

A rare transcontinental example of late 19th-century critiques of racism

Focusing on Ferdinand Blumentritt, José Rizal and Franz Boas

Blumentritt's insight

Traces do not always point at first glance to their author or origin and lead the tracker directly to the data hidden underneath. In many cases, they offer at best ambiguous clues that require at least a minimum of contextual knowledge.

The Bohemian Philippinist Ferdinand Blumentritt laid such a trail in one of his numerous letters to Richard Andree (1835–1912).¹ Among other things, Andree was the editor of a popular journal called *Globus – Illustrierte Zeitschrift für Länder- und Völkerkunde* (Illustrated journal for regional and ethnological studies), which Blumentritt supplied with articles on ethnographic and political news from South-east Asian, Caribbean and South American countries throughout his scholarly life. On January 30, 1892, he wrote to Andree (I quote an excerpt):

I have gained an even deeper insight because the Indians [*indios* of the Philippines] regard me as an advocate of their human rights and as a brother and speak with the greatest frankness about their own people, what they otherwise do not do to any white person. One of them once

1 Johann Stockinger: Der große Verteidiger der Philippinen. Teil 1: Leben und Werk von Ferdinand Blumentritt (1853–1913). Wien 2017

described this relationship in the following words: “You know we civilized Indians find ourselves in the same position towards Europeans as a man in Europe who has risen from a low estate through his own strength and ability and now has to move among people of noble descent by virtue of his position. These high gentlemen may not all have as much sense as the intruder, most of them have also learned much less, but that does not matter, for them the self-made man remains an object of contempt, which of course is not expressed thanks to the social form, but which the ‘parvenu’ immediately senses. Now the European ‘upstart’ has it better than we do, for he can succeed in making up a civil service pedigree or the like, and in the end medals and ennoblement completely conceal his ancestry, but we carry our pedigree indelibly in our faces, can never deny it, and so, in the best case, we will be in protection. In the best case, we are favoured in the protective tone or regarded as ‘exceptions to the rule’, because we are naturally ‘inferior beings’, cannot grasp the times table and the like”.²

Blumentritt is quoting a friend who expresses bitterness towards personal injuries caused by discrimination rooted in xenophobia and racism, which still harbour antihuman attitudes today. While class differences can be overlooked, racist stereotyping and patriarchal condescension cannot. Racists treat people as less than fully human beings and categorise them according to external characteristics that denote foreignness. This exclusionary discrimination is based on the idea of a biological racial hierarchy, which places individuals in lower ranks based primarily on their physical appearance.

Blumentritt’s reference to human rights is noteworthy. He was undoubtedly acquainted with the Virginia Declaration of Rights of June 12, 1776, which is based on natural law and states that ‘all men are by nature equally free and independent and have certain inherent rights.’³ He would also have been familiar with Article 1 of the *Déclara-*

2 I would like to thank Johann Stockinger for providing me with a copy of the Blumentritt letter.

3 <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/virginia-declaration-of-rights> (7. 4. 2024)

tion des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen of 1798, which begins with the sentence: 'Les hommes naissent et demeurent libres et égaux en droits.' However, the universal validity and worldwide dissemination of Human Rights, as we know them from the UN Charter adopted after the Second World War, were still beyond the scope of his and his contemporaries' vision. Blumentritt's connection between the defense of human rights and racism's limitation of these rights to the supposedly privileged representatives of the 'white race' is remarkable. This connection highlights the limitless claim to validity that the concept of universalism represents.

We know very well today that there is no scientific (biological) evidence for "racial" differences within the *homo sapiens* species: "Race is fabricated, socially made and politically manipulated", as the introduction to the Oxford *Companion to Racial and Ethnic Studies* rightly states.⁴ It would therefore be wiser to banish the fatal term – "race" – from critical discourse altogether and instead speak of discrimination with reference to different ideologically biased issues (religious, political, social, cultural, etc.). This is because the biologicistic, deterministic core of the word "race" will otherwise continue to exist, even if its use moves away from the narrow focus and shifts to diverse functions in the registers of negative semantics.

