

# The informational university, the uneven distribution of expertise and the racialization of labour\*

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In his book *Nice Work If You Can Get It*, Andrew Ross opens the final chapter on The Rise of the Global University with the following assessment: 'Higher education has not been immune to the impact of economic globalization. Indeed, its institutions are now on the brink of channeling some of the most dynamic, and therefore destabilizing, tendencies of neoliberal marketization'.<sup>1</sup> Arguably, one of the central reasons higher education embodies the intensity of transformations wrought by neoliberalism has to do with ways in which post-Fordist labour is 'multiplied and divided'.<sup>2</sup>

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The political-economic technologies of measure are key to the division of labour in and across university settings. A quick listing of examples is sufficient to get an idea of what I am talking about here: systems of ranking institutions of higher education within a global frame serve to distinguish universities and the labour within them along national and geocultural lines of division; this in turn shapes the global mobility of students and thus the logic of economic accumulation, again dividing universities, labour and disciplines in terms of market competition and geocultural segmentation. The construction of special economic zones for higher education, which is most notable across the Asian, Middle Eastern and African regions, functions to divide national markets internally and externally along the lines of domestic and global spatialities that have implications for income generation derived from teaching and research activities in terms of the scope of student catchment and institutional sources for research funding.

The political-economic architecture of intellectual property regimes is another state supported device through which lines of division are constructed between what McKenzie Wark has termed the 'vectoral class' (those who proprietise and thus enclose the productive efforts of biopolitical labour) and the 'hacker class' (those engaged in the

collaborative work of co-production and creation of the common).<sup>3</sup> Universities and corporations have sought to further establish systems of measure from such labour through the global rankings of journals and citation indices. Such rankings overwhelmingly favour journals that are part of Anglo-American publishing consortia that over the past 20 years have set out to aggressively takeover the few remaining independent journals that support research and intellectual debate in national and regional settings. The effect of this has been to consolidate the hegemony of global English and erode the connection between the production of knowledge and its frequently local social-political conditions of possibility. This, notwithstanding the fact that the very notion of the local has become enormously complicated with the consolidation of economic and cultural globalisation coupled with the rise of the network society.

Additional lines of division operate in terms of what Andrew Ross calls the 'new geography of work', and what I'm wishing to frame in this essay as the uneven distribution of expertise. Incorporated into the uneven distribution of expertise is the racialisation of labour, both of which connect back to the construction of special economic zones for global universities. It is on this basis that my essay concludes that the 21st century informational university in its global manifestations is in many ways disturbingly similar to programs of institution formation and the management of populations undertaken by 19th century colonial powers. I will develop these aspects of my argument shortly, but first I wish to say a few more things about the multiplication of labour and how this dynamic and condition relates to the rise of the informational university.

## THE INFORMATIONAL UNIVERSITY AND THE PRODUCTION OF THE COMMON

In his book *How the University Works*, Marc Bousquet's crucial insight is that the flexibilisation of labour is at the centre of the informatisation of the university as it embraces the force of neoliberal regimes.<sup>4</sup> This orientation of labour around processes of informatisation draws on work undertaken by various researchers associated with Italian post-*operaismo* thought. One of the key analytical and political precepts developed out of such work, as summarised recently by Tiziana Terranova, makes the distinction between the social production of value and the model of classical political economy, which measures the time and cost of labour in determining the production of commodity value.<sup>5</sup>

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri note that traditional models of measure (e.g. intellectual property regimes, university and journal ranking systems, citation indicators, etc., all of which operate within the contemporary neoliberal, informational university), and thus of the law of value, are in crisis today due to profound contradictions within the force of economic globalisation and the multiple antagonisms between the cooperative logic of biopolitical labour and capitalism's mechanisms of expropriating the wealth of the common as it is produced by the creativity of biopolitical labour.<sup>6</sup> In his dialogue with Negri, Cesare Casarino reiterates this point, noting how the common provides 'the locus of surplus value' for capital, whose apparatuses of capture--or regimes of measure--expropriate the wealth of the common.<sup>7</sup>

A distinction needs to be made here between the concept of *the common* and that of *the commons*. The latter is associated with processes of enclosure and proprietary control of that which was

previously collectively owned and managed. In a neoliberal paradigm, such a process has been marked by the shift of public goods to private ownership. The key point here is that the commons--whether they are understood in terms of ecology, culture or relationships--are predicated on the dual logic of scarcity and ownership, and are thus assumed to be resources in need of protection. Within social democracies, the state is frequently bestowed with such a role. The commons is thus ascribed a representational quality.

