and Belgian scholars during colonial rule, seems to have little foundation in history or descent. In these and many other cases, race is a political issue because a racial or racist ideology has made it one (in addition to the cultural and political dimensions). Racism created and sustained the relevant distinctions of race on which social and economic discrimination in these societies depend. It is a social construct that created and then justified patterns of inequality and discrimination. Similarly, there is a direct connection between racist theories and ideologies (and policies and practices informed by them) and the economic systems that depend on the exploitation of disadvantaged groups.

Racism thus has three elements: (i) it is a *vision* of society that is composed of inherently different groups; (ii) it includes an explicit or implicit *belief* that these

different groups are unequal by nature – often enough based on a Darwinian interpretation of history; and (iii) it shapes and manipulates these ideas into a programme of political action. Combined, these three components give racism its force.

It is in this context that the international definition, used by the United Nations, should be read. Article 1.1. of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1965) defines racial discrimination as:

any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life.

The strength of this definition lies in its breadth. It covers distinctions based on race or colour and also distinctions based on descent and national or ethnic origin. It also catches measures that are intended to result in inequality and measures which (with or without intent) have an unequal effect on the rights and freedoms of the individuals and groups involved.

The definition does not meet all requirements and it is not universally accepted. Some consider it altogether too broad. It does not cover discrimination based on gender (though to a point this is addressed by the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women). Problems have arisen because it permits states to distinguish in law between citizens and non-citizens (Article 1.2). Whenever new issues emerge, inevitably there is debate about whether they fall within or outside agreed definitions. While it has a vital role to play, therefore, the Convention does not cover all the issues that may need to be considered.

Whatever definitions are used, care should be taken to maintain a clear focus. The concept of racism should not be overstretched. Yet, forms of racism and racial discrimination are to be found in all societies and in many areas of life, and need to be named – however complex or subtle they may be. *Only when named can racism be recognised, understood, and eventually addressed effectively.* Since defining racism is not straightforward, meeting this objective is not straightforward either. The denial that discrimination or prejudice is racial is almost as ubiquitous as the prejudice itself, and is itself a primary obstacle to progress.

## A typology of denial

Denial of racism takes many forms.<sup>1</sup> At the extremes are *denial in good faith* (“I didn’t know”) and the *outright lie*, when truth is deliberately denied using falsehoods, misinformation or evasion. Most denial, however, lies between. There is a partial knowing, a knowing-without-knowing, a knowing that is suppressed.

It is often assumed that better public education will cause this grey area to shrink, and that most unwilling racism would eventually disappear. Experience suggests this may be too sanguine. Racist attitudes appear to lie very deep. It may be that we suppress awareness of racism, not because it is too painful to face but because we cannot be bothered, because it does not hurt most of us or affect our lives. Fifty years after Nazism some still deny the facts of the Holocaust – and many even in Europe are scarcely aware that at least 500,000 Roma were murdered by the Nazis. Even the scale of the killing remains obscure.

Sometimes the *facts* themselves are denied. An incident is said not to have happened or to have been exaggerated. Facts are redescribed to be less grave or offensive. In this way, states may deny that racial minorities exist within their borders, as Turkey denies that there is a distinct Kurdish identity or Bulgaria denied in the 1980s the presence of a distinct Turkish minority within its borders.

In some cases, the interpretation of facts is denied. That an incident occurred may be acknowledged, but racist motives or implications are denied. Thus, the Sudanese government claimed that its decision to impose Islamic law on the Christian population of southern Sudan was merely the normal extension of laws appropriate in an Arab state. The government of Japan argued that its discriminatory treatment of Koreans living in Japan, including its refusal to grant them citizenship rights, was merely a technical issue of nationality. The Czech Republic explained that its policy of placing Roma children in special schools for the mentally handicapped was merely an appropriate response to differences in intellectual attainment.<sup>2</sup> Western European or North American authorities are frequently reluctant to treat crimes against black people as racially motivated. Policies that have racially discriminatory effects are presented as if they are justified by social and economic inequality, and are not a human rights problem.

<sup>1</sup> In drafting this section, we have drawn particularly on the work of professor Stanley Cohen, *Denial and Acknowledgement – The Impact of Information about Human Rights Violations*. Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, 1995. Pages 19-58 are especially relevant.

<sup>2</sup> Academic research has shown that, compared to other groups, up to twenty-seven times more Roma children are placed in special schools.

Often, a *social consensus* prevents racism from being acknowledged. In prosperous democratic Western Europe, a consensus has formed that says the “flow of refugees must be stemmed”. It is believed, essentially without foundation, that refugees pose a threat to the stability of society. This attitude is racist but not acknowledged as such.

