



IT'S A
SYSTEM

OF OPPRESSION

THAT
FAVOURS
ONE GROUP

AT THE EXPENSE
OF RACIALIZED
GROUPS.

LDL

Ligue des
droits et libertés

Systemic racism...
Let's talk about it!



Does talking about systemic racism imply that we are all racist?

In recent years, we have seen an increase in open expressions of racism. This trend is not specific to Quebec. In many places, racist discourse is circulating more freely and even seems to be acquiring a troubling degree of “acceptability.” The Ligue des droits et libertés therefore believes it is important to understand what racism is and how it operates as a system.

To fight racism, we need to identify and document the problem and understand its effects. We cannot hope to solve a problem if we refuse to call it by its name. That is an essential first step.

Today, racialized and Aboriginal peoples are sounding the alarm. They are drawing attention to glaring disparities between their communities and the white majority. In 2016, a broad coalition called for a commission on systemic racism in Quebec. While there have been a number of reports and inquiries, including the *Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse* (CDPDJ) report on racial profiling, there has never been a commission on systemic racism that heard from the people who experience it on a daily basis. The idea of calling for a commission was to document inequality between white and racialized people, identify systemic obstacles to equality and take measures to address them.

To be clear, talking about systemic racism doesn’t mean putting Quebecers on trial. Racism doesn’t stop at the border. In Ontario, it took 10 years of discussion and equivocation before the government finally created an Anti-Racism Directorate in 2016, a move that has the merit however of recognizing the existence of systemic racism. The objective is not to launch a witch-hunt, but to recognize that racism, like sexism, is a system we have inherited. As long as we, as a society, refuse to name it, we cannot fight it.

“I am writing this letter to open a dialogue, not with the goal of placing blame on White people for our racist culture, but rather responsibility. No one of us invented it. We inherited it. Nevertheless, we are responsible for understanding how to change it and then doing so. Of course, this isn’t easy, since we struggle even to perceive a way of being that seems so normal to us.”

Deni Ellis Béchard,
*Kuei, My Friend: A Conversation
on Race and Reconciliation,*
Talonbooks, March 2018, p. 7.

Q. Why do we still talk about races today?

A. The concept of race does not reflect any biological reality. There may be more genetic differences between two “white” people than between a “white” person and a “non-white” person. Biologically, there is only one human race.

Distrust of the Other is nothing new. There are many historical examples of societies in which a group’s social status was determined by its ethnic origins. The meaning we ascribe to skin colour, religion and ethnic origin has varied at different times and places.

The first pseudo-scientific studies that sought to classify human races, drawing on the natural sciences, appeared in the West in the 18th century. It was not until the 19th century, however, that racist ideologies emerged, along with the first attempts to establish a hierarchy of human races.¹ Those theories led to the birth of social Darwinism and the emergence of white supremacist theses that were picked up by, among others, Nazi theoreticians in Germany.

The racist theories developed in the West were used to justify imperial conquest by the Christian West. The belief in European superiority that underpins the concept of the white man’s “civilizing mission” even served to justify the institution of slavery: enslavement would help raise the natives closer to the ideal of civilization incarnated by the West.²

While this “classic” racism has been officially repudiated today, it still has a profound influence on our conception of the world. It manifests itself in the unequal relations between “whites” and “non-whites,” persistent inequality between the Global North and South,³ and the continuation of colonial relations with Aboriginal peoples. The survival of racist, imperialist and colonialist patterns in the West is also evident in the perpetuation of racism, prejudice and discrimination against racialized minorities, immigrants and the peoples of the Global South.

“Racism was born out of this relationship of domination. Man created it better to achieve his purposes. To exploit the territory and his fellow beings and have more room. To be able to take even more and impose himself. Impose his way of thinking. His way of believing in higher powers. We should remember the reason why most of the explorers came to America after its ‘discovery’: it was for conquest. One of their tasks was to exterminate the Indigenous Peoples or to make war on them. Of course, there were exceptions ...”

Natasha Kanapé Fontaine,
*Kuei, My Friend: A Conversation on
Race and Reconciliation*,
Talonbooks, March 2018, p. 18.

1. Jean-Claude Icart, *Perspectives historiques sur le racisme au Québec*. Montreal: Conseil des relations interculturelles, 2001. Online: <http://collections.banq.qc.ca/ark:/52327/46829>

2. Emilie Nicolas, from a presentation at a conference on racism organized by the Ligue des droits et libertés, 2017-01-24.