The common, by contrast, cannot be owned or managed, most especially by statist formations that assume the identity of the people or the public. The common does not operate within the logic of representation, in other words, and instead is a force mobilised through non-representational relations and the multiplication of biopolitical labour. Nor is the common a resource underscored by the logic of scarcity. And while the common holds an economic potential--something that is made clear in the moment of expropriation--its 'wealth' is not inherently economic. As I have written elsewhere with Soenke Zehle, 'If we understand the *commons* to refer both to the material context and the consequence of practices of peer-production, the *common* is the political potential immanent in such practices. Such an understanding of the common situates it conceptually as the latest iteration of the political; just as there exists an "excess of the political over politics", the affirmation of the common is offered as a condition of possibility for collaborative constitution, for the sharing of affects of love, solidarity or wrath, and for the translation of such affects and experiences across the "irreducible idiomaticity" of ethico-political practices'.<sup>8</sup>

Casarino makes the 'important qualification' that there is always a remainder of the common that is not appropriated by capital. There is the suggestion that this 'outside' or 'externality' provides the point of separation between capital and the common, which otherwise risk becoming indistinguishable. The precise content of this common is left without elaboration by Casarino. My sense is that asymmetrical institutional-social temporalities between capital and the common are key here. Where the university is often accused of being 'out of time' or 'too slow' by those who heavily identify with the business sector and industry, perhaps one could also suggest that the time of the common and living labour holds a special complexity that refuses absorption into capital's apparatuses of capture and regimes of measure, which are always circumscribed in a way that living labour is not. I can only note such speculations in passing--the empirical-conceptual content here is the stuff of future research.

When transferred to the setting of the university and its transformation under conditions of economic globalisation, questions such as the following emerge: How does the social production of value (brand desire, affect, subjectivity, online social networking, etc.) shape the commodity value of the university degree? What relation does this have with the globalisation of higher education? And how does the informational university--defined increasingly by privatisation (as distinct from being a public good), labour flexibility and informational management--relate to the social production of value?

Let me outline in concrete fashion how the social production of value shapes the commodity value of the university degree. Anyone who is astute to the conditions of cognitive labour within universities will not have trouble making the connection between diminishing numbers of full-time faculty, increasing casualisation of teaching staff, the massive expansion in administrative

labour and the viral-like proliferation of managerial personas, the structural reproduction of adolescent research subjectivities through short-time contracts for junior researchers on cross-university projects and what I would term the incapacity of the disciplines to invent new conceptual and methodological idioms of practice.

It is a well known if rarely articulated strategy of refusal for coordinators of course modules to reissue the same material for students year in and year out. Admittedly this is a practice that has gone on for years in universities, but it takes on substantially different hues with the shift from the public-state university to the pseudo-corporate and informational university. Whereas the academic of the public university who trotted out the same module outline every year was justifiably accused of intellectual and pedagogical laziness, these days it is more a matter of survival as academics struggle to manage an enormous increase in managerial and administrative workloads that accompany the ever-expanding mechanisms that define the madness of audit cultures (another feature that defines the informational university). Come the start of a new semester, it is not uncommon for academics who have spent whatever recess from teaching duties by writing grants, undertaking marking, fulfilling administrative duties, meeting with dissertation students and maybe, if lucky, engaging in some research, to then find themselves having no time to redevelop old course materials (forget about producing new materials), and thus resort out of desperation and self-survival to repeat whatever it was that they taught the previous year.

The result of such practice--which I would expect to be widespread across the sector--is that disciplines become impoverished. You might counter this charge by telling me it is the job of research to provide the material of innovation for the disciplines. To do so falls into the trap of privileging research and thus dividing the important and mutually informing relationship between research and teaching. Moreover, it assumes that research activity is actually doing the job of disciplinary reinvention. I would suggest that, to the contrary, the vast majority of national and supranational funded research--especially in the humanities--is funded on the grounds that it reproduces the orthodoxies of the disciplines, in which case very little is gained by way of disciplinary innovation.