*Euphemism* is associated with this form of denial. Terms like “ethnicity” and “tribal” can be misused to deny or obscure racism. Terms such as “guest worker”, “host state”, “new immigrant”, and even “ethnic minority” reinforce stereotypes or confuse understanding of the real relationships at play. A constant emphasis on illegal immigration confirms the racist notion that all immigrants are prone to crime. A language of “colour-blindness” and “multiculturalism” is sometimes used to efface real ethnic and cultural differences. These portrayals are harmful because they disguise politically important information. In the United States, for instance, they make white poverty invisible by implying that welfare recipients are uniformly black. In fact, though a higher proportion of the black population receives welfare, the majority of recipients are white.

In other cases, moral responsibility is denied. Research shows that the *indifference* of bystanders is a fundamental cause of ethnic violence. This might be called *implicatory denial*. Passers-by do not stop when a street-child is beaten by police, and argue (with themselves or others) that their intervention will have no impact or that they are too busy, or that it is the job of others to sort out these problems.

A similar type of rationalising denial focuses only on legal equality or on equality of opportunity, whether or not these ideals can be attained in existing circumstances. In reporting to the United Nations on the implementation of the Convention against Racism, some thirty states said that in their countries “there was no racism” and many of them did so on the grounds that their constitutions and laws proclaimed the ideal of equality or outlawed discrimination. Yet it is evident that *neither the formal declaration of equality nor the formal prohibition of racism or racial discrimination will by themselves eradicate racism*, any more than the prohibition of other crimes leads to universal lawful behaviour. It is the lack of implementation of existing legislation which is partly to blame for the persistence of behaviour that it purports to outlaw.

The former socialist states cultivated a particular form of denial. Their constitutions linked rights with personal duties. All too often, this was used to justify repression – for instance, on the grounds that right of free speech implied a duty to support the socialist system. Advocacy of minority rights, especially support for secession but sometimes even the right to an identity or language, was often considered by such governments to be an abuse of free speech. Capitalism deflects responsibility differently, by affirming that individuals create their own life chances

and that the state and society have a limited duty to assist or protect those who suffer from discrimination or misfortune.

Moral responsibility is deflected in many other ways. Successful individuals from groups that suffer discrimination are cited as evidence of progress, even if they are a rare exception. Or it is presumed that history is progressive and historical facts that tell an opposite story are ignored. Following the brutal killing of a black man, who was dragged to his death behind a car in Jasper, Texas in June 1998, the local authorities claimed the murder was an “isolated case” – though similar dragging killings had occurred in recent years and the headquarters of the Ku Klux Klan were in the neighbouring town.

Condemning the critic (shooting the messenger) is another form of denial. When northern human rights organisations or governments criticise racial discrimination, they are said to be motivated by neo-colonialism or capitalism, or Christian or Zionist bias. At the individual level, individuals who challenge discrimination are said to display “political correctness”, implying that this discredits what they say.

## **Complex issues and racism**

Racism and discrimination are one factor among many in complex and large-scale processes. Examples might include the integration of the global economy, the impact of the media and new technology, or the evolution of gender relations. It is not always easy to assess the role racism plays, as cause or as effect, in some of these processes, and here too issues of definition and “naming” arise. There is no space here to analyse the issues in depth, but we indicate below some of the elements that might be considered.

### **Multiple discrimination**

In many circumstances, women, the disabled, the elderly and children experience double (even triple) discrimination. In conflicts, for example in the former Yugoslavia, women displaced by ethnic cleansing have been raped or killed by those who also evicted them. Dalit women have been sexually abused by landlords and police in India to intimidate their communities and crush dissent. Women and children who are both poor and from minority communities are often singled out for sexual exploitation. A high proportion of street children in many countries, in Latin America for example, are from minority communities; they are victims of racial discrimination and at the same time subject to sexual exploitation and violence or other forms of abuse from police.

In general, vulnerable groups within communities that suffer racism are disproportionately discriminated against. In many cases, furthermore, such groups suffer discrimination within their own community (as women, for example) in addition to racial discrimination from the wider community outside. Policies to address the needs of such groups ought obviously to consider these complicating factors.

### **Population movements**

Large movements of population have occurred in several parts of the world in recent years, driven particularly by conflict but also by poverty and environmental stress.<sup>3</sup> Many of these movements have been within countries or across local borders. However, the development of modern transport has made it easier for people to move much longer distances, and large numbers of migrants try, by legal and illegal means, to enter the industrial economies, to which they are attracted for many reasons including opportunities for employment. Some of the world’s poorest societies have accepted large numbers of migrants and displaced

<sup>3</sup> The International Labour Office estimates that there are eighty to ninety-seven million international migrants. Of these, fourteen million are recognised under the programme of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Approximately one hundred and twenty-five million individuals live outside their country of origin.

people and have often shown tolerance and generosity. By contrast, though more able to absorb people, industrialised states have placed higher barriers in the way of migrants, and in doing so have made it harder even for refugees to find international sanctuary. In addition to legal obstacles, some political leaders and the media have promoted a negative image of migrants, who are widely described by political leaders and the media in many industrialised societies as likely to be criminal, likely to be a financial burden on the state, likely to bring drugs or carry diseases and so forth.