3. The term “Global South” doesn’t refer to the geographical south but rather to the countries that have been impoverished by capitalist globalization, often referred to as “developing countries” or “the Third World.”

***To be able to enslave
colonized peoples, it was
important, indeed essential,
to define the Other
as somehow subhuman.***

As modern science has shown that “race” has no biological basis and is in fact a social construct that serves to support the domination of one group by another, we use the term “racialization” and refer to the individuals and groups targeted by that process as being “racialized.” The terms “racialized” and “racialization” have the advantage of emphasizing the fact that “race” is an invented category rather than a biological reality. The process of racialization has the effect of differentiating, excluding and reducing its subjects to inferiority.

It is worth noting that the expression “racialized individual” is not usually applied to white people. Whiteness is not named. “Whites” are considered the norm, the reference point, the universal representation of all humanity, while “non-whites” are perceived as “different,” the exception, the particular. Of course, there are also relations of domination among “whites” based on characteristics such as language, religion, nation, class, age and gender. Other systems of oppression exist that are distinct from racial oppression.



D. Mathieu Cassendo

But what does “racialize” mean?

Q. If there is no such thing as race, can we talk about racism?

A. If races don't exist, what is racism? The commonly accepted definitions of racism generally revolve around reprehensible behaviour by individuals towards racialized persons. That is explicit or overt racism. It is despicable and usually relatively easy to identify. But it is only one form of racism. Racism also encompasses

“economic, political, social, and cultural structures, actions, and beliefs that systematize and perpetuate an unequal distribution of privileges, resources and power between white people and people of color.”¹

So, even though race is a social construct, racism still exists!

The term “systemic racism” refers to a system that disadvantages certain racialized groups on the basis of their skin colour or ethnic origin, and works to the advantage of white people. Hence the expression “white privilege.”

But I'm not privileged!

The word “privilege” is usually associated with wealth. However, a person can enjoy privileges under a system of oppression based on social class, gender or sexual orientation and be disadvantaged in other ways. Intersectional analysis sheds light on the interplay between these different systems of oppression and helps us grasp how they interact with each other. A white person may suffer various forms of oppression (colonial, patriarchal, heterosexist, and others) and still be privileged in relation to racialized people (see “What is white privilege?” below). A white woman enjoys privilege because of the colour of her skin but may also be a victim of sexism and disadvantaged as a woman, a worker, a lesbian or a person with a functional limitation.

Acknowledging privilege just means recognizing that it is difficult for some people to have access to things others take for granted.

“Systemic racism occurs when an institution or set of institutions working together creates or maintains racial inequity. This can be unintentional, and doesn't necessarily mean that people within an organization are racist.”

A Better Way Forward: Ontario's 3-Year Anti-Racism Strategic Plan, p. 10

1. A. Hilliard, *Racism: Its Origins and How It Works*, 1992, quoted in Robin DiAngelo, “White Fragility,” *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, Vol 3 (3) (2011) p. 56.

What is white privilege?

Although equality rights are written into our laws, “white” people have advantages simply by virtue of the colour of their skin. Those advantages are invisible to the people who enjoy them. White people benefit, unintentionally and often unknowingly, from the fact that other people are racialized and discriminated against. Peggy McIntosh describes the process that led her to the concept of white privilege in these terms:

“After I realized the extent to which men work from a base of unacknowledged privilege, I understood that much of their oppressiveness was unconscious. Then I remembered the frequent charges from women of color that white women whom they encounter are oppressive. I began to understand why we are justly seen as oppressive, even when we don’t see ourselves that way. I began to count the ways in which I enjoy unearned skin privilege and have been conditioned into oblivion about its existence ... White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks.”¹

A few examples of white privilege:

- Being well represented in government
- Learning a history that is mostly about my group and depicts it positively
- Not being accused of forming a ghetto for living in a majority “white” neighbourhood
- Easily finding children’s posters, picture books, dolls and magazines that depict my group
- Not being stopped by police for identity checks for no apparent reason
- Not being expected to speak for or defend all members of my group
- Feeling welcome and “normal” in most public, institutional and social situations

1. Peggy McIntosh, *White Privilege, Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*, 1988. Peggy McIntosh is a US feminist, anti-racism activist and researcher at the Wellesley Centers for Women, Wellesley, Mass.

