Structural racism

Cristina Piffer (Buenos Aires, 1953)
300 records, 2017. Installation.
Courtesy of the artist.
https://cristinapiffer.com.ar/obras/22/

In *300 records,* Cristina Piffer works from the baptismal records of Martín García Island—where, during the so-called "Desert Campaign (1878-1885)", indigenous people were imprisoned and Christianised. The work exposes the political and administrative mechanisms of subjugation. The artist selected and transcribed 300 records that contain information such as age, ethnicity, parentage, and imposed names, revealing the structural violence of a system of classification and identity erasure. The transcriptions are engraved on polished metal sheets, whose reflective surface draws the viewer's gaze into the work. The installation denounces the complicity between the Church, the Army and the State in the construction of a white, Eurocentric national fiction.

Contextualization

Historically, humanist institutions (the UN, UNESCO, etc.) have hindered the adoption of a broad and systemic conception of racism, relegating it to a moral problem associated with beliefs or explicit acts of rejection towards people on the basis of ethnicity, skin colour, origin, religion or language. In other words, the most influential institutions have promoted the idea that racism is mainly linked to individual actions, rather than to laws, regulations, protocols or bureaucratic procedures. At the same time, in the context of the Spanish state, the active policy of forgetting has meant that a wide range of processes, dynamics and situations are not labelled as racist. This has led to a narrow conception of racism, sometimes relegated to the irrational thinking of a section of the population or to acts of violence committed by individuals. Thus, racism is only 'seen' when it appears explicitly in the relational sphere.

To overcome this limitation, the first thing we must do is broaden our understanding of racism. We take as our starting point the conception of **racism as a structural system** (Bonilla-Silva, 1997). We could describe structural racism as a set of institutionalised dynamics and devices that, together and routinely, produce life trajectories that facilitate the lives of white people in all aspects, while generating continuous obstacles and disadvantages for people who are not

white. This has a profound impact on their education, health, access to work and the guarantee of rights, ultimately affecting the life expectancy of groups affected by racism. This position has consequences for all levels and shows us a vision of reality in which politics, economics, social formation, art, historiography and philosophy, as well as subjectivities, are permeated by dynamics that reproduce racial inequality.

The second point is that racism is cumulative. On the one hand, this implies that racism has memory: although the periods of religious, biological and scientific racism of the colonial era are perceived as officially over, the contemporary expression of racism – including, but not limited to culturalist expression – continues to contain vestiges of those historical forms. On the other hand, it also alludes to the systemic and interactive nature of racism: different systems (education, health, the labour market, housing, etc.) interact and produce cumulative processes of racial grievance.

In this regard, modern racism is linked to the history of colonial and post-colonial capitalism and, therefore, to slavery and forced or unfree labour of racially classified peoples. In this sense, it would be impossible to understand the phenomenon without a historical approach to global events. At the same time, not all forms of contemporary racism can be explained by referring exclusively to the historical narrative.

In this sense, the **persistence of racism** is due to its **capacity for adaptation and contextual transformation** in each historical moment and each place. In other words, racism (but also other forms of domination, such as heteropatriarchy, capitalism, or imperialism) constitutes a form of domination characterised by global (geo)politics, but takes on different forms through **nation-states** and their specific histories and external and internal relations.

In short, what we want to highlight is that the **structural nature of racism** affects the (non)distribution of symbolic and material resources (Hall et al., 2023): rights (citizenship, labour, protection, etc.), work, education and health; as well as global mobility and the way in which the state and institutional bodies relate to people affected by racialisation. And that if racism exists today, it is not because we have failed to rid ourselves of a denigrating past, but because it is produced through multiple mechanisms– some old and some new – in today's world.

Finally, it is important to remember that the dimensions that structure racism – its **cumulative** nature and its **symbolic and** material dimensions – are related through multiple (dis)continuous lines that come and go. In other words, there is a **co-constitutive relationship** between the **discursive** sphere of racism, which is related to discourses and all intellectual and knowledge production; the **attitudinal** sphere, referring to individual or psychological behaviours; and the **institutional** sphere, relating to norms, laws and protocols.

Examples

Different dimensions within structural racism

Racism has **symbolic and material** dimensions that are transmitted and reproduced through four predominant mechanisms: **institutional racism** (here we refer to the scope of public policy and institutional action or practices, whether by the state or private institutions with social impact); **discourses** (we refer, above

all, to public discourses, advertising and acts of enunciation with the capacity to produce social signifiers); **social racism** (attitudes and forms of relationship between individuals and groups); and **epistemic racism** (the question of what is considered knowledge, how it is constructed, and what falls outside that sphere). It is important to understand that the symbolic and material dimensions feed into each other.

Epistemic racism gives rise to worlds of meaning that are often based on enlightened reason, Eurocentric modern sciences, Western culture and the Christian religion. In other words, we call epistemic racism the fact that Western thought has established itself as the only legitimate tradition capable of producing universal (valid for all people), rational (based on enlightened reason) and, therefore, truth-associated knowledge as objective and neutral – the rest will be considered interpretations. This type of racism views knowledge that does not stem from these premises as inferior or less reliable. This has also been called **the coloniality of knowledge** (Lander, 2000).