The accelerated encounter between (Southern) immigrants and (Northern) residents encourages social differentiation that may lead to competition, rejection, hostility, and exclusion (including residential segregation and ethnic ghettos). Where they occur, these processes enhance a mutual perception of ethnic incompatibility and can lead to antagonism and violence.

In practice, *industrial economies are criminalising the migration of particular nationalities*, although migration has been a consistent feature of human society throughout history and at different times their own development has depended upon it and may do again. Members of such groups become suspects and are often treated as potential criminals by police and local authorities, irrespective of whether they have in fact engaged in criminal activity. Their stigmatisation by political leaders and in the media, and the enactment of legal obstacles to migration, have encouraged many citizens in industrialised countries to perceive migrants as beings who have fewer rights and do not need to be treated as equal human beings. Consequently, xenophobia has become a common and widespread phenomenon in many immigrant-receiving countries. That has been true, for instance, for Arab and West African immigrants in France, Spain and Italy, for Turks in Germany, for Moluccans and Surinamese in the Netherlands, for Koreans in Japan, Angolans in Portugal, Congolese in Belgium, Africans in Russia and China, and Hispanics in the United States.

Such an approach inherently encourages and comforts racist attitudes and over time is likely to license forms of racial discrimination. Less wealthy states do not face the same pressure to absorb economic migrants, but probably share fundamentally similar attitudes. Minorities and immigrants in many non-industrial states also face discrimination – as Egyptians and Palestinians do in Kuwait. It is significant that, as of December 1999, nine years after its adoption, only twelve states had ratified the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families.

### **Self-determination and national minorities**

The presence of minorities within states raises particularly difficult issues wherever their right to recognition and particularity must be balanced against the democratic right of other minorities or the majority. When states and societies fail to achieve such a balance, some of the most bitter and persistent social and



political conflicts result. This is evident in Rwanda, Burundi, Sri Lanka, or the former Yugoslavia.

The rise and fall of empires also aggravate nationalist questions. The European powers created frontiers in their colonies that reflected their own economic or political interests rather than natural boundaries. When new states formed at decolonisation, many of them had little historical or natural identity; they were not willing to accommodate minorities or were based on discriminatory practices. Such issues also arose in parts of the Ottoman Empire. In Turkey itself, the Kurds were for many years referred to as “mountain Turks”, and many expressions of their cultural, linguistic and ethnic identity are still ruthlessly suppressed. During the 1980s, the Bulgarian government attempted to eradicate all expressions of a separate Turkish identity, forcing members of the Turkish community to adopt Bulgarian names and erasing Turkish names from gravestones. Similarly, China’s decision to exercise direct control over Tibet, which historically had recognised a loose form of Chinese sovereignty, triggered violent oppression and prolonged and bitter resistance.

Breaking up political entities based on a myth of single nationhood is the most obvious way to give effect to the principle of self-determination, but it creates considerable dangers. In Greece, Ireland, Korea and other countries, exalted and often artificial conceptions of history and nationhood accompanied the fight for independence, bestowing on the new states that emerged a straitened or exclusive identity that complicated and shackled their political evolution. The nationalism of some of the “new democracies” in Central and Eastern Europe, following the disintegration of the Soviet Empire, has worsened the oppression of many minorities. Yugoslavia’s disintegration led to particularly violent discrimination. The ethnic cleansing of entire regions not only triggered a bitter civil war but eventually international military intervention as well.

Sometimes, regions or societies have developed a shared, exclusive self-view. For many centuries, the West defined itself as Christian and white; this view still implicitly (mis)informs much national debate and inspires the racist rhetoric of some politicians in Austria, Switzerland and France. In Germany, such attitudes caused prolonged opposition to the granting of German nationality to German-born Turks. In France, it continues to cause distrust and exclusion of the Muslim minority. In the United States, it perpetuates the exclusion and oppression of African-Americans, Hispanics and native Indians. It inspired the “Fortress Europe” approach to migration of the European Union.

The Arab world has two main, competing visions of identity: Islamist and Arab-nationalist. The first would exclude non-Muslims, the second non-Arabs from the polity, while both fail to take account of religious sub-identities such as Sunna and Shi’a Muslims within their frame of reference. Violent conflicts have occurred within the Arab world between Sunnis and Shi’as, among Shi’a Muslims, between Shi’a Muslims and Christians, and among Christians.