Q. Can a person have racist behaviours without knowing it?¹

A. Like sexism, racism is prevalent in our society and influences us whether we like it or not. The world vision and values instilled in us from childhood are marked by racism and sexism. This has been borne out by research using the implicit-association test (IAT).

The IAT shows that we all have implicit biases, to different degrees. We have unconscious associations rooted in images, models and implicit messages received since childhood that shape our perceptions and behaviours. For example, the word “Mom” is connected with gentleness, tenderness and comfort. That is the image conjured up by the word, even if our personal experience is different.

The Project Implicit study² tested 700,000 people around the world and found that 70% of respondents had some preference, strong or slight, for white people as opposed to black people. So there is clearly an implicit bias in favour of white people. In a simulation in which subjects had to decide whether to shoot an armed person or a threatening person, they were more likely to shoot if the person was black, and more likely to shoot an unarmed black person than an unarmed white person. This bias is evident in the prison system: a study of federal penitentiaries found that black inmates were more often subjected to arbitrary punishments meted out by guards.³

The results of the IAT are disturbing because they often do not match the respondent’s conscious values. For example, the test found that a feminist journalist whose mother had been a scientist associated the sciences with men more than women.⁴ However, the unconscious bias revealed by the test doesn’t necessarily mean that this person will display sexist behaviour towards women in science, for people can counteract their own implicit biases.

“I often observe in myself thoughts that I find racist and I realize that I didn’t even choose to have them. I learned them and integrated them into my world view before I even learned the word racism.”

*Deni Ellis Bécharde,
My Friend:*

*A Conversation on
Race and Reconciliation,
Talonbooks, March 2018, p. 109.*

1. See Régine Debrosse, “Peut-on être raciste sans le savoir?,” Revue LDL, Fall 2016, p. 10.

2. Project Implicit, <http://www.projectimplicit.net/about.html>, consulted on April 11, 2017.

3. <http://www.oci-bec.gc.ca/cnt/rpt/pdf/oth-aut/oth-aut20131126-eng.pdf>, consulted on May 25, 2017.

4. Rima Elkouri, “J’ai des préjugés et vous aussi...,” *La Presse*, January 14, 2017.

The invisible privilege

“Michael Kimmel, an American sociologist, was speaking about an African American friend who, when she looked in the mirror, saw a ‘Black’ woman, and about a White friend who, when she looked in the mirror, saw a woman. He explained that when he looked in the mirror, he saw a human being. He shares how he realized that, unconsciously, he thought of himself as ‘the generic person,’ as if his experience of life had something universal about it. The African American woman was aware of her difference in relationship to the social norm (the ‘White man’). She knew that she was a woman and that she was African American, whereas the White woman saw herself more or less as a generic woman. Kimmel, however, simply perceived himself as human. He didn’t actively view himself as a White man, because White men are at the epicentre of power, looking outward at those at the margins; they are the ones who put labels on all of those who are not like them and whom, historically, they have excluded from power. Kimmel emphasized how privilege is invisible for those who hold it and how Whites have the luxury of not having to think about questions of race every second of their lives.”¹

1. Deni Ellis Bécharde & Natasha Kanapé Fontaine, *Kuei, My Friend: A Conversation on Race and Reconciliation*, Talonbooks, March 2018, p. 81-82.

Islamophobia

Racism also regards “cultures,” “ethnic” customs and religions as unequal. In “cultural racism,” as in classic racism, certain groups, which are deemed to be fundamentally different in their very essence, are ascribed characteristics that make them inferior. Islamophobia, like anti-Semitism, is an example of this.

The Ontario Human Rights Commission defines Islamophobia as “stereotypes, bias or acts of hostility towards individual Muslims or followers of Islam in general. In addition to individual acts of intolerance and racial profiling, Islamophobia leads to viewing Muslims as a greater security threat on an institutional, systemic and societal level.”¹

1. Ontario Human Rights Commission, *Policy and Guidelines on Racism and Racial Discrimination*, 2005, p. 10.

Q. How does racism, direct or systemic, violate people's rights?

A. Human rights are interdependent. For example, the right to health is linked to the right to food, housing, education, life and access to information. It is also related to the right to safe working conditions, and hence to freedom of association in defence of that right. Depending on circumstances, it may be related to freedom of movement. In other words, the ability to exercise a right depends on the recognition of other rights.

Like all systems of oppression, systemic racism creates disparities across the board and therefore results in significant violations of basic rights. Racialized people face unequal treatment in all areas: work, health, justice, safety, education.

