Unrooting the genesis of racism

Marielle Oka Sire

Abstract:

For the last 600 years, prejudices and biases based on people's racialisation have plagued Europe and the rest of the world. Far from being an inevitable phenomenon, racism emerged and spread from intentional political practices rooted in an imperialist logic of domination.

In 2020, the anti-white supremacist association Black Lives Matter gained unprecedented momentum and attention after demonstrations broke out to protest the death of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, both killed during an interaction with United States police officers. Movements in the rest of the world soon caught wind and demonstrations took place, notably in Europe and Commonwealth states, to demand social justice in the face of enduring structural racism and the state-sanctioned police violence. Reported through television and radio but also on social media, these events have been an exceptional occasion to take the measure of social inequalities when it comes to racism. In particular those between Indigenous people and people of colour's experience and the discourse of equality proffered by what we call Western states and corporate media. Unsurprisingly, little place was given to conversations deepening the understanding of what structural racism means, and where it comes from.

This piece is the first of a series which aims at untangling the many threads of colonialism. It will soon appear that the overall yarn is complex, which does not mean difficult. The ramifications of racism and colonialism are diverse. At the same time though, their intimate and logical intrications flow in such a way that they make for an easy understanding. This article starts by setting the stage of how European elites built a strong structure of domination to carry on their expansionist project. It begins with retracing the origin of modern racism and how it got co-opted by the wealthiest, most violent states to establish a lasting system of domination over non-white people, their culture, and institutions through racialisation.

Foreshadowing modern racism: the Catholic Reconquista

Racism is a way to look at the world, and especially at people. It is a set of theories of ideas that divide the human species into so-called races and claims a hierarchy among them. To understand this way of classifying people, it is necessary to understand how the idea of racism sprung and developed in the last 500 years, and how politics were involved in the emergence of racism.

Back in the 16th century, Catholic Monarchs Isabel and Ferdinand reconquered the Iberian peninsula from the Moorish, who had been there since the 8th century. They put an end to the cultural mix between Jewish, Christian and Muslim people that was so characterised of the Al-Andalusia territory, and expelled non-Christians. Many converted to Christianity to remain and avoid persecution, but the return of the Inquisition countered their attempts. Up until the Reconquista, the Inquisition was an institution charged to probe the faith of Christians; with the Reconquista it was mandated to investigate further and check Christians' faith "purity" through genealogy (https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/race)

Although the concept of race was not fully formed at this time, the return of the Inquisition nonetheless instituted the idea of "purity of blood" as a criteria to classify people under different religious and political categories. On this base, racism continued developing during the same 16th

century, on the very same Iberian peninsula when slavery of people abducted during colonisation campaigns on the African and American continents, or bought to merchants, came to replace Christian's Europeans slaves.

If at first Queen Isabel declared indigenous people from the American world "free vassals" (van Deusen, 2015:2), it only took a couple of years for merchants to pressure her into reversing this decision. In 1503, she issued another decree stating that indigenous people could be enslaved if they were "barbarian" man-eaters or resisted Christianity (van Deusen, 2015:3).

At this point, "there was no universal theory of race differences that sanctioned such cruelty and mistreatment" (Hirschman, 2004:393), but the Reconquista paired with the first waves of colonisation on the African and American continents were the fertile ground for a theory of racism to consolidate.

Racial ideology of white supremacy

Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, multiple ideas and theories unravelled to classify humans based on their differences. It was during the 19th century though that racial ideology properly formed and permeated in the popular culture in support of white supremacy (Hirschman 2004:393).

Before going any further, it is timely here to pause and highlight a few points about the concept of race, the development of the ideology of white supremacy, and racism. First, scientific research, however pseudo-scientific it is, is not a neutral venture but a deeply social activity rooted in a given context. Research on human diversity which produced racism cannot be understood without "the reality of growing European military, economic, and political dominance" (Hirschman, 2004:394). That is, research on human differences across the planet was based on the assumption that European societies were the most advanced, evolved and civilised version of the human species.

These pseudo-scientific conversations on whether or not peoples from African and American continents should be considered human were happening within restricted circles of the academic elite – which had similar, if not totally aligned, interests with the military, economic and political elite. Secondly, the quasi-totality of these elites producing these conversations and ideas on racism were overwhelmingly European-Caucasian males, in other words: white men.

There was nothing neutral in the 19th research on diversity among humans. Stakes were very high since scientifically backing the idea that whiteness was the most advanced human feature of the world allowed European states to justify slavery and genocide (victims were dehumanized to the extreme), land dispossession (which could not be theft since non-white people could not possess anything), and the subsequent accumulation of wealth that resulted from them.

Racism as we know it today has not only been embedded in societies by colonial powers, but its very consolidation as an ideology, as a way to look at the world was cemented to justify colonialism itself. As a top-down tool, it allowed for European colonial powers to accommodate slavery, genocide and land dispossession with the emerging ideals of equality, freedom and sovereignty propelled by the philosophers of the Enlightenment.

