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The Absurd Workplace

How Absurdity is
Normalized in
Contemporary Society
and the Workplace

Chapter 6: The hypernormalization of race in contemporary workplaces

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Introduction
The chapter discusses the way in which race relations and discrimination have been hypernormalized in contemporary society. With globalization and overwhelming evidence of increased productivity when a diverse workforce is in place, it is paradoxical to notice the difficulties in linking practices and rhetoric in organizations with such evidence. The issue becomes more apparent when government grand narratives, particularly in the capitalist world, call for migrant labour to help industry and nation building. Yet, not sufficient institutional structures are put in place, nor their implementation adequately enforced to guarantee long term adequate and sustainable wellbeing for a large number of newcomer groups who are then racialized and ghettoized. This raises questions of whether racism and disadvantage are consciously normalized in so-called democratic systems which profess equality in their philosophical and political rhetoric. The rest of the chapter expands on Western thought and its contradictions about race, the construction and normalization of racism through colonial practices as well as the issue of systemic racism and its normalization in contemporary workplaces and labour relations. These themes running in the help to lay out the case for a hypernormalization of racism, incl its manifestations, meanings and effects.

Western thoughts and its contradictions on race

Western philosophical and sociological literature is filled with the idea of equality, liberty, freedom and justice, etc. This also pervades modern business and management literature and the Western—centric textbooks in the field. We shall not cover the full spectrum of Western thought on the issue of equality in this chapter. However, we shall focus on a number of key 17th and 18th century systems of thoughts that shaped the narrative and legal framework about equality and diversity in Europe and the western world that derived from its conquests. In this context, we consider the thoughts of Montesquieu, Hobbes, Rousseau and Descartes.

In 17th and 18th Century Western philosophy, thinkers such as Montesquieu, Thomas Hobbes and Montes occupied the centre stage. Speaking about equality, Montesquieu (2011 originally published in 1783) argued that all men are born equal and should remain so thanks to the protection of the law. This extraordinary thought that sits in sharp contrast with the political system of the time (feudal system), was a novel and provocative idea that spread rapidly throughout Europe and the western world. It is believed that the constitution of the United States and the perspectives on civil liberties and freedom are largely inspired by Montesquieu's work. Rousseau (2014) equally believes that man is born free. His seminal work has inspired many freedom movements in Europe and the West more broadly.

In the English-speaking world, Thomas Hobbes is credited for being one of the most influential social reformers and philosophers of the 18th century era. It is important to note that Hobbes himself was a 17th century thinker, but the significance of his philosophy made is lasting and dominate that 18th Century. In his The Social Contract, Hobbes argues that emphasized

equality between all peoples and between men and women. He asserted that all are part of the social system and can take charge or be subjects at some point in time. Hobbes's ideas reiterated the emerging narrative about the natural freedom that all humans on the planet should enjoy unreservedly.

With these philosophers, we have the foundation of freedom and liberty in Europe and the Western world. Their seminal works have inspired many freedom movements in Europe and the West more broadly. For example, the French revolution of the 1800s cannot be divorced from the philosophy of Montesquieu and Rousseau. Equality and diversity thinking in the United Kingdom and the United States is linked to the work of Hobbes. In fact, the British philosopher contended that all humans have an ascribed right to compete for acquisition of resources and to defend themselves. This early idea of equality laid the foundations of thinking about individual rights central to Western capitalist societies and democracies. Only by acknowledging this diversity can humans be happy (Tucker, 2016). More significantly, the mottos of many of the most prominent so-called democratic countries such the USA, UK and France draw directly from these philosophical thoughts, for instance in the USA it is "In God We trust", in the UK it is "Dieu et Mon Droit" (paradoxically written in French and meaning God and My Right). In France one speaks of One and indivisible France with the moto "Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité" meaning Liberty-Equality, Brotherhood.

However, the Western political systems and world international relations driven by the West at the time were not commensurate with the grand narratives about trust in the fair and non-discriminatory God. However, the exclusion of minorities in much of the Western hemisphere is at odd with the explicit reference to the one loving God in the British and American constitutions. The reality of Western society throughout the centuries has defied the philosophical views and national mottos which profess an elusive equality and freedom. These narratives sit right at the heart of a 300-year-long slavery movement and subsequent western oppression (colonization) of the nations outside of Europe. The violent oppression of the colonized and the indoctrination of the masses, has shaped the attitudes towards minorities in Western societies leading to the inferiorization of these minorities in most spheres of life, including work and employment, education, housing, health and access to political power. Abrams et al. (2015) talk of hypocrisy. We can speak of Western hypocrisy about equality and diversity because of unequal application of human rights, whereby the balance of equality tips in favour of one group (white) to the detriment of others. These will have dramatic and lasting consequences for postcolonial workplaces, e.g. equality and diversity in employment opportunities as well as promotions within work. Evidence suggest that white male have a disproportionately wider representation in top jobs in organizations and government (Tomaskovic-Devey & Hoyt, 2019; Mooney, 2017). We consider these contradictory narratives and practices in the next paragraph. We also draw on the critical voices from the oppressed world, such as those of Frantz Fanon and more recent scholars such as George Ayitteh, Miles and Anthias & Yuval-Davis who denounce the normalization of disadvantage and Western hypocrisy.