Devolution within states can also aggravate racism. While it allows the dominant group within a devolved region to express its identity more clearly, it may at the same time marginalise other minorities. Renewed nationalism in Scotland and Wales led recently to the formation of new Scottish and Welsh Assemblies. Afro-Caribbeans and Asians, who have always been under-represented in the national parliament, currently have no representation at all in these new bodies. The principle of devolution is itself neutral: it is the context and the process followed that determine whether the outcome promotes or reduces racism and discrimination.

It should be noted, finally, that, although ethnic minorities are often victims of discrimination, it is primarily because they are politically or economically weak. Majority groups also face discrimination when they are similarly vulnerable. South Africa under *apartheid* is an obvious example; some would also cite the situation of the Hutus in Burundi. In this sense, racial discrimination is not about numbers or size, but essentially about vulnerability.

### **Poverty and marginalisation**

Racism is also about distribution of resources. In the globalised market economy, the losers are frequently – if not systematically – members of certain ethnic groups whose particular vulnerability results partly from a history of discrimination, oppression and exploitation. In contrast to fifty years ago, when it was closely linked to colonialism, contemporary racism adopts the form of xenophobia and social exclusion.

*In general, racial discrimination impoverishes and socially deprives people who suffer it. They are denied access (or equal access) to land, jobs, education, medical facilities, family planning and housing. Poverty and social disadvantage are then cited as evidence to confirm and justify the racial prejudices and discriminatory practices of the dominant group. Facts on crime, ill health, illiteracy, prostitution and so forth are seized upon as evidence that the minority group is less able or is responsible for its own predicament. This cycle of reinforcement is not confined to a small category of societies. Racism and racial discrimination are presented as social problems as often in the parliaments and media of industrialised states as in the parliaments and media of developing or impoverished countries. The persecution and murder of street children is depicted in Brazil as the effect of a societal problem, just as the exclusion rates of black boys in British schools (six times higher than the average) is attributed to behavioural problems and cultural maladjustment.*

In certain labour markets, some (ethnic) groups have access only to low-paid jobs, while (dominant) groups take most of the better posts. In such systems, particular groups, often identified racially, become identified with low-paying economic niches, which then appear to be reserved for them. Even though the individuals caught in these patterns can do little to remedy their effects, the blame falls on the

victims and their “culture” rather than on the economic structures and institutions.

Unregulated markets have tended to reproduce, and have often deepened, economic and social inequality. Even in industrialised economies, large numbers of people have lost their employment or been forced into economically marginal work because they have not acquired modern skills or because their skills have been overtaken by technical change. For the majority of people living in poor countries, the outlook is worse. Their economies attract little capital and generate few forms of employment, and their citizens earn lower wages and usually work in greater insecurity and worse conditions. The state, which provided the largest source of jobs in such countries, is shrinking. Welfare benefits are often negligible. While benefits accrue to overseas investors and to local political and economic élites, the poorest of the poor, including the racially oppressed, are further marginalised. Emigration can only ever be a partial solution.

The integration of nations, communities, and markets using new communication technologies has produced massive concentration of wealth and power, mostly in the North. Yet excessive emphasis on market economics has had the effect of marginalising millions of people (mostly in the South) from the world economy. Without access to technology or markets, whole societies are virtually doomed to exclusion. Without regulation and appropriate social and development policies, a policy of privatisation extended across the globe will reinforce patterns of exploitation of the South by the North and thereby the racism that this exploitation perpetuates.

In this context, the behaviour of national and international companies will be increasingly influential. They have a duty to recruit fairly and treat employees without discrimination. Covert racism can flourish in private companies just as well as in local or national government. Like senior government officials, company managers can lead by example, and require their companies to operate in ways that are rigorously non-discriminatory, and that welcome cultural and social plurality.

The term “structural racism” refers to forms of racism and discrimination that are institutionalised, rather than individual, generated by the way economic and social institutions operate. In the corporate world, in local government, in education systems, discrimination occurs through subtle mechanisms in which racism is often difficult to detect, indirect and “unprovable”. Members of communities that suffer discrimination cannot easily establish that they do not have equal access to housing, when it is priced beyond their means. It is difficult to ascertain in court that companies and local government offices recruit and promote unfairly, when managers have written anti-discrimination regulations and claim to have honoured them. This is compounded by the fact that, in many places, there is a lack of reliable demographic information and racial data gathering which makes it impossible to determine whether racial discrimination exists or what its

manifestations and dimensions might be.