Discourses, narratives and everything that circulates in written or oral form are also part of symbolic-epistemic racism and, at the same time, produce perceptions of the material reality that surrounds us. From a structural perspective, it is important to pay attention to the discourses and texts produced and disseminated by political parties, administrative or professional documents, media, social networks, academic publications, educational curricula, books and other similar outlets, as they constitute devices of social engineering. All of this production is part of the mechanisms that modulate social sensibilities and impact other spheres (political decisions, social intervention measures, vote manipulation, police impunity, etc.). We are therefore talking about a **cultural battle**, and how widely accepted – or contested – racism in this arena modulates the (lack of) perception of its existence.

Institutional racism is understood as the formulation of decisions and policies based on racial considerations, with the purpose or effect of subordinating a racialised group and maintaining dominance over it. These actions take the form of laws, regulations, programmes, projects or measures issued by institutions, administrations or public and political spheres of the state. These bodies are not mere observers, but **active agents** in the reproduction of racism (Carmichael and Hamilton, 1969).

In relation to the above, the attitudes, behaviours and gestures of people who work in institutions have more power than racist attitudes in the public sphere, and discourse in the media or in election campaigns has greater amplification than discourse on the street. Here, a **distinction** is made between **social racism** and **institutional racism**: although the former is also relevant and can seriously affect people's lives – especially when it occurs in groups or in a socially structured manner (e.g. denial of access to housing by private landlords, or socially condoned *bullying* and aggression) – it is institutional racism that receives institutional and legal protection. Therefore, it has the power and tools – in the form of administrative or criminal sanctions, binding reports, etc. – that are characteristic of institutions.

Activity

'What is racism?'

Objective

To introduce the notion of structural racism and break with the idea that racism only exists as individual aggression or prejudice (micro-racism).

Guided brainstorming

Dynamic

We pose the question:

- 'What is racism and where do we see it today?'

We ask the group to respond freely. All responses are recorded and grouped into three columns without explanations first:

- Ideas about people (e.g. 'insults', 'hatred', 'aggression')
- Ideas about institutions or norms (e.g. 'the police', 'immigration laws', 'school')
- Ideas about discourse or images (e.g. 'fake news', 'what's on TV', 'films', advertising)

Objective

To visualise how the collective imagination about racism is more focused on individual/social (micro-racism) racism than on institutional or structural racism.

What would happen if...?

Dynamic

We propose some scenarios:

- An undocumented young person cannot access vocational training, even though they have completed secondary education.
- A racialised family has been unable to find a flat for months because no one will rent to them.
- Textbooks do not mention slavery in Spain or colonialism in Asia.
- An undocumented migrant is afraid to go to the hospital.
- A political party launches a social media campaign saying that 'they are invading us'.
- A Roma person is constantly followed by security staff in shops when they go shopping.
- In the most-watched series among teenagers, the only racialised character is conflictive and represents a negative cultural stereotype.
- A secondary school does not translate communications for families who do not speak the official language.
- A young woman from a Muslim background does not put a photo on her CV because she thinks that if they see her veil, she will have less chance of being called for an interview.
- A girl without Spanish nationality cannot participate in a summer camp organised by the local council.
- The president of a North American country tells the president of an English-speaking African country that he 'speaks English very well'.

- A Roma girl says that she is never invited to birthday parties because she is 'difficult'.
- A group of boys laugh at a classmate's Chinese name.
- A secondary school refuses to enrol a young person in a vocational training course because he does not have a residence permit.
- A health centre requires a person to be registered as a resident in order to receive treatment, even though they need urgent medical assistance.
- A philosophy course only studies European thinkers.
- Mohamed changes his name on his CV to his middle name because he thinks this will give him a better chance of being called for an interview.
- A teacher explains that the veil is a symbol of oppression of women in a class where there are people who practise and have families of Muslim tradition.
- A young black man is identified by the police four times in one week while walking down the street.
- A migrant mother cannot apply for a school meal grant for her child because she does not have all the documents they ask for.

Questions for reflection and discussion in small groups:

- What is happening in this situation?
- Who does it affect and why?
- Is it an individual act or is it related to a norm or system?
- Do you think this type of situation is isolated or part of something broader?

Mapping structural racism

Dynamic

Group activity:

Based on the proposed scenarios, and returning to the initial reflection, work together to construct a 'map' of structural racism, including:

- Institutional racism (laws, regulations, protocols)
- Epistemic racism (what is taught/not taught)
- Discursive racism (discourse in the media, social networks, politics)
- Social racism (attitudes, relationships)

This can be organised as a cross-sectional or layered diagram. The idea is to show how different dimensions are interconnected.

The mapping can be done using physical materials or digital tools.

Sharing

We analyse the results of the mapping, where we will surely see more examples of social or interpersonal racism than structural racism, and reflect on why we are often taught that racism is only a personal attitude.

Pedagogical notes

- There may be differences of opinion about whether something is racism or not. The aim is not to point out racist opinions in the classroom, but to dismantle a narrow view of racism.

- The activity and language used can be adapted to the level of the group (secondary school, university, etc.). Vocabulary such as 'law', 'norm', 'media', 'representation', 'inequality' or 'discrimination' can be used instead of 'epistemic' or 'structural'.

Resources

Audiovisual material

- Video: Structural Racism explained
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lQ_8eOaiz8o

- Video presentation: Càtedra d'Anàlisi i Acció Antiracista
  https://www.catedraantiracista.cat/la-catedra/ (Available in Catalan)

References

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