In Blumentritt's world, it was common practice to classify humanity into different 'races' based on skin colour. He adopted the racial classification system developed by physician and anthropologist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752–1840), which was based on Carl von Linné's (1707–1778) taxonomy.⁵ This system distinguished five 'main breeds':⁶

4 A *Companion to Racial and Ethnic Studies*, ed. David Theo Goldberg/John Solomos. Oxford 2002, 3

5 Nicolaas Rupke/Gerhard Lauer (Hg.): Johann Friedrich Blumenbach. *Race and Natural History, 1750–1850*. London 2019

6 I quote from Blumentritt's essay "¿Hay razas superiores e inferiores?" in the bilingual edition of *La Solidaridad*, translated by Luis Maneru, Volume VII, 1895. Pasig City 1996, 71 ff.

- “white or Mediterranean Caucasians”,
- “yellow Mongolians”,
- “brown or olive-colored Malays”,
- “red Indians”,
- “black Africans”.

Since the 18th century, the term ‘Caucasian’ has been used to refer to the ‘white race’ due to the belief that the ‘cradle of humanity’ was located in the Asian Caucasus, as loosely based on the Bible. According to this doctrine, the lineages of the Aryans, Semites (Jews), and Hamites (Africans) differentiated and spread across Europe and Africa. It is important to note that this phantasy is without any evidence and has been debunked. Neither Blumenbach nor Blumentritt could find any fault with this fiction. However, they were not racists who persecuted individuals based on their “race” or “caste” with derogatory and exclusionary actions and language.

German-American anti-racism

In 1895, Blumentritt published an essay titled “¿Hay razas superiores e inferiores?” in several instalments in the journal *La Solidaridad* run by young Filipino intellectuals in Spain. The reason for Blumentritt’s publication was Franz Boas’ lecture *Human Faculty as determined by Race*, which was published at the end of 1894. Ferdinand Blumentritt was convinced that Boas’ remarks echoed his own long-cherished thoughts.⁷ Therefore, he not only commented on the anthropologist’s position critical of racism but also supplemented and reinforced it with detailed examples, as if co-lecturing.

7 In earlier publications, Blumentritt had already rejected the doctrine of “racial purity”, citing the historical evidence of inter-racial mixing. In the annual review of the *Leitmeritzer Zeitung* of 5 November 1881 (p. 1018), there is a brief report on one of his lectures entitled “On the racial purity of the European peoples”. I would like to thank J. Stockinger for this reference.

Franz Boas, born 1858 in Minden, Westphalia, started his studies in Heidelberg, worked for the ethnologist Adolf Bastian in Berlin and established modern Anthropology in the USA. In his Brooklyn lecture to the *American Association for the Advancement of Science*, he addressed the concept of “scientific racism”, a pseudoscience based on social Darwinism and biology. This false doctrine has become increasingly popular since the 19th century, anticipating the crimes of eugenics and genocide. It is worth noting that three authors and key words were particularly successful in this regard: Arthur de Gobineau (1816–1882), a defender of “white racial purity”; Wilhelm Marr (1819–1904), a fanatical propagandist of “anti-Semitism”; and Houston Stewart Chamberlain (1855–1927), a prophet of “Aryan” imperialism.⁸ Not forgetting the rigid apartheid legislation that had been rampant in the USA since the 1870s, which formed the background for Franz Boas’ criticism of so-called “racial science”.⁹

Boas’s own scientific approach aligned with a culturally relativistic hermeneutics that aimed to avoid ethnocentric and racial generalisations. Instead, it demanded that foreign cultures and ways of life be understood on their own terms (emic perspective). This approach does not exclude exchange and cooperation between different cultures and societies. Boas attributed all known forms of civilizational advancement to the recognition of cultural pluralism as a prerequisite for reciprocal learning processes that depend on “intercommunication”. The lecture states:

Proofs without number have been forthcoming which show that ideas have been disseminated as long as people have come into contact with each other and that neither race nor language nor distance limits their diffusion. As all have worked together in the development of the ancient civ-

8 Arthur de Gobineau: *Essai sur l’inégalité des races humaines* (1853–55); W. Marr: *Der Sieg des Judenthums über das Germanenthum* (1879); H. S. Chamberlain: *Die Grundlagen des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts* (1899)

9 On the reactions of scholars to American racial legislation, cf. Charles King: *Schule der Rebellen. Wie ein Kreis verwegener Anthropologen Race, Sex und Gender erfand*. München 2020, 106

ilizations, we must bow to the genius of all, whatever race they may represent: Hamitic, Semitic, Aryan or Mongol.¹⁰