Now that we have briefly retraced the origins of racism and how white supremacy spread under the umbrella of colonialism, the next section will focus on how precisely these ideas are incorporated and operate into the structures of advanced capitalist states.

Structural racism: a system of discrimination

Why would a concept so old be so resilient? And how can racism still persist where so many states appear to have taken up legal stances against it? Plainly, because this ideology has been a structuring feature of advanced capitalist societies and, if ever, is only superficially challenged. Today a strong consensus prevails: racism is a social construct with the sole purpose of discriminating

people. The fact that a concept of biological race has been proven false does not mean that the ideas of race and white supremacy have vanished. To continue exploring the way racism has been used in the structures of states to secure white supremacy, let's retain Hirschman's definition of racism: "the belief that social and cultural differences between groups are inherited and immutable". This definition is helpful to tell apart racism as individual bias and prejudice from structural racism. Although both are intimately connected and reinforce one another.

Imposing state's sovereignty

Racism can manifest between individuals through racist bias and prejudice but originally trickles down from an overall system set in place by the state – structural racism. Structural racism is a system in which all the parameters are organised to benefit to a certain vision of the world, of its peoples, lands and resources. This system is man-made, just like the state within which it operates.

A state is not just a government. It is "a centralised political system within international legal boundaries recognised by other states" (Nietschmann cited by Taylor-Saito 2020: 43). This involves two crucial things. It means that behind the flat word of state, there are a vast web of legal ramifications that fix the rules of the state's game and impact its population. The criminal system that police people and certain activities, laws that govern the economy and frame what private companies can and cannot do, property law which dictate who can own what, or who. As an illustration, in the so-called United States, a decision from the Supreme Court in 1857, known as the Dred Scott decision, established as a rule that slaves were property and did not have any rights of citizens (Hirschman, 2004: 395).

The second implication of the definition of the state is the element of recognition. A state is recognized by other states, as an equal entity with its laws, territory and population. In the context of colonisation of the American, African and Australian continents for instance, that means that European colonists did not recognise existing social and legal systems in these places, did not

acknowledge people as part of a population and, as a result, ignored the fact that the territory they invaded was ever anyone else's than theirs. A colonist invasion is by definition a racist project which makes the colonist state the only valid form of social organisation, and discard all others as uncivilised, barbaric and backwards.

With this in mind, Hirschman's definition of racism needs to be completed. Not only does racism see social and cultural differences as inherited and immutable, it also supposes an irretrievable superiority of the centralized state over any other form of society. Racism then is not only the belief that white people are superior to any other, it is the belief that "white" institutions are the most evolved. Colonial European states acted as if it were legitimate to discard colonised people and their law, recast them as non-human in order to enslave, or kill them.

Whiteness as the crux of colonialism

Despite the incredible violence that structural racism yields on people of colour and Indigenous people, colonial states keep framing racism as being a 'non-white' issue. In so-called Australia for example, policies of protection and assimilation of Indigenous people have followed policies of extermination. Assimilation for colonial institutions means to "close the gap" between Indigenous people and white people, that is inequalities that have been created by these very same colonial institutions (Moodie, 2020). The spotlight here, like in many other cases and places, is put on the so-called 'shortcomings' of Indigenous people to integrate and thrive within the Anglo-Australian society, whereas this Anglo-Australian society, its institutions and policies are the very causes of Indigenous people's plights in the first place.

In this picture, whiteness remains invisible and unmarked, as if it represented a 'normal' and universal state of being (Moreton-Robinson, 2000). Yet, it is whiteness that serves as a measuring stick for ranking people, while European ideals of the Enlightenment serve as a benchmark to compare societies. This segregating

way of seeing the world has been forged and reinforced in centuries of justifying European invasions of different part of the world. It has been inscribed in the functioning of many states and has permeated in the general population through political and media discourse (civilising missions and "enhancing" standards of living through capitalism), cultural representations (through cinema industry) but also education with history books written by, for and from the point of view of European centralised states.

White supremacy championing whiteness and its attributes of rationality, civilisation and legitimate knowledge cannot and will not disappear until it has been fully exposed and duly questioned. Considering this colonial heritage, turning it around requires more than simply making racism an offence punishable by law. It demands that Western conceptions of justice, economy and society be challenged and that people benefiting from privileges granted by whiteness relinquish their power.

Towards decolonising

Understanding racism and structural racism as a white supremacist problem is crucial to untangling the many ramifications of colonialism and grasp what decolonising states and minds would look like. Since its conception as an issue of purity of faith to purity of blood in the Catholic Inquisition in the 15th century to land dispossession and genocide in the following centuries, structural racism is still alive and well to this day. The next part of this series will build on the genealogy of racism and white supremacy to expose how colonialism is is still operating in advanced capitalist states and within the international scene through police violence, but also in the very way we look at the world.

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