This brings me to the social production of value. When academics no longer have the time and perhaps intellectual stamina let alone curiosity to test the borders of their disciplines, what do they do? Well, in similar fashion to capital--and indeed, precisely because they are subjects of the corporate, informational university--they look to appropriating the creativity of the common. In my own field of new media studies, it has become very clear over the past 10 years that academics have contributed very little by way of conceptual and methodological invention. Such work has been undertaken outside and on the margins of the academy by artists, activists, computer geeks and media theorists.

How is such work undertaken? It is undertaken through practices of collaborative constitution and the multiplication of labour made possible by the mode of information and the media of digital communication.<sup>9</sup> The key social-technical features here of flexibility, adaptation, distributive co-production, informational recombination, open/free content and code, and modulating axes of organisation (both horizontal and vertical) all define the culture and labour of networks. And as the generative content of the common is absorbed and more often enclosed by non-generative proprietary regimes that function to shore up the borders of the corporate university, there is also

an informational dimension of open and generative network cultures that is carried over and interpenetrates the institutional dynamic of the university.

Actually, an increasing number of universities are recognising the value of adopting open content practices--MIT's OpenCourseWare being one of the more widely known examples.<sup>10</sup> The reason for this has to do with the fact that there is very little 'product differentiation' across degree programs from one university to the next, and universities are slowly but surely understanding that economic leverage for higher education comes not from the sale of pre-packaged, static material (although this is still the dominant economic model). Rather, they see their business as that of awarding degrees (i.e. granting an institutional/symbolic legitimacy upon a learning experience, which is the basis of determining tuition fees) and service delivery. This is a model that effectively duplicates the business model of open source software providers who understand that users (including educational institutions, corporations, small businesses and organisations) expect to download content (operating systems and office software, for example) for free, but are then willing to pay for labour that customises the software to specific institutional needs, with follow-up service as required.

## THE UNEVEN DISTRIBUTION OF EXPERTISE

What is the relation between the informational university and the uneven distribution of expertise across the higher-education landscape? Indeed, what is expertise and who is an expert? And what are the geocultural configurations upon which such relations might be mapped out? With the rise of Web 2.0 and its attendant self-publishing and promotion platforms such as blogs, wikis, Twitter and YouTube, everyone these days is an expert. In some respects this seeming democratisation of knowledge production is a structural phenomenon brought about by the outsourcing of labour and content production in the media industries. These days, even the corporations want everything for free. And with the social production of value, which in the case of news media comes in the form of citizen-journalism that willingly supplies content for free, the cost of labour is effectively removed from the balance sheet.

How, though, does this Cult of the Amateur impact upon the distribution of expertise within the university? With the rise of mass education and user-pay systems, many academics nowadays complain of the 'dumbing down' of curricula. Academic departments have become in most cases almost entirely dependent on income derived from student fees, with international students making up a substantial portion of annual budgets. This is especially pronounced in universities in Australia where, after two decades of partial deregulation and massive cuts in government expenditure on education, it has become a routine practice for academics to slide students over the ever-diminishing hurdles of assessment. If they didn't, then the security of their own jobs would be at stake.

Similar practices are the norm in British and North American universities, no matter what the 'quality assurance' reports might say to the contrary. Such systems of measure long ago lost any relationship with their referent and function in a very similar way to the production of public opinion, which does not exist according to Bourdieu's compelling thesis.<sup>11</sup> What does exist is the ever-increasing extension of self-referential reporting measures into the time of academic work.

The tyranny of audit cultures inscribes academic subjects into discursive practices of accountability and conditions the over-production of administrative functionaries, whose job is to keep track of the bureaucratic madness that such systems guarantee.

Not only has the dependency relationship on student fees had substantive impacts on the design and content of curricula, it has also exacted a toll on the capacity for academics to keep abreast with--let alone make contributions to--advances in their field. Increasingly, the insistence by students and administration for entertainment-on-demand styles of not so much teaching but 'course delivery' has resulted in more academic time expended on maintaining online administration and content management systems such as the notorious WebCT and Blackboard. (Although for reasons I fail to understand, such systems are embraced with an obsessive degree of delight by some colleagues I've worked with over the years).