In his lecture, Boas expressed dissatisfaction with the unequal living conditions for 'black' and 'white' citizens in the USA. Similarly, Blumentritt reflected on the inequalities between Jews, 'gypsies', and the German majority society. He clearly rejected the notion of race-related 'innate' characteristics based on one's 'blood'. He attributed the 'parasitic' lifestyles of certain minorities to historical and social conditioning factors, such as work restrictions imposed by the majority society, religious prejudices, and occasional persecution. He believed that all individuals, regardless of their appearance or lifestyle, possess the same intellectual capacity. Blumentritt was sceptical about improving living conditions through assimilation, as this could lead to the loss of the group's characteristic traditions. According to Blumentritt, it is the differences and the richly varied socio-cultural forms of expression within a community that reject compulsive collectivism under the thumb of a dominant 'race'. In his own words: 'Pero entre las esferas de una misma nación, no reina la homogeneidad.'¹¹ (Not even between the spheres of one and the same nation reigns homogeneity.)

After conscientiously examining all the knowledge available up to that point, Blumentritt concluded that "there are no special intelligences for any particular race that indicate superiority or inferiority. Neither the white race in general nor its Aryan subgroup in particular can claim any privileges with regard to their intelligence."¹²

10 F. Boas: *Human Faculty as determined by Race*. Salem, Mass. 1894, 5

11 *La Solidaridad* 151, 15. Mai 1895, 104

12 *La Solidaridad*, ed. Luis Maneru, Volume VII, 1895. Pasig City 1996, 168 ff.

Intelligence innate or acquired?

José Rizal, who was in the third year of his exile on the island of Mindanao when the *Solidaridad* edition cited here was published in 1895, was one of Blumentritt's closest friends and comrades-in-arms. As a vehement critic of the corrupt colonial administration and the abuse of religion, Rizal was targeted by the Spanish authorities for persecution. Upon returning to his Philippine homeland in the summer of 1892, he attempted to establish a reform alliance, the *Liga Filipina*, but was denounced, arrested by the Guardia Civil and immediately deported to his place of exile by order of the Governor General. Despite surveillance by the censorship authorities, he was able to maintain contact with Blumentritt and other European scholars, mainly natural scientists.¹³

Rizal agreed with Blumentritt's theses but also reflected on the genesis, promotion, and development of intelligence. This topic alone shows that he believed intelligence development to be malleable, which contradicts the hereditary-biological claims of racial science. On July 4, 1895, after reading Blumentritt's essay, he wrote to him in *Spanish* (as directed by the police supervising the exile):

Regarding the intelligence of different races, after careful consideration, I agree that it is not a matter of limited intelligence. Rather, there are disparities in wealth and resources between nations and individuals. It is a misconception that some are born into wealth, as everyone is born equally vulnerable and dependent. The wealthy have simply inherited the assets accumulated by their parents. Intelligence is believed to be inherited. Races that have been forced to use their brains due to certain conditions have developed them more and passed them on to their descendants. The European nations are rich, but the present nations cannot without temerity say that they were born rich: they have needed centuries of struggle, wise combinations, freedom, laws, thinkers, etc., who bequeathed these

13 Cf. the detailed narrative in D. Harth: José Rizals Kampf um Leben und Tod. Facetten einer kolonialismuskritischen Biografie. Heidelberg ²2025, 145–169

riches to them. The races that are now intelligent are so after a long process of inheritance.¹⁴

Rizal's heredity thesis is not to be understood biologically, but refers to accumulation through learning processes. When he speaks of "ciertas condiciones especiales", he seems to be suggesting that intelligence, like a survival mechanism, develops in the face of resistance, such as unfavourable living conditions. The conditions he mentions are complex: one driving force is the fight against the one-sided educational monopoly of the Spanish religious schools in the Philippines; other conditions require sensible planning, as this is the only way to put anarchy and arbitrariness in their place; still others are the fight for freedom and legal certainty (*libertad, leyes*) and, last but not least, the abilities attributed to philosophers (*pensadores*) to get to the bottom of these very conditions and to justify them.

