Institutional racism

Priscila Rezende (Belo Horizonte, 1985)
Laços, 2010. Performance. Photo: Luiza Palhares
Courtesy of the artist.
http://priscilarezendeart.com/projects/lacos-2010/

In *Laços,* Priscila Rezende addresses the symbolic and material violence inscribed on racialised bodies under structural racism. Through a binding device—14 pieces of jewellery attached to her skin and connected to the space by physical ties and tensions —the artist performs the condition of a body historically bound to stereotypes, expectations and social roles constructed since colonial times. The act of breaking these ties materialises a resistance to the logic that commodifies, classifies and exploits black bodies, especially feminised bodies.

Contextualization

Institutional racism is the fundamental force behind structural racism and, in this sense, **it institutionalises racism** in all its forms.

This term was coined in the American context of the civil rights struggles of the African American population in the United States during the 1960s and popularised in the book *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (Carmichael and Hamilton, 1967). The authors used the term **institutional racism** to refer to the **legal systems** and **patterns of behaviour** embedded in structured institutional or social dynamics, through which white people oppressed black people.

What was particularly novel and useful about their proposal was the **shift in focus** from the human causes of racism – which, until then, had been explained as a matter of personal conscience and behaviour – to an understanding that situated it as a **matrix of social, structural and systemic functioning**, independent of the intentions and conscience of the actors.

In this sense, the authors emphasised the **more subtle, hidden or even invisible nature** of institutional racism, in that it did not require the explicit mention of racial categories in order to function. This quality contributed to its more effective deployment and, at the same time, to its going unnoticed or being less questioned by the dominant sectors of society.

> ❝ 'Institutional racism is less explicit, much more subtle, less identifiable in terms of specific individuals committing the acts, as it originates in the functioning of the established and respected forces of society and therefore receives much less public condemnation than the first type.' (Carmichael and Hamilton, 1967, p. 10)

Thus, **institutional racism** manifests itself through a network of **policies, rules and procedures,** which, when incorporated into the functioning of institutions, disproportionately affect racially diverse individuals and groups. These structural dynamics hinder equal access to **rights, resources and opportunities** through laws, regulations, administrative decisions, budget allocations or access mechanisms. Furthermore, this type of racism is expressed in the **specific practices** of institutional agents, whether in their discourse, in the exercise of their functions, or in their daily actions (Aguilar and Buraschi, 2021; Buraschi and Aguilar, 2017).

For all these reasons, **institutional racism** is considered a form of **legal, bureaucratic, technocratic** and often 'democratically' decided exclusion in political and administrative decision-making processes. Consequently, dismantling it involves **conflict with** state **institutions,** as it is the state that provides the means, mechanisms and tools for the **racial structuring** of society.

Examples

- Laws, rules, measures, regulations and bureaucratic procedures that **produce inequality** and **limit the social, political, economic and cultural rights** of migrants.
- **Public speeches** by politicians and institutional representatives that legitimise the rejection of migrants or racially diverse people.
- **Public policies** that have direct or indirect discriminatory effects in different areas. This includes both the state's migration policies and social policies on education, health, employment, social services, housing, etc.
- Actions (and inactions) with discriminatory effects carried out by people who represent and work in institutions. This includes discriminatory behaviour by **civil servants** and other public employees who represent the law and the state (police, judges, teachers, social workers, etc.); by the staff of civil entities (NGOs, foundations, etc.) that provide public services (juvenile centres, shelters of various kinds, etc.); and by staff who make decisions or manage entities of public interest.
- **Social integration programmes** that, explicitly or implicitly, reproduce **paternalistic, assimilationist or ethnocentric** models, either because of their design or approach, or because of the way they are implemented through the practices of their professionals (health, education, social services, employment, etc.).

Activity

Exploring institutional racism in school

Objectives

- To understand what **institutional racism** is and how it manifests itself.
- Identify forms of **institutional racism** in education.
- Develop a **critical view** of structural inequality based on institutional racism in schools.

Brief introduction to institutional racism

Main ideas

- Not all racism manifests itself through insults or aggression.
- Sometimes racism is found in the rules, decisions or ways of operating of institutions, such as schools, which make things more difficult/easier for some people than others, even if this is not explicitly stated.

First, ask the students if they can think of any examples and write them on the board (physical or digital). You can add additional examples or use the video in the resources section as a 'trigger' for group discussion.