Within conditions such as these, which again are typical of the informational university, it would seem the very notion of expertise is in crisis. And arguably it is. But there are also ways in which expertise is upheld, since once it can be quantified as measure a crucial symbolic value can then be accrued that can then be transferred as brand value for individual academics and their institutions. This in turn results in a capacity to charge higher student fees and attract the much vaunted external research funds, whose board of assessors place great emphasis on so-called 'esteem indicators' provided by journal ranking systems and citation indices which hold their own geocultural and political economic bias that reinforces what Harold Innis termed 'monopolies of knowledge'.<sup>12</sup> Such measures supposedly confer upon the body of academic research a 'quality assurance' that effectively removes from the assessor the task of critical assessment, which is now designed to be as automated and therefore as time efficient as possible. Again, these are some of the key features that characterise an informational mode of knowledge management. Though it remains to be said, the calibration of such systems of automation are deeply ideological and underscored by cabals of self-interested academic groups and individuals.

This brief survey of teaching and research practices within the informational university comprise what Andrew Ross has termed the 'new geography work'. A far-from-uniform informational geography of intellectual property regimes, content management systems, database economies, flexible labour and open content production becomes integrated with a geocultural system that valorises the reproduction of Western knowledge traditions and hegemony of global English.<sup>13</sup> There are further implications here for disciplinary innovation and the production of subjectivity. With the rise of the global university, local knowledge traditions and expertise have very weak purchase within an educational-machine that demands modes of flexible, just-in-time delivery provided by staff in contract positions whose structural and ontological insecurity is offset by largely generic course modules whose uniformity ensures a familiar point of entry for the next short-term academic hired by the global university.

## THE RACIALISATION OF LABOUR

In which cases might a racialisation of labour underscore the informational university? In short, what are the labour inequalities that shape the market of higher education on a global scale and how are new (or, as the case may be, neo-colonial) class subjectivities being reproduced? There

are multiple hues of labour differentiation across universities at a global level. To make the claim of differentiation along the lines of race is to suggest a reproduction of the 19th century biological category of race as the basis upon which division is operating. The official positioning of universities across the world would be most defiant in maintaining that this is certainly not the case, and indeed may be inclined to issue legal writs against anyone making such a charge, if it was perceived that brand damage was a stake.

Nearly twenty years ago, Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein observed that 'in traditional or new forms (the derivation of which is, however, recognizable), *racism is not receding, but progressing* in the contemporary world'.<sup>14</sup> Arguably, this is no less the case today, and one of the sites upon which racism has become reproduced, albeit in new guises, is that of the informational university. The category of race, as Balibar and Wallerstein go on to analyse, is one of the key modalities enlisted in the construction of the 'people', or what Foucault analysed in terms of the biopolitical production of territory, populations, security and subjectivity.<sup>15</sup> Other social-political devices through which populations are constituted include the nation, class, ethnicity, gender and broadcast media of communication. How the category of race intersects with these technologies of governance that define the rise of the nation-state and industrial modernity has been a matter of considerable research, which is in no way exhausted yet. It may seem a surprise to many that the seemingly archaic category of race should figure within the time and space of informational modernities. But, as I go to show, forms of institutional racism are central to the problem of labour within the global university.

Let me conclude by briefly documenting the operation of what Balibar terms 'racism without races' with reference to the division of labour and uneven distribution of expertise operating at global universities present in China. How to situate the differences between labour regimes in the global university and those of 19th century colonialism? In form they are similar. In both cases indigenous elites are enlisted as administrators to provide the linguistic and cultural interface between the imperial institution and local populations, which include government officials and industry representatives. But one key difference is that a relatively high-ranking official such as myself in the 19th century could freely have lavished all the racial epithets on the lower ranking colonials. Today, however, someone such as myself has to be careful about how the discourse on race is handled since it could endanger my position, to say nothing of the offence it may provoke. There's a difference here with the 21st century variants of differential racism that needs to be analysed. And the concept of 'racism with race' helps such analysis part of the way. Racism without race is predicated on modes of division that while not invoking the biological category of race are nonetheless reproducing the logic of racism--namely, to divide and exclude on the basis of race--through other means but which at their heart are racist in orientation, no matter how unconscious or unintentional that may be.<sup>16</sup>

A notable feature across global universities operating in China today is the substantial presence of domestic Chinese in the administrative ranks, with considerably fewer Chinese working as academic faculty. While smaller scale operations may combine academic and administrative roles and have those carried out by foreigners on casual contracts familiar with the 'culture' of the national system within which they are working, the larger universities employ local Chinese for administrative work on an almost exclusive basis. These staff often hold an undergraduate

degree from a U.S., British or Australian university, and many will also have postgraduate qualifications from an overseas university. In many cases their degrees will have been awarded from their current employer, which again ensures familiarity with the culture and administration of their particular institution.