The demand for respect for human rights runs like a leitmotif through Rizal's writings criticising colonialism. He had translated the 1789 French *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen* into his native Tagalog. He knew what he was talking about because he and his family had experienced inequality in the form of ethnic and racial discrimination since his earliest youth. He also later reflected on his own prejudices, which had led him, as a student who could do everything with ease, to conclude that his Spanish classmates were lazy and therefore all Spaniards lacked intelligence.

"Tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner" was the ironic comment he made to Blumentritt on the result of his self-criticism. This seems quite true when one considers what the friend has to say about the man murdered by the colonial regime in his obituary. In this obituary, published in 1897 in the *International Archive for Ethnography* (published in Leiden, Paris, London and Leipzig), Blumentritt endeavoured to characterise his friend through his own statements. After all, he had been involved with him for many years in fierce journalistic battles against the racist polemics of the Spanish supporters of co-

14 Escritos de José Rizal, Tomo 11: Correspondencia Epistolar II: Cartas entre Rizal y el Profesor Fernando Blumentritt. Manila 1961, 877

lonialism, and had discussed strategies with him in numerous letters. In his obituary, Blumentritt also paraphrases the objections to the devaluation of the indigenous intelligentsia in Rizal's letter from exile of 4 July 1895 (see above). And he even repeats in his own words the complaint of an anonymous Filipino – Eureka! so they were Rizal's words – from the letter to Andree of 30 January 1892 that I quoted at the beginning. In the obituary, he writes without mincing his words (92):

The Europeans consider themselves the irreplaceable masters of the globe, their race the only bearer of progress and culture, themselves the only legitimate species of the genus *homo sapiens*, while they declare the other races to be inferior, i.e. they deny them the ability to ever appropriate European culture; thus, according to the Europeans, the coloured races are varieties of the genus *homo brutus*. Rizal now asked himself: Are these views correct? [...] The coloured man, however noble and accomplished a gentleman he may be, usually finds himself in the position of a second-class parvenu, for his ancestry is indelibly marked on his countenance, which, with the prejudices of the Europeans, brings with it embarrassing humiliations for the coloured man. Everything is criticised; a small mistake, easily overlooked in the case of a cobbler's son who has become a baron, [...] provokes a smile and the remark "what's wrong, it's only a coloured man". If you do not violate any etiquette, if you are a skilful lawyer, a capable doctor, this is not taken for granted, but you are admired with the same benevolence as a well-dressed poodle in the circus, but not as an equal human being.¹⁵

To deny a person or group their cognitive abilities and human dignity is part of the standard repertoire of racist misanthropy. Rizal – writes Blumentritt in his obituary –

felt deeply as a boy that the Spaniards treated him with contempt simply because he was an *indio*. From that time on, he tried to find out what moral right the Spaniards and the whites in general had to look down on a per-

15 Internationales Archiv für Ethnographie, 10 (1897), 88–92; page numbers in brackets.

son who thought the same way, learned the same things, and was able to do the same things as they did, just because he had brown skin and straight hair (89).

The discussion of ‘moral right’ is tricky because it involves the justification of what is or should be ‘human’. If Human Rights are taken as the yardstick, the only normative statement is that being human alone justifies the defence of moral rights. But I am human *with* other humans, and ‘Mitmenschlichkeit’ (common humaneness) involves recognition as well as understanding. Those who are forcibly denied their humanity may appear to settle into the role of *homo brutus*, while secretly laughing at the racist usurper, or they may courageously dedicate themselves to the non-violent struggle for recognition.

“The law has no skin, nor does reason have nostrils”

As is well known, the specific goal of Rizal’s reform agenda linked to this struggle was peaceful “association” with the “mother country” Spain, involving a degree of autonomy and self-determination yet to be negotiated with the colonial power. This pointed to a long road of mutual understanding, which might even lead to full independence. But understanding presupposes the recognition of the equality of all concerned, which racism denies by invoking a supposedly scientifically based, allegedly insurmountable inequality between the ‘human races’. In short, racist stigmatisation is nothing more than the denial of recognition of the other’s “Mitmenschlichkeit”. Under these circumstances, there is little chance of understanding, which is why the struggle for recognition must first and foremost be a struggle against the false doctrines of “racial science” and against all varieties of everyday “racial delirium”.¹⁶

16 I was inspired to choose this metaphor by the Italian anarchist Camillo Berneri (1897–1937), who in 1934 took on the fascist spawn of the “pure race” and the “Aryan” myth in a brilliant essay peppered with quotes from

At least, Blumentritt attested to his friend's ability to understand and explain the prejudices of Europeans. His knowledge of many languages, his ethnographic curiosity, his extensive study of ethnological literature, his boundless travel experiences – all this, together with “the analysis of the feelings that whites and coloured people have for each other”, had led him to bring the “Filipino Malays” and the Europeans “closer together as human beings” (88).