The statistics tell the story:

- A job applicant named Tremblay or Gagnon has a 60% better chance of being invited to a job interview than a person with the same qualifications called Traoré or Ben-Said¹;
- When racialized minority applicants are turned down for a job, it is due to discrimination in 35% of cases;²
- Among Canadian-born university graduates, the unemployment rate is twice as high among members of "visible minorities" than among others (6% compared with 3.1%).³

Studies have shown that closer police surveillance leads to a higher number of people being stopped and arrested. . Further, according to Université de Montréal sociology professor Christopher McAll, "For the same offence – e.g. a parole violation or drug possession – a young white person is less likely to be arrested by police when caught in the act than a young black person."⁴

"Many people are excluded from a society in which they would have liked to participate. There are voices that we will never hear. And we, in the West, who believe ourselves to be the protectors of democracy, we should know that if we don't listen to the voices of the diverse groups who constitute our society, then we aren't living in a true democracy."

Deni Ellis Béchar, *Kuei, My Friend: A Conversation on Race and Reconciliation*, Talonbooks, March 2018, p. 126.

1. CDPDJ, *Mesure de la discrimination à l'embauche subie par les minorités racisées*, Paul Eid, May 2012, p. 45.

2. Ibid., p. 43.

3. Statistics Canada, 2016.

4. Christopher McAll, "La racisation de l'exclusion : pouvoir et espace public," Bulletin de la Ligue des droits et libertés, Fall 2010, p. 9.

Examples of practices that can be forms of systemic discrimination

Apparently neutral rules, requirements or formalities may have a discriminatory effect on people who come from other countries. For example:

- Requiring official documents that are uncommon in other countries
- Requiring previous experience in the same industry (which may not exist in some countries) or requiring a letter of reference from the applicant's previous employer in French
- Giving preference to applicants recommended by another employee of the firm

Thus,

- In Montréal-Nord and Ville Saint-Michel, young black men are stopped by police for random street checks 5 to 8 times more often than young white men.⁵
- In Montreal, 22.4% of youths who are arrested and charged were identified as black, although they make up only 10% of the population.⁶
- Aboriginal people make up 23% of Canada's prison population but only 4% of the general population.⁷

People often attribute disparities in standards of living to merit: "He was a diligent student." "She's always worked hard." "If he's not happy, he should move to a better place." It is said that individual effort is all it takes for people to improve their circumstances. However, merit is not the main factor in a person's living conditions. We know it can be difficult for some people to have access to things that others in the same society take for granted. This is what is meant by privilege. Political and institutional changes are needed in order to eliminate privilege and ensure that all people enjoy full rights.

Unlike direct discrimination, which is overt, systemic discrimination is much more difficult to expose and prove. There has to be a will within an organization to address discrimination. Rules, practices and ways of doing things must be examined to determine whether they may have discriminatory effects. If rights and freedoms are to be respected, organizations must be required to correct mechanisms that give rise to inequality, even if that is not their intent..

5. Will Prosper, "Je ne suis pas raciste, mais..." Huffington Post, April 25, 2016 (online).

6. CDPDJ, *Profilage racial : document de consultation sur le profilage racial*, Paul Eid and Michèle Turenne with Johanne Magloire, 2010. p. 14.

7. Howard Sapers, *Annual Report of the Office of the Correctional Investigator 2013-2014*

Q. What can we do?

A. Systemic racism has been woven into the fabric of our society – and many others – for centuries. We didn’t invent it but we did inherit it. It is a system in which we all participate, often unknowingly. We have a collective responsibility as citizens to oppose it. It is important to understand, first of all, that racism is much more than disgraceful words or deeds; it is a system that must be recognized and named. We have to listen to the people who experience the effects of systemic racism on a daily basis. Pretending that we are all equal and it’s just matter of effort only helps to preserve and maintain the structural obstacles that breed inequality. We must identify and address all the factors that contribute to maintaining and increasing inequality between “whites” and “non-whites.” We must all support struggles waged to expose racism.

We need to be proactive in the fight against racism. It isn’t enough to say that we’re not racist. We must take action to dissect and root out systemic racism: we must be anti-racist. The fight against racism is a battle for respect and dignity for all, without distinction. It is a battle for the human rights of all human beings.



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*Condemning racism is fine
but what else can we do?*

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Like all systems of oppression, systemic racism creates disparities in all areas – in work, health, justice, safety, education – and therefore has a significant impact on the rights of racialized people.

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