

## *Sites of Race: Conversations with Susan Searls Giroux*

by David Theo Goldberg

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This book contains a set of insightful conversations that might prove highly useful for readers of David Theo Goldberg as a general overview, both of the intellectual concerns and biographical facts motivating the arguments synthesized in *The Threat of Race* and *States of Race*, his main works, and of the intellectual contexts in which these ideas developed. It might also be useful for unfamiliar readers, especially those interested in a general introduction to contemporary discussions on race and racism, and the debate between critical race theorists and their critics. The conversations oscillate between theoretical considerations on historical racisms and assessments of racial aspects in relation to recent events. The latter are mostly confined to U.S. issues, and at certain points some background knowledge in recent U.S. history and politics is necessary. The chapter on Foucault could be demanding for non-specialists, but the general framework remains approachable even for readers not well acquainted with these topics.

Goldberg's reflections describe how his scholarship, from its early years, matured as a reaction to what he perceived as a serious neglect in academic departments of the complex philosophical genealogy of modern racism. As a corrective to this neglect, Goldberg insists on the racial aspects inherent in modern European thought, particularly in the liberal tradition (p.20), and contributing to the now widespread (and still polemical) discussion in post-colonial studies and political thought on the relation between the works of canonical figures such as Locke, Hume and John Stuart Mill and the phenomena of racism, colonialism and imperialism. The early proponents of the sovereignty of the 'demos' and the theory of the 'social contract', he argues, traced the boundaries of these concepts according to criteria tainted with racist underpinnings (p.30).

His analysis is not limited to canonical works, though, and points to intellectual tendencies of modernity which, in his view, shaped the various racisms of the 20th century,

principally in their overemphasis on classification and categorisation (p.29), beliefs in the naturalness of homogeneity and the necessity of homogenisation (p.31), and consequent ideas of 'social' prophylaxis (p.39). A general eclecticism is evident in the incorporation in his theory of elements from authors of various traditions, including Eric Voegelin, W.E.B. Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, Stuart Hall, Angela Davies and Michel Foucault. He manifests a dissatisfaction, however, with Marxist analyses and their tendency to reduce racism to a reflection of economic relations (p.19) and, in addition, crystallises his various arguments into an overall critique of neoliberalism, which he sees as protecting contemporary racial expressions in the private sphere from state intervention (p.29).

His assessment of the current situation is a counterpoint to the general impression that the Presidency of Barack Obama signals the final overcoming of racism and race-related discrimination in the U.S. He sees this country as still 'deeply racially configured' (p.199). Under the guise of so-called 'post-raciality', he sustains, racism is being rendered 'invisible' in the public sphere (p.182), the use of terms and concepts necessary to argue about it and to detect and halt its manifestations is being limited (p.181), and the memory of past crimes and discrimination is being quickly diluted (p.56). These factors, along with the neoliberal tendencies toward privatisation, Goldberg claims, constitute a framework in which racism are reinforced and its correction is prevented. These manifestations take the form of pre-criminalisation of populations (African-American, Latinos, Muslims) and inequality of opportunities in employment, education, and so on.

Overall, besides highlighting the often overlooked intellectual origins of European and American racism, Goldberg's various remarks point to the interconnection of racist ideas and tendencies with established practices and conceptions. He also indicates their survival and reinforcement in the current context, against contemporary trends that reduce racism to individual and independent private incidences (p.205). This scheme of analysis and the multidisciplinary methodology employed seem to be adequate. Nevertheless, it is difficult not to feel some discomfort with some aspects of Goldberg's use of certain concepts and categories, whose scope often tend to be too wide to be appropriate, and how the connection between certain elements is framed.

The general character of his categories is problematic, given that his analysis is mostly focused on the relation between European/Caucasian and other populations. This context is the most familiar and perhaps where the roughest expressions of racism have taken

place, but these categories seem to be insufficient to understand the problem of racism in different contexts such as the segregation suffered by Native American from *mestizo* populations in South America. In addition, some themes are too loose and need strong qualifications, such as the role of the modern emphasis on classification in racism, or the connections between what he describes as ‘social militarisation’, centralisation and efficiency (p.121), and between ‘social prophylaxis’, state surveillance and examples such as travel warnings (p.120), all of which could be explained by factors other than racist logics.

As said before, the emphasis on the interplay of racist tendencies with established social institutions and ideas is a strong merit of this work, but its analysis is to some extent limited by the fact that, at times, these institutions and ideas are not assessed in their own terms, but are seemingly reduced to the racist expression that is perceived in them. In this way, the concrete form in which they interact with these racist tendencies is difficult to identify. This is evidenced, for example, in the connection that Goldberg makes between racism as local rule (p. 203). The latter is a general theory which is upheld by many thinkers of various traditions, not only libertarian or anarchists. The claim is certainly plausible, but if the content of the idea is not taken in consideration properly, thus reducing it to no more than a vehicle for racist expression, the terms in which the idea and racist logics are interrelated -- whether in the form of reinforcement or mitigation -- are difficult to perceive.

Goldberg argues that racial homogenisation is not spontaneous, but rather the result of imposition, and at the same time maintains that state intervention is crucial in correcting contemporary racist tendencies. There is an apparent distrust of the role of non-state factors, such as cultural and social practices and movements (p.6), which is perhaps the result of a focus on issues such as employment, wages, access and opportunities, and an array of problems which cannot be fairly corrected through cultural movements alone, without state intervention. Nevertheless, given the interdependence between racist tendencies and the cultural matrix in which they develop, this distrust seems to be unjustified. The historical context justifies the focus on the polemical aspects of neoliberalism, but a more detailed attention to the role of non-state actors in mitigating racism seems to be significantly absent from his analysis.