The contradictions
Postcolonial theory of race examines impact of colonialism and the ensuing so-called globalization on race relations. Therefore, postcolonial theory of race relations in its historicity sheds lights on its ongoing ramifications for societies generally and employment relations more specifically. The legacy of colonialism has been significantly theorized in the sociological literature.

Authors such as Phizacklea and Miles (1980) argue that the complexities of labour and race relations have their roots in the migration that followed colonialism. During the two world wars, people from the colonies were drafted into the battle zones, helping to save Western nations from Nazi Germany. And in the aftermath of the wars, particularly the second world war, labour shortages to rebuild post war Europe mean that once again, the colonized were called upon to help Europe. However, in all these calls, the significant labour areas filled by the foreign and migrant labour were largely menial and labour intensive work roles (Hack-Polay et al., 2021). The narrative, here again, was that the non-European labour force was needed but in reality it was largely for unfulfilling and hazardous positions that no one wanted to undertake. This is an exemplification of how inequalities in early diverse labour relations were set in sharp contrast with the ideals of equality and fairness advocated in Western thoughts and political narratives. The ideals of equality and fairness pertained to the ingroup – and in the silence, groups such as women and non-whites were excluded. For instance, the Chinese immigrants in Liverpool (England) were largely confined to jobs in shipyards, cleaning cockpits (Chiang, 2021; Broady, 1955); the Caribbeans were employed in coal mines (Sutherland, 2006) and the Africans mainly in cleaning and domestic jobs. Clearly the labour force in postwar and postcolonial Europe was segregated. These segregation practices were neither accidental nor isolated. As explained earlier, they were ideologically constructed through imperialism and colonization. Fanon (2004) saw colonization as hypocrisy and a machine for violence from the very nations that claimed to be democracies which profess non-violence approaches. This led Ayitteh (1992) to decry the betrayal of Africa [and by ricochet the colonized world] through the western colonial enterprise, which was largely aimed at removing dignity from the colonized, humiliate them and exploit them. In most cases these practices were state-sponsored by the very political establishments that professed equality and diversity (Carter, Harris & Joshi, 1987). Segregation ideas were prevalent in British postwar political narratives. As an example, in 1968, the British Health Secretary, Enoch Powell's Rivers of Blood speech explicitly expressed the undesirability of non-white people in British society. He claimed that non-whites will corrupt the purity of British race and culture (Hickson, 2018). Enoch's speech is still relied on by British white supremacist movements to justify ats of violence against minorities in the UK and the USA (Webb, 2015; Langlois, 2021, The Washington Post) and the denial of Black vote in the USA. Segregation and slavery movements were legislated during colonial times with royal ascent. These were abolished in 1863 only after all major colonial powers had done so, thus showing the attachment of the West for the very equality that their eminent philosopher and constitutions have professed for centuries (Hickson, 2018, Drescher, 1994). The spirit of segregation has since not disappeared in the Netherland, where Rose (2022) still found that in the 21st century black women face stiff discrimination. Thus, clearly ethnic labour was not equal to white labour, leading Anthias and Yuval-Davies (2005) and many other authors to conclude that western nations used migrants as a reserve army of labour. "Reserve" means no equal access to desirable jobs. Where some non-white workers landed in seemingly supervisory positions, the lack of respect and unequal pay were key features of their tenure.

Institutional racism: culmination to hypernormalization

In recent year key debates have emerge over the notion of systemic racism and its existence. It is generally thought that racism flourishes in times of hardship (Weil, 1991), where racial selection in terms of access to resources is more prevalent. The recent period of hardship caused by the covid-19 pandemic has not been an exception. Racial debates, in particular around health inequalities and socioeconomic disadvantage, have intensified since the COVID-19 pandemic

period. This period has seen a resurgence and significant surge in racial tensions, particularly as affecting minority ethnic groups. Though some in the political and media sector acknowledge that there may be some organized discrimination against minorities, others in the same circles have persistently refuted the existence of systemic racism. This attests to the normalization of discrimination. In this section, I examine the meaning of the concepts and provide some clues as to what might constitute systemic racism.

Defining 'systemic'

Let us first unpack the meaning of the term systemic (or sometimes used interchangeably with the term systematic). The Oxford Dