

Anti-racist Struggles

The continuity of a very long memory

Papers n. 16 - Juny 2020

Cristianisme i Justícia - Roger de Llúria, 13 - 08010 Barcelona

+34 93 317 23 38 - info@fespinal.com - www.cristianismejusticia.net

From social racism to racism as system

For some time now, anti-racist and anti-colonial theories have contributed to many of the varied analyses of social problems. The theoretical contributions of authors from the global South have shown us how colonial processes have produced lasting changes in the patterns of world power. Even though colonization was a historical process that was interrupted by the emergence of independent nations, the colonial structures and the colonial logic still hold sway.

In recent years these analyses of racism and colonialism have been used in the global North to examine how the colonial heritage functions in European societies. Ever more numerous are the voices that claim that racism is not some new phenomenon that has arisen suddenly because of the growth of the extreme right; rather, it simply a continuation of the long history of domination that began

in 1492, when the first Europeans disembarked on the coasts of what they called the New World.

Various anti-racist collectives and movements have denounced the institutional racism that adversely affects both the migrants living in Spain and other persons who are trying to reach European territory. The countless deaths of migrants and refugees within fortress Europe or on its borders or the neighboring seas are the result of definitely racist policies that question and rank the humanity of certain persons. We are not talking about accidents or tragedies but about the long-term effects of policies, negotiations, and investments that have made over the last 500 years. The social racism we see every day in concrete situations rests firmly on racist structures that try to place the blame for these crimes on particular individuals in order to make them appear to be anomalies or exceptions to the rule.

In view of this, we propose to understand racism as something more profound than the explicit prejudices and stereotypes expressed by intolerant or reactionary individuals. That is to say, discrimination is not just a question of people who are bigoted. Discrimination is inevitably produced by a system that classifies and grades persons and peoples. Such a system calls into question the humanity of persons or behaviors that are different from those of the supposedly ideal modern subject, namely, the white, well-off, heterosexual male. Rather than understand racism from an individual and/or moral perspective, as a question of intolerant people, we understand it as part of a political, economic, cultural, and social system that arises from the very model of society that we live in.

Anibal Quijano¹ explains that colonization imposes *coloniality*, thus producing a new classification of the world population (Indians, Negros, Mestizos, Whites, etc.) which affects all spheres of life. Starting with the conquest, the differences between conquerors and conquered peoples became codified in terms of “race,” and “race” became the basic criterion for assigning social roles and positions in the population. When we speak of *race* and *racialization*, we are referring to the processes by which persons or peoples are assigned a “race.” It is not a question of biology or ontology; it is a question of the distribution of power.

Different expressions of institutional racism

In recent years the European Union (EU) has been improving its unrelenting policy of inflicting death, both within and beyond its borders. Astronomical amounts

of money have been spent to prevent migrants and refugees from gaining access to European territory. The document “Human Rights on the Southern Border 2018” reports that FRONTEX, the agency controlling the EU’s external border, has spent 1.4 billion Euros in the thirteen years of its existence. The policy of exclusion enforced by FRONTEX, along with the externalization of border control, has resulted in the normalization of death in the Mediterranean Sea, making it the most deadly body of water in the world.

Inside fortress Europe as well, the authorities have hardened the policies for controlling and criminalizing of migrants, refugees, and “racialized” persons. A variety of different means are used to make it more difficult for migrants to remain in Spanish territory. A wide range of activities are used for this purpose, from harsher criminal and migration legislation to persecution in the streets and racist raids. A report issued by SOS Racisme Catalunya² states that a foreigner is seven times more likely than a national to be detained by police for purposes of identification.

Spain’s lethal policies have cost the lives of at least five persons: Mama Mbaye died during a racist raid in Lavapiés; Manuel Fernández Jiménez was killed because of anti-Roma prison policies; Mohamed Bouderbala was murdered in the CIE of Archidona, Málaga; and finally, Soufian Hnin and Mamadou Barry were two minors who died because of the lack of protection for migrant youth.

Institutional racism affects not only migrants and refugees but also those who do not meet the ideal of white European citizenship. The criminalization of Muslims and Roma has a long trajectory.

At the present time, Catalan schools have programs to prevent radicalization, but they are directed only at Muslim students. Such programs foster stigmatization and produce attitudes of permanent suspicion toward such students, as has been noted by various anti-racist organizations and specialists in the subject.³ African migrants have also constantly denounced the institutional racism that touches every part of their lives.