In principle, the Chinese administrators working within global universities in China are not there because they are Chinese but because they have met the job selection criteria--relevant degree or diploma, competency in English language, good interpersonal skills, relevant experience, etc. The official positioning is thus definitely not about race in its classic 19th century articulations. On the other hand, if these administrative staff were not Chinese, then they most likely would not be working in these universities. Why, then, are there so few and in enough cases no non-Chinese staff comprising the administrative ranks at these global universities?

If it was just a matter of holding the appropriate qualifications and skills, then there could be people from any number of racial and ethnic backgrounds working as administrators in these universities. As noted earlier, while the primary administrative and teaching language of these universities is English, there is a need for at least some administrative staff to have a high proficiency in Putonghua in order to interface at linguistic and cultural levels with local and national government departments and businesses. But there is no obvious reason or need for all administrative staff to be of Chinese origin. It would seem that there's an important subjective desire to work for Chinese administrative staff with largely Anglophone qualifications to find work back home. What emerges from this phenomenon is a dual-language system where intra-institutional and transnational administration and engagement with academic staff is conducted in English, whereas the informal socialisation among administrative staff and their interaction, to some extent, with Chinese students is conducted in Putonghua or local dialects.

To not be Chinese, in other words, means to not be participating in those institutional and social circuits conducted exclusively in Chinese. This enlisting of the (middle-class) elite 'locals' in administrative positions strikes me as very similar to the colonial strategy of engaging indigenous elites to administer colonial institutions (India being the classic example) and in so doing reproduce and reinforce (or in some cases produce) a local class system. My understanding of such operations is that racial distinctions determined the institutional positions and conditions of the labouring subject. Institutions of globalised higher education provide the institutional settings and organisational cultures through which the logic of differential racism is played out today.

Moving to the question of academic faculty and the international staff that compose its ranks, the opposite display of racialised labour becomes notable: namely, the tendency for Chinese to not be among those holding academic positions. Perhaps this is even more remarkable than the case of the Chinese majority within administrative positions. The opportunity for movement within administration from a U.S. or British university to a global university operating in China, or some other country, for that matter, is less likely than in the case of academics, who tend to be much more mobile within both national and global settings. Why, then, do so few Chinese academics comprise the ranks of faculty within global universities in China? One reason has to do with remuneration. Local Chinese are paid substantially less than their international colleagues, and in this respect the economy of labour in global universities reproduces that of most other busi-

nesses in China. Unlike other business sectors, however, the global universities do not—at least not yet—fill their academic ranks with local Chinese in order to save on labour costs. Key to the brand value of the global universities is the assurance these institutions make to students that they are receiving a product and experience that essentially reproduces what they could expect if they were enrolled at the ‘home’ institution. An important part of that assurance thus rests on a significant portion of academic staff who are either on secondment from or at least familiar with the workings of the home institution. There are also administrative practicalities for this practice associated with the running of equivalent programs, submission and moderation of grades, establishment of academic and administrative committees, and so on and so forth.

From the perspective of the Chinese academic who may give thought to shifting from a Chinese university to one of the increasing number of global universities setting up shop in China, a number of practicalities need to be considered. The linguistic barrier presented by the necessity to have a working command of English is just one of various factors to take into account. While the low pay may be equivalent between Chinese and global universities, the Chinese academic will have to forego the frequently informal ways in which income is supplemented within the Chinese system. The household items and food parcels supplied by the national teacher’s union, for example, would not be part of academic life in a global university. Moreover, they will have to suffer the knowledge that for effectively the same labour they are being paid a fraction of the amount received by their international colleagues. It must be said that such differentiation of remuneration levels is not based on whether one is Chinese or not. The same applies for those international teachers who have entered the global university from within China, and thus are structurally positioned as part of a domestic labour force. Nonetheless, the material effect of these multiple forces results in an academic body that is largely absent of Chinese staff.