However, if we follow Blumentritt, it is not only the social, economic and legal disadvantages, but above all the violence inflicted on the Filipino people and the permanent moral humiliation that Rizal holds against the ‘mother country’ Spain. His novels tell of the corrupting consequences for everyone, masters and servants, sometimes with a laugh, sometimes with a lament. The metaphor of the “social cancer”, with which the author introduces his narrative, reveals the infectious “moral corruption” for which, at the end of the novel, even the well-meaning observer has no convincing cure:

It's true that the vices of a government are fatal to it. They cause its downfall, but they also kill the society in whose bosom they develop. An immoral government corresponds to a demoralised people. It's a vicious circle: an administration without conscience, rapacious and servile citizens in the villages, bandits and thieves in the mountains! Such a master, such a slave. Such a government, such a country.¹⁷

The mimesis that appears in the novel is dedicated to the destructive effects of distorted and distorting communication: deception, lies, dissimulation, betrayal and denunciation. In this world, the boundaries between what is norm and what is deviation, what is right and what is wrong, become blurred. By choosing a perspective that is as grotesque as it is disturbing, the author poses the question to the reader as to which “moral right” the ‘colourless’ European in the role of colonial

Hitler, Goebbels and Mussolini's speeches. His essay was published a year later in a Buenos Aires publishing house under the title *El Delirio Racista*, and has remained in print for some time.

17 José Rizal: *El Filibusterismo*. Gent 1891, 283

ruler is supposed to invoke in order to deny “Mitmenschlichkeit” to the ‘colourful’ part of humanity.¹⁸

Let’s go back to Rizal and ask him directly. In his essay *The Philippines in One Hundred Years*, published in 1889, his advice is not to try to battle racist stereotypes:

It is pointless to refute certain derogatory remarks made by some nice writers about more or less brown skin, about more or less snub-nosed faces [or about the vapours of wild mountain peoples]. China, for example, which has 414 million inhabitants and a very old civilisation, finds all Europeans ugly and calls them Fan-Kwai [?] or red devils. After all, the [Chinese] aesthetic has 100 million more followers than that of the Europeans. If it really mattered [for example, skin colour], then we would also have to accept that the Latin peoples, especially the Spanish, are inferior to the much whiter Saxons. And as long as it is not said that the Spanish parliament is a meeting of Adonises, Antinouses [classical beauties], *boys* and other such angels; as long as it goes there to legislate and not to philosophise (*socratizar*) or to roam about in imaginary hemispheres, we believe that the Government should not stop at such inconveniences. The law has no skin, nor does reason have nostrils.¹⁹

18 In a physical sense, white is not a colour. This shows how stupid it is to say that a “white” race is superior to the “coloured”.

19 “Inútil de refutar ciertos inconvenientes de algunos lindos escritores, sobre las pieles más ó menos morenas, y los rostros más ó menos narigudos. En cuestión de estética, cada raza tiene la suya la China, por ejemplo, que tiene 414 millones de habitantes y cuenta con una civilización muy antigua, encuentra feos á todos los europeos á quienes llama Fan-Kwai, ó sea diablos rojos. Su estética tiene 100 millones más de partidarios que la estética europea. Además, si de eso se ha de tratar, tendríamos que aceptar la inferioridad de los latinos, en especial la de los españoles, respecto de los sajones que son mucho más blancos. Y mientras no se diga que la Cámara española es una reunión de Adónises, Antínoos, *boys* y otros *angelos* parecidos; mientras se vaya allí para legislar y no para socratizar ó errar por hemisferios imaginarios, creemos que el Gobierno no se debe detener ante esos inconvenientes. El Derecho no tiene piel, ni la razón narices.” José Rizal: Escritos políticos e históricos. Manila 1961, 152