Some topics that come up in the video

- Lack of representation of diverse content and sources in textbooks.
- Whitewashing of the historiography of racism (naturalised slavery; benefits of the slave trade presented as natural or positive, etc.).
- More frequent punishments or sanctions for migrant or racially diverse students.
- Difficulties in accessing school or extracurricular support.
- Differences in teachers' expectations based on the origin of the students.

Some topics that do not appear in the video but can be added (using the resources as a source of information):

- Classification of schools as 'highly complex schools', a metaphor for schools with a higher proportion of working-class and racially diverse pupils.
- Distribution of schools by urban areas: given the **racialisation of urban distribution**, so-called 'ghetto schools' are used to describe schools with exclusively racially diverse students (as opposed to schools that bring together upper-class or wealthy children, who are mostly white).
- Protocols for the prevention of violent extremism that call on teachers to monitor children from Muslim backgrounds in particular.

> It is very likely that examples related to the differential treatment of teachers will come up. It is important that the person leading the activity allows this space to be used to question teaching attitudes and practices and does not question what is said, however implausible it may seem. The aim is to engage in dialogue with what is expressed in the classroom and to provide tools for pupils to develop their analytical skills.

Group work – Fictitious case: 'Class 4B'

Based on the topics or situations mentioned above, each group is given a brief case study.

Each group analyses the case and answers the following questions:

- What situations arise that could be examples of **institutional racism**?
- Who are most affected and why?
- What could the students, teachers or school do to change this?
- (The situations can be acted out in the classroom by assigning roles.)

Sharing

Each group briefly presents its analysis.

The teaching staff collects the forms of institutional racism identified.

Encourage discussion:

- Have you encountered similar situations?

- Have you experienced anything similar?

Resources

Audiovisual material

- Video clip: «Parlem de racisme a les escoles» (Available in Catalan)

The video clip «Parlem de racisme a les escoles» is a product of the Human Rights Resource Centre. Five young people explain their experiences at school with teachers and students. The **inaction of teaching staff** in situations of racism, the lack of **racially diverse teachers** and the presence of a **hidden curriculum** are some of the issues addressed in the clip.

Readings and articles

- Project material: *Benvingudes a l'escola… Intercultural?*
- *How can we create a truly intercultural education system?*
  As part of a two-year process carried out by the **AICE Anti-Racist Collective**, a group of five young people with diverse migratory backgrounds enrolled in the Catalan education system developed a series of materials to work on anti-racism in schools. This collective was created with the aim of **exploring and questioning** intercultural education, focusing on their experiences and debates around the challenges and possibilities of achieving truly intercultural education in the education system.

  - Fanzine: https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/bcnacciointercultural/sites/default/files/documentos/fanzine_interculturalitat.pdf
  - Decàleg per a professionals: https://media-edg.barcelona.cat/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/01181258/Decaleg-Nuevo-doble.pdf (Available in Catalan)
  - Guide to presenting the fanzine: 'Benvingudes a l'escola… Intercultural?': https://media-edg.barcelona.cat/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/01181253/GUIA-PRESENTACIO%CC%81-FANZINE.pdf (Available in Catalan)
- Online magazine: *La Disruptiva*. It is a digital magazine on education, anti-racism and critical pedagogy promoted and self-managed by the **Col·lectiva Antirracista AICE**.
  https://ladisruptiva.cat/index-2/ (Available in Catalan)
- Report: Amazian, S. (2021). *Islamofobia institucional y securitización*. SOS Racismo Catalunya.
  The aim of this report is to provide a critical analysis of the impact of the securitisation of the lives of Muslim people as a result of measures to prevent

radicalisation and combat terrorism in the Spanish context. Information on the implementation of **prevention protocols in schools and social services** can be found on page 59 of the report: https://www.sosracisme.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/InformeIslamofobia_01072021_INTERACTIVO_CAST_.pdf (Available in Spanish)

References

Aguilar-Idáñez, M. [María] and Buraschi, D. [Daniel]. (2021). *Racismo institucional: ¿De qué estamos hablando?* https://theconversation.com/racismo-institucional-de-que-estamos-hablando-157152

Buraschi, D. [Daniel] and Aguilar-Idáñez, M. [María]. (2017). Herramientas conceptuales para un antirracismo crítico-transformador. *Tabula Rasa,* (26), 171–191. https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=39652540009

Carmichael, S. [Stokely] and Hamilton, C. V. [Charles Vernon]. (1967). *Poder negro.* Siglo XXI Editores.