The Idea of Race and of a "Natural" Group

The idea of race

The idea of race. What is this self-evident notion, this "fact of nature"? It is an ordinary historical fact—a social fact. I deliberately say idea of race: the belief that this category is a material phenomenon. For it is a heterogeneous intellectual formulation, with one foot in the natural sciences and one foot in the social sciences. On the one hand it is an aggregate of somatic and physiological characteristics—in short, race as conceived by the physical anthropologists and the biologists. On the other hand it is an aggregate of social characteristics that express a group—but a social group of a special type, a group perceived as natural, a group of people considered as materially specific in their bodies. This naturalness may be regarded by some people as fundamental (a natural group whose nature is expressed in social characteristics). Or it may be regarded by others as a secondary fact (a social group that "furthermore" is natural). In any case, in the current state of opinion, this naturalness is always present in the approach which the social sciences.
take, and which the social system has crystallized and expressed under the name of "race."

So apparently it's all very simple. A purely "material" approach to observed characteristics on the one hand; and on the other hand, a mixed approach, more interested in sociosymbolic traits than in somatic traits, all the while keeping the latter present in the mind, in the background in some way or another. But with no profound clash between the two approaches; it's indeed a matter of the same thing in both cases. And equilibrium seems assured with the natural sciences referring to physical forms and the classical social sciences referring to social forms. Nevertheless, one might expect from the latter that their classifications and commentaries, even if they render discreet homage to the natural sciences, would still declare their specificity, first by defining with precision their concerns, and then by questioning the meaning in social terms of the fact that certain social categories are reputed to be natural. In fact, the social sciences are fascinated by the natural sciences, in which they hope to find a methodological model (which at the very least is debatable), but in which also (and this is the most serious matter) they believe they find an ultimate justification. This attitude is not unrelated to the social reasons which lead to the usage of the idea of nature in the classification of social groups.

But, to proceed, let us accept for the moment that the division is effective and that equilibrium is realized between the disciplines, and let us take for established fact a separation between them, at least in their explicit concerns. So we have, on the one hand, a supposedly natural taxonomy, that of physical anthropology, population genetics, etc., declaring the existence of "natural" groups of humans, finite and specific (whites, blacks, brachycephalics, dolichocephalics, etc.); and on the other hand, a social taxonomy, that of history and sociology, taking into account the relational and historical characteristics of groups (slaves, the nobility, the bourgeoisie, etc.). The two types of classification can overlap or not, can have common areas or have no meeting point. An example of nonoverlap: The blacks of the American social (read racial) system obviously have nothing (or very little) to do with the blacks and whites of physical anthropology in the anthropological meaning of the term. An example of overlap: The whites and blacks of the apartheid system are indeed what anthropology designates them as. But let us note that this is only at the price of another category, which is, if you wish, nonexistent, or out of consideration—the "coloreds"—bringing together both an aggregate of socioeconomic criteria (an aggregate without which and outside of which this group would literally not be seen)