While the differentiation of work across the spectrum of academic and administrative life points to standard divisions of labour in universities around the world, often enough both the individual worker and collective experience will embody these distinctions in singular ways and thus becomes a subject who multiplies rather than divides the borders of labour. This process whereby the borders of labour become multiplied is made clear in the relation cognitive labour holds with the social production of value, as sketched earlier in this essay. The racialisation of labour, on the other hand, serves as a technology of division in the case of global universities currently operating in China.

Both the multiplication and division of labour are features of the informational university and its expropriation of the social production of value. Cognitive labour includes modes of peer-to-peer production that make available resources in the form of an informational *commons*. While more immediately understandable as a technology of division, the racialisation of labour also feeds into the symbolic production of a commons in terms of the image repertoire and affective registers that are communicated about the global university as a site for international experience and certification. When situated within China, such an imaginary is reproduced in material ways in terms of the domination of mainland Chinese in administrative ranks coupled with the general absence of Chinese academics from faculty programs.

The relationship between the multiplication and division of cognitive and racialised labour, however, is substantially different in terms of how they connect with the social production of *the common*, which can be understood as the political potential that subsists within *and* conditions the possibility of the commons. The point of connection between such immediately distinct modes of labour lies precisely within the ways they shape the brand value and thus economy of the informational, global university. While there is unlikely to be political affiliation between transnational cognitive labour and Chinese administrators in global universities operating in China (the geocultural disparities being largely insurmountable), there is potential for relations to be forged between workers who experience the informatisation of labour as it manifests in both global and national academies. It is at the point of shared experience borne out of struggle that the possibility arises for differential inclusion in the social invention of the common. Both the racialisation of labour and the uneven distribution of expertise hold the capacity to be a part of such a process.

As the hegemony of the Chinese state unfolds and exerts its power across the geocultural terrain of global institutions, it should come as no surprise that the composition of labour within those institutions becomes increasingly comprised of mainland Chinese workers whose skills, expertise and symbolic value is no longer perceived as second tier. Such a transformation will occasion new lines of struggle in the globalisation of higher education. The challenge for biopolitical labour will be to assert the autonomy of the common from emergent apparatuses of capture. A key part of this struggle will involve refusing the informational technologies of measure.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Ross, *Nice*, 189.

<sup>2</sup> See Mezzadra and Neilson, *Border*.

<sup>3</sup> Wark, *A hacker*.

<sup>4</sup> Bousquet, *How*, 55-89.

<sup>5</sup> See Terranova, *The internet*. See also Terranova, *Another*, 234-262.

<sup>6</sup> Hardt and Negri, *Commonwealth*, 314-316.

<sup>7</sup> Casarino, *Surplus*, 20.

<sup>8</sup> Rossiter and Zehle, *Exodus*. Oddly enough, Michael Hardt confuses the common with the commons in one of his preparatory texts leading up to the publication of *Commonwealth*. See Hardt, *Politics*.

<sup>9</sup> That such invention is undertaken through practices immanent to media of

communication would suggest that it is a mistake to assume that informational modes of communication and practice result in outcomes such as the informational university. Clearly, such a position is one that holds a technologically determinist viewpoint, which is undermined by the fact that social-technical practices of collaboration constitution facilitate the production of the common.

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of the implications of initiatives on cultural and disciplinary formations, see Ross, *Nice*, 202.

<sup>11</sup> Bourdieu, *Public*, 124-130.

<sup>12</sup> Innis, *The Bias*.

<sup>13</sup> See Ross, *Nice*, 202.

<sup>14</sup> Balibar and Wallerstein, *Race*, 9.

<sup>15</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Birth*. See also Foucault, *Society* and Foucault, *Security*.

<sup>16</sup> Balibar offers the following definition of 'racism without races': 'It is a racism whose dominant theme is not biological heredity but the insurmountability of cultural differences, a racism which, at first sight, does not postulate the superiority of certain groups or peoples in relation to others but 'only' the harmfulness of abolishing frontiers, the incompatibility of lifestyles and traditions; in short, it is what P. A. Taguieff has rightly called a *differentialist racism*'. See Balibar, *Is there*, 21

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