Introduction to Ann Morning's article "And you thought we had moved beyond all that: biological race returns to the social sciences", 2014

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Introduction to Ann Morning's article "And you thought we had moved beyond all that: biological race returns to the social sciences", 2014

Élodie Edwards-Grossi

- 1 For many decades, sociologists have routinely drawn a line between productions in the social sciences that define race as a social construct and research findings in the natural sciences that use this same notion in order to describe genetically circumscribed groups. The latter publications are labeled essentialist, and are accused of promoting biological reductionism: they are viewed largely negatively by social scientists.
- 2 Ann Morning's various books and articles published after completing her Ph.D dissertation, since turned into a book (Morning 2011), have focused on how anthropologists, biologists, or people who are not part of academia, today define the notion of race, according to the social context in which they evolve. In an article published in *Terrains/Théories*, she sheds light, for example, on the various ways undergraduate students in several American universities (public, private, highly selective or not) approach the notion of race, which they sometimes see as a cultural variable, a social construct, or as biological data, depending on the questions asked by the interviewer (Morning 2015). Her article shows that only in very few cases do students refer to race as a social construct, and do so only if they were trained in anthropology or any other field in the social sciences. Those who major in other fields, however, tend to approach race as a biological category, or as a fixed cultural concept, which is close to the concept of ethnicity and which is transmitted from one generation to the other in families. By approaching race from a cultural point of view, the majority of respondents thus dismissed the issue of racial inequalities (Guillaumin 1972, De

Rudder, Poiret and Vourc'h 2000), which sociologists who view race as a social construct refer to when defining the notion of race.

- 3 Moreover, these sociologists are generally convinced that the notion of race as a social construct is consensual within their own research field. However, as Ann Morning shows, this is not always the case. This assumption needs to be questioned in the light of recent publications in peer-reviewed sociology journals in the United States.
- 4 In the article that we have chosen to reprint here, in order to make it available to a wider audience of French-speaking speakers, Ann Morning does not only reveal the way in which people from non-academic circles actively use and define the notion of race in semi-structured interviews.¹ Rather, she examines how some sociologists employ this concept as a variable linked to genetic groups, despite the fact that a majority of social scientists have defined race as a social construct for decades. Sociologists also refer to race and biology together when it comes to discussing recent research findings in genetics, and they reflect upon how this discipline could bring about profound upheavals for the social sciences in the near future.
- 5 There are several reasons that motivate us to republish this text in this special issue on race and biology. First of all, it seemed timely to highlight that the field of sociology is not monolithically committed to defining race as a social construct. Interestingly, these sociologists do not speak out from the fringes of the legitimate field of production of social science research. Quite the contrary, they are part of professional institutions that are well known in the United States, they publish papers in peer-reviewed journals which are celebrated for their scientific rigor, such as *Sociological Theory*, published by the American Sociological Association, or *Demography*, published by Population Association of America, one of the leading professional associations of demographers in the United States, and they give conference papers at international symposiums such as that of the American Sociological Association annual meeting in 2013. In a way, their line of argument, which rehabilitates presupposed links between genetics and race, is an important reminder that not all sociologists have adhered to social constructivism, contrary to what was commonly believed to be true.
- 6 However, these sociologists do not deny that ethno-racial categories can sometimes be social constructs, only they believe that more objective, more 'scientific' categories, defined by the hard sciences, exist in parallel. Ann Morning emphasizes the fact that these researchers argue that races are *initially* natural categories, which are used in the social and political spheres in distorted forms. She proposes that these ethno-racial categories emerge primarily in the social and political fields and *then* influence the way in which biological categories, which are themselves socially constructed, are thought out. Ann Morning underlines that their theories are influenced by sociobiology, which has its source in the United States. She hypothesises that they will have a broad influence on scientific productions all over the world, given the number and weight of scientific publications emerging from the United States.
- 7 Paradoxically, these sociologists place high hopes in publications in genetics, although some of them are far from being consensual in the peer community. Ann Morning notes that the work of the biologists and statisticians on which they rely is highly nuanced when it comes to linking genetic clusters to the broad racial categories commonly used in the United States. Thus, some geneticists (Wilson et al. 2001) explain that categories such as "Black", "Caucasian", and "Asian" only give a partial and inadequate definition of the human genetic structure, while other geneticists as David

Serre and Svente Pääbo (2004) confirm that there is "no reason to assume that major genetic discontinuities exist between different continents or 'races'."

- 8 This text also seems relevant to us because it questions the links that the sociology community creates with scientific productions in genetics, and reflects upon the legitimacy of sociologists' interventions in the social sphere, when it comes to commenting upon fields of expertise that are not their own—in particular the genetic and biological sciences. This question of legitimacy highlights the asymmetric representation which seems to put on a pedestal the productions of the so-called 'hard' sciences to the detriment of the social sciences, which defines race, by comparison, as an immaterial social construct. According to Ann Morning, many social scientists who defend a constructivist approach to race do not take up these questions in the public arena with the same frequency as do geneticists and biologists, who are invited to participate in popular science debates and present their work on race and biology. For Ann Morning, this unequal repartition of public engagements produces a phenomenon of invisibilization of the social sciences in the public space. Very methodically, she details the reasons for the silence of constructivist researchers, especially when it comes to speaking about biology. She thus notes that, paradoxically, one of the only positive results of the recent productions produced by sociologists defending the links between genetics and race was that these initiated a dialogue with the natural sciences. In a nutshell, this text invites us collectively, as researchers in the social sciences, to be extremely vigilant on these questions, and provides critical tools enabling us to speak out on race and biology from a critical perspective outside the ivory tower.

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NOTES

1. We wish to thank Ann Morning, the editors of the journal *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, as well as Taylor & Francis for allowing us to translate and reproduce the article originally published in English under the title "And you thought we had moved beyond all that: biological race returns to the social sciences" (Morning 2014).