Structural racism and institutionalised covert racism generate particular mistrust and alienation, especially when they are established within societies in which discrimination is illegal, precisely because the effect is evident but the cause is hard to prove. Even where public education programmes have been run for many years, and quite sophisticated legislation enacted that makes racial discrimination illegal, the perception that certain (ethnic) groups have “problems” remains dominant. So far, states have not successfully addressed and certainly have not changed public attitudes. *Too often, national anti-discrimination legislation lacks serious and committed enforcement.* As often, covert discrimination evolves as fast as legislation to curb it. Rules exist, but managers walk round them, respecting the letter of the law but not its intention. In many of the societies in which regulations have been passed that ban racial discrimination, the values of racial equality have not been socially internalised. As a result, people do not mobilise in their defence.

To change this, political leaders and those in positions of authority will probably need to support more actively a concerted and integrated approach that trains people to understand racial attitudes and support the values that underpin laws against discrimination. In any such strategy, political parties, educational institutions, the media, trade unions and other non-governmental organisations can influence political debate and public opinion both positively and negatively, and political leaders have a vital responsibility because they define the limits of what is and what is not acceptable.

### **The role of the state**

In any strategy to deal with racism, the state has a central role. In the worst cases of genocidal and institutional racism this century – Nazi Germany, *apartheid* South Africa, 1994 Rwanda – governments have played an active and distinctive role in promulgating racist values and discriminatory legislation. The responsibilities of government are fundamental – to educate, to enact fair laws, to ensure that justice is administered impartially, and to maintain standards of fairness in political and economic life.

Specifically, states have a duty to protect the rights of non-citizens who live within their borders as well as citizens; to enact laws that ban racial discrimination and ensure that officials – including judicial officials – understand those laws, and apply them; to monitor actively the incidence of racism and racial discrimination in their own institutions and societies and condemn it publicly wherever it is found; to ensure institutions or officials of the state that undermine or deny fair treatment to people on racial grounds are sanctioned and punished; and to monitor and act against covert racism as it appears (and not only be concerned by explicit and intentional racism). In all these areas, and specifically in relation to policies that are on their face racially neutral but racially discriminatory in their impact, governments

should test the success of their policies by whether they have racially discriminatory effects, not merely in terms of their form or intention.

Some states are retreating from a number of their basic functions and in the process are in danger of losing sight of the need to ensure fairness, justice and equality of opportunity in their societies. As already noted, privatisation that is not socially regulated and balanced by effective social policies will tend to increase economic inequality and social marginalisation and thereby perpetuate entrenched racism. In various societies, the social welfare of immigrants and refugees, the homeless and other socially deprived groups is increasingly left to churches and private charities. Policies that reduce services provided by the state are likely to hurt vulnerable and poor groups first and most, and some of these will also be subject to racial discrimination. Economic and social policies should also be judged by their racially discriminatory effects, not merely in terms of their form or intention.

The shift of social responsibility from the state to private institutions increasingly extends also to law, order, and other central responsibilities of the state. In South Africa, there are now more private police and security personnel than government police officers, with the result that the rich are protected more expensively and the poor less than ever. Private corporations run prisons in the United States and in the United Kingdom. *Adequate laws, access to court, a willingness to interpret the law broadly and effectively, and a determination on the part of the courts to enforce the law, are all essential prerequisites for the eradication of racism.* The state maintains the basic institutions supporting the rule of law: the military, the police, the law and the courts. These institutions are vital to action against racism. Even when laws are inadequate, and victims cannot get access to court or courts fail to uphold the law, legal action can still be effective. Individual cases can set precedents, court verdicts can extend the application and interpretation of laws, and trials can change public opinion.

The police occupy a critical position. Police forces that uphold the law and standards of fairness are an immense force for good. Conversely, where police institutions are corrupt, collude in racism, or are dominated by groups that hold racist values, they can do incalculable harm to efforts to increase social trust and reduce discrimination and prejudice. *A racist and discriminatory police force is the most obvious symptom of a racist society.* It is crucial to punish police who are found guilty of racist or discriminatory behaviour.

### **Conflict**

*Intra- and inter-state conflict is closely associated with political manipulation of racial ideas and social polarisation.* Political mobilisation linked to real and imagined group differences frequently arises where the state's administrative structures and legal institutions distribute resources on ethnic criteria. The former Yugoslavia and Rwanda are cases in point. So is the situation of Palestinians in

Israel where the Israeli state continues to exclude Palestinians from equal access to resources and from full participation in the political system.

Racism can trigger conflicts that impact on national identity in three ways: they cause other nations or national groups to be demonised; they hasten the physical and social segregation of communities; and they “close the ranks”, making impossible identification with transsocial goals and alternative, multiple identities. In Rwanda and in Kosovo, extremists played upon the fears and frustrations of the populace. Racist discourse was used to deepen group suspicion and hatred. In time, this led to extreme violence. In Rwanda, Hutu militias slaughtered Tutsis en masse, and in Kosovo Albanians were forcibly deported. In both cases, women and children were among those who were imprisoned, raped, tortured and murdered. These crimes were at their core political acts driven by racist ideology.

Hate speech is most likely to cause violent conflict where government institutions monopolise the provision of information and few public forums promote the free exchange of ideas. Racist discourse, usually through a historical mythology, creates a culture of victimisation. A person who feels a victim more easily becomes a perpetrator. Many kinds of hate propaganda help to create a culture of victimisation, but racist discourse is particularly effective. Once a human being can be called genetically inferior or less than human, killing becomes justified and therefore easy.

After violence has occurred, it is extremely difficult to overcome fear and mistrust. Where there is racism in addition (often combined with social and economic inequalities), the task of social recovery is even harder to achieve. A number of responses have been explored in various conflicts, including separation, political autonomy and other means of self-determination, peace and truth commissions, arrest and trial of those responsible for abuses, new constitutional and legal regimes that affirm equality and address causes of discrimination and suspicion, the forging of new political alliances that consciously challenge and deny the old order. None of these, alone, is a panacea.

## The political economy of racism

As a general rule racism and discrimination serve to protect the political and economic interests of those who discriminate. Oppressed minorities are frequently denied access to land or to other means of economic development as a matter of policy. Areas occupied by such groups receive little investment. Members of these groups are screened out from the best schools, from the best medical treatment, and from better housing. The benefits of discrimination are systemic: it is in the interest of privileged groups to maintain such political and economic discrimination. In this sense, racism and racial discrimination can be described as rational responses within rational systems.

As a result, specific groups suffer specific and systemic social, economic and political exploitation and deprivation. In such systems, abuse and destitution are enforced by the military and the police, and by the political and often the judicial élite.

Today, it is taken for granted that the racist system of slavery justified and entrenched a social order that brought wealth and privilege to slave-owning groups, and misery and loss of liberty to the communities that were enslaved. It is less often remembered, that, in between, a myriad of different social and economic groups managed and mediated the economic and political arrangements that made slavery possible – soldiers and ships' crews, guides and translators, chiefs and administrators and clergy and so on. In the United States, segregation similarly protected a social and economic order that brought great benefit to a minority, and oppressed those who were black – while many layers of people in between participated more or less and benefited more or less from that system. Most white people identified with the thinking that made the system of segregation feasible; they sympathised with the laws that legalised discrimination. But many whites were also poor, and a great number drew indifferent benefits from the exploitation in which they participated.

In South Africa, *apartheid* imposed an extraordinarily complex web of regulations to maintain distinctions between people living in the country. Most white people clearly identified with the racial values of that system and collectively they benefited economically from the systemic exploitation of the black majority. Even here, nevertheless, numerous intermediary groups, whose participation was necessary to the system, benefited only marginally – notably Indian and Coloured people who were at once relatively victimised and relatively privileged by *apartheid*. It can be argued that *apartheid* collapsed because it could no longer spread the benefits of discrimination widely enough, just as, arguably, slavery and segregation in the United States collapsed because these systems could no longer bring adequate economic benefit to the range of interest groups that were

required to sustain them politically. The interests of intermediary groups in discriminatory systems are not simple and can be of crucial importance in any reform process.

The caste system in India is another powerful and holistic structure, although the Indian Government has passed legislation banning discrimination against Dalit people. Lower castes have an interest in maintaining the system, and are often staunch defenders of their degrees of privilege. Yet the economic benefits that small landowners or shopkeepers derive from this system – the margin between loss and profit, food and hunger – is minute. Many of the intermediaries on whom the system depends are themselves acutely vulnerable.

Acknowledging this, it is often argued that entrenched racist attitudes are primarily found and reproduced by vulnerable intermediary groups – unskilled white people in South Africa, the lower middle class in Poujadist and LePenist France, urban unskilled working class whites in the United Kingdom and elsewhere. This is a partial truth, for there is mounting evidence that material security does not necessarily generate generosity towards the less well off. Often, it engenders indifference, a sense of threat and attitudes among the rich that are no less intolerant and discriminatory. *The combination in industrialised societies of a violent racist reaction among vulnerable unskilled groups who have been marginalised by global change, and fear among educated professionals for whom global change has brought unexpected prosperity, is politically a dangerous one.*

Ideology continues to play a particularly crucial role in the persistence of racism. For instance, it was a religious tradition of charity and duty – now weakened in modern industrial economies – which traditionally tempered the self-interest of the well off in European societies. Such traditions continue to provide the moral foundation for public welfare policies in most cultures. Ideology also provides the most powerful foundations for social behaviour that is racially intolerant. The discrimination and racial violence suffered by Jews in most countries of Europe was rooted and justified by a prejudice against Jewry that was deeply entrenched in Christian thinking (the Catholic Church officially recognised the concept of “The Perfid Jew” until the Second Vatican Council). The complex prohibitions of India’s caste system, internalised and practised daily, and spiritually validated, creates conditions in which it is extremely difficult for many Hindus to think differently, or change their conduct towards Dalit people.

Where populations involved in entrenched conflicts internalise value systems that establish and maintain social discrimination – as in Northern Ireland, Burundi, Palestine or the former Yugoslavia – it becomes difficult to break down those attitudes. This is so even when the majority of the people that are involved themselves perceive that the conflict is undesirable and against the long-term interests of both sides. Great courage and vision come to be required, as well as



international political and financial assistance, to bring about any substantive increase in trust or a change of attitude.

This warns of the difficulties involved in removing entrenched attitudes of racism, not only from among those who oppress but also from among the oppressed. Over time, they too internalise the values of resistance or subjugation, as a form of defence or a means of survival. For neither side is change a simple process of cleansing or liberation.

## The responses of victims

Those who suffer racism respond in a variety of ways. *Some communities internalise the values of the system that oppresses them.* Many Hindus of low caste accept their status in the belief that they have been morally guilty in a previous life. To some extent, such fatalistic perceptions are also found among the indigenous communities in Guatemala, Mexico and Peru. At a different level, children in particular tend to assume, if they suffer discrimination or abuse, that they are responsible or partly responsible for the behaviour of others towards them.

A second response of *oppressed communities is to isolate themselves* from the larger society that oppresses them. Communities live separately, often literally. They may fall back upon a distinct culture, and may do so in a way that is negatively inward looking. Such a response also internalises, though in a different way, the expectations of the wider society. An extreme example is the ghetto. A less extreme example is offered by the informal and complex physical compartmentalisation and layering of numerous minorities within cities in the United States.

Inward-looking *minority cultures can themselves become oppressive.* In the United Kingdom, the Asian community suffers considerably from racism, and has responded by closing in around its culture, which has become authoritarian in certain respects. This reaction is mainly expressed at the expense of women, many of whom are denied some of their basic rights. One effect of racial discrimination in certain societies, therefore, is to strengthen intolerance and authoritarianism within oppressed cultures.

A different response to racial discrimination is *self-restraint*. People choose, often with mixed feelings, to live within the limits and expectations of the society that surrounds them. An example might be the way that sport has come to be a domain in which black people excel. It is a path both to success and a form of stereotyping. Many members of groups that suffer discrimination censor themselves, lower their expectations, allow less able individuals from other groups to get ahead of them, because they recognise the risks they will incur by competing. Such semi-voluntary discretion, even under-achievement, is a significant issue in many societies. This half-conscious or privately acknowledged sense of fear and intimidation, which may have no explicit cause, is rarely discussed even within the oppressed communities themselves. It should be an issue for policy-makers who want to attack the roots of racism and discrimination.

Another response of victims is to adopt (and in doing so, also subvert) the stereotypical behaviour that prejudice expects of them. In reality, this response

can become self-fulfilling and trap victims within the stereotype they are quite consciously assuming.

Some victims of racial oppression oppress those who are below them. *Victims of racism are not themselves immune from racist attitudes.* In many cases, people who are treated as inferior seem to feel the need to find others over whom they can claim superiority. Societies in which this process occurs become not merely racialised but develop hierarchies around racial status. Racism and discrimination cascade down the system, falling ever more heavily on the poorest and most vulnerable. *Apartheid* was clearly such a system; the caste system in India is another. In other cases, this response is driven by anger – as when oppressed groups persecute those who subjugated them once they have been overthrown. The response of Kosovar Albanians, following international military intervention in Kosovo, is a recent instance.

Even the oppressed may invest in the status quo. To the extent that they do, it is often difficult for oppressed groups to co-operate with one another to secure their common and greater interest. An extreme example might be some societies in the Caribbean, where racial layering is very sophisticated, and relatively pale members of the society consider themselves superior to darker people in the same society. Political responsibility for this state of affairs, and for many other failures of the society, is attributed to slavery and white racism. Blame can rightly be attributed, but no solution to these problems will be found while the communities involved reproduce and invest in complex distinctions of colour and status.

Upward mobility can also divide communities. In the United States, over the course of one generation, significant numbers of African-Americans and Hispanics have successfully educated themselves and become professionals. Social gaps may open within such groups when some of those who have become prosperous feel that the poor in their community are dragging them down, reinforcing stereotypes they are trying to escape. The temptation to break away from the poverty and degradation associated with belonging to a racially oppressed group is strong. Extremist groups in the United States have become sophisticated about taking advantage of these feelings and insecurities. Blacks have mobilised to oppose the presence of Mexican immigrant workers. The rise of a new African-American (and Korean and Vietnamese and Chinese and Hispanic) middle class creates new layers of ambivalence, which are racially exploited, even as new spaces open in which to create a more open and diverse society.

*These newer forms of racism are masked.* Politically, a statistical game can be played. Progress can be assessed in terms of the numbers of graduates from communities that suffer racial discrimination, or the number of senior executives, diplomats, successful athletes, or film and music celebrities. Yet what matters is not only the number of minority judges and minority politicians and officers, but also whether institutional structures and institutional discrimination have changed.

In this regard, it is not an accident that, after forty years of civil rights action in the United States, most prisoners on death row and a high proportion of American prisoners are black.

Some people respond to racial oppression by building a strong, separate group identity, which they publicly affirm and project. People who suffer racial discrimination need to empower themselves to overcome it, but an exaggerated emphasis on identity can lead to ethnic essentialism, in which members of the group accept moral responsibility only for their own. A philosophical position of this sort encourages a fracturing of society into competing groups that have difficulty in solving common problems and may even perpetuate racist attitudes. An ideology of victimhood can lead those who suffer oppression to blame all wrongs on those that oppress them and so abdicate their own responsibilities. This said, racism – not its victims – is the problem. It is pernicious to blame victims, who in addition are expected to conduct themselves in a generous and disinterested manner towards those who abused and discriminated against them.

## Concluding comments

Transformations in the world economy are having the effect of marginalising those who are poor and least able to take advantage of new opportunities. The state's retreat from a range of social responsibilities renders the same people, in many cases, more vulnerable still. At the same time, that slice of the world's population that has become unexpectedly prosperous as a result of the same global economic changes is increasingly insulated from the poor and those who suffer discrimination of all kinds most acutely – whether in their own countries or internationally. Partly as a result, racism remains present in public awareness, but less pressingly. The indignation that was required to end Nazism and segregation and *apartheid* is somehow banked down and the denial of human dignity that racism represents is less visible.

The law is a powerful instrument for protecting and widening rights. Anti-discrimination laws have been in place for several decades in many countries. Yet racism, in numerous forms, persists. In many places, a dominant group is able to confine a subordinate group to distinct spaces that also confer inferior benefits. It is clear that the law has not changed attitudes. More needs to be done. Strategies that have been successful need to be identified. Enforcement of the law and effective punitive procedures against state authorities that condone or commit racial discrimination, or show racism, are necessary. Improving the record of police forces, in this regard, is essential.

Changing attitudes requires public awareness and education. The evidence shows that this too will not be enough. In very many cases, racism is a rational response in defence of privilege. Education alone will not change the conflict of interests that drives and reproduces it. In some cases, no positive change can occur without economic reform and new economic resources. In other cases, different and more imaginative approaches will be required to break down the layers of denial that cause groups in a society to harass others or disregard their needs.

To eradicate the racism in their midst, societies need to become fairer economically, more accountable politically and more responsible socially and culturally; and these changes need to occur globally. It is true that this is a huge challenge, but so were slavery, segregation, Nazism, and *apartheid*. Much has already been achieved in the last two centuries.



**The following papers were prepared for the meeting:**

- *The role of racism and prejudice in exclusion, marginalisation, and inequality*, by Yasmin Alibhai-Brown
- *Racism and mismanagement of ethnic diversity in the Arab world*, by Saad Eddin Ibrahim.
- *The role of racism as a cause of or factor in wars and civil conflict*, by Julie Mertus
- *Racial and gender discrimination in the global political economy*, by Kinhide Mushakoji
- *Entrenched discrimination – the case of India's 'Untouchables'*, by Smita Narula
- *The denial of racism*, by Dimitrina Petrova
- *Structural racism and trends in the global economy*, by Rodolfo Stavenhagen
- *Obstacle illusions – profiling and preconception in the post-civil rights era*, by Patricia J. Williams

These papers may be downloaded from the Council's Web site:  
<http://www.international-council.org>.

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## **THE PERSISTENCE AND MUTATION OF RACISM**

*The persistence and mutation of racism*, International Council on Human Rights Policy, 2000. ISBN 2-940259-09-7, 28pp., 165mm x 220mm. Available also in French and Spanish. Price: Frs. 15. – (+ Frs. 3.– p.&p.).

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In one form or another racism is to be found in every society on earth. It is associated with certain forms of entrenched poverty and certain kinds of extreme violence. It is a denial of human relationship. Yet, for many people it remains almost invisible, unnoticed except when violence is involved. Those who do not experience it often fail to understand how profoundly offensive it is. As preparations are made for the United Nations World Conference on Racism and Xenophobia in 2001, this short report surveys some of the main issues that preoccupy people who suffer from racism or who study its effects.

### ***racism***

**any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life.**

Article 1, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1965)

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