Given the harsh discourse of the right-wing sectors that portray migration as a problem and a threat, the indifference of the “white” left is alarming. Even though racialized persons and organizations have stressed the structural and dehumanizing nature of racism, the problem is frequently depoliticized and treated as a moral or personal question. Whenever “white” leftist organizations or collectives are asked what they are doing, their evasive silence indicates their complicity with this system that grades people according to “worth.” Perhaps the reason for their inaction is that such grading yields benefits and privileges to some individuals who are not ready to question or relinquish them.

The murder of Lucrecia Pérez Matos as a symbol

For their part, migrant movements and organizations have been constantly denouncing the cruelty of a system that every day spawns death, violence, and exclusion for a large part of the migrant and racialized population of Europe.

The 1992 murder of Lucrecia Pérez Matos, a Dominican woman, symbolizes the continuity of this dehumanizing logic. Lucrecia was killed by three white men who, convinced of their racial supe-

riority, decided to “teach a lesson” to the migrants living in the zone of Aravaca, Madrid. Led by a civil guard, they shot up the neighborhood at random, and death found Lucrecia that night.

Her murder caused a profound reaction within the collectives of migrant, refugees, and racialized persons. Each anniversary of her death—the 13th of November—reminds us of the “robust” health of a system that perpetrates violence against particular bodies, especially those of racialized women, lesbians, and trans persons, all of whom are highly vulnerable because of the intersection of gender, class, and race.

A long memory of resistance

Given the countless instances of daily, institutionalized violence, it is important to talk about resistance and the transformative actions carried out by migrants and racialized persons. Collectives in various Spanish cities warn that racism forms the basis of the historical oppression of racialized bodies for the benefit of white society.

In this regard we must mention the struggle of the Popular Union of Sidewalk Vendors in Barcelona. A few years ago a group of “blanketeers”—mostly African street vendors who sell from blankets in public spaces and tourist zones—organized a union to denounce the criminalization to which they were subjected by police and public officials. They have demonstrated how immigration law makes them into “illegals” and denies them access to regular work. As a result, the only way they can survive is by working as street vendors.

The formation of a union allows the street vendors to work collectively to de-

find their rights and to regularize their administrative status. In 2018 they created their own trademark, Top Manta, for articles of clothing that they design and sell, thus generating alternative work opportunities. A crowdfunding campaign helped them collect enough money to buy machines for silk-screen printing and to open a clothes store in the Raval neighborhood of Barcelona. Since its creation, the union has become an important political actor, exposing the institutional racism to which its members are subjected and producing collective solutions to many of their problems.

In addition, various collectives of domestic workers and caregivers, most of them migrant women, have been waging a long struggle to have their labor rights recognized. Spanish labor law does not accord them the same treatment it provides to other workers. Instead, they are placed under a special regimen that denies them the right to Social Security and unemployment benefits. Legislation was proposed for them to be included in the Social Security scheme, but an amendment in 2018 postponed their incorporation until 2024. Meanwhile, they have been actively mobilizing and organizing to ask that the amendment be repealed. They are also demanding that Agreement

189 of the International Labor Organization be ratified and that their labor activity be given the dignity it deserves.

These actions are not something new, nor do they represent a sudden “awakening” of the racialized collectives. Rather, they are a further stage in the long history of resistance by our ancestors and by all those who confront racist violence with their mere presence in a territory that is constantly devising new mechanisms to exclude, expel, or eliminate them. As various *comunicués*⁴ have stated, there is continuity and consistency among the struggles of all marginalized groups: the Moroccan workers in Huelva, the Roma people, the migrant sex workers, and the migrant trans persons. They are all “proving” every day that humanity does not depend on an identity card.

It is imperative that our political debate focus directly on the policies of death and dehumanization that have been deployed against migrants, refugees, and racialized persons. These policies mark the bodies and the lives of these persons while ordinary citizens look on with complicity and indifference.

Florencia Brizuela González
Doctor of Law and Political Science
(UB)

-
1. QUIJANO, A. (2000). «Colonialidad del poder y clasificación social», in *Journal of word-systems research*, Vol. 2.
 2. «L'aparença no és motiu. Identificacions policials per perfil ètnic a Catalunya. Informe 2018», report issued by SOS Racisme Catalunya and the platform of organizations Pareu de Parar-me, Barcelona, 2018.
 3. «Vigilància de frontera aplicada a les escoles», *La Directa*, núm. 443. Available at: <https://directa.cat/vigilancia-de-frontera-aplicada-a-les-escoles/>
 4. To have access to the whole manifesto that was read at the anti-racist demonstration of 11 November in Madrid, consult: <http://esracismo.com/2018/11/03/manifiesto-de-la-manifestacion-antirracista-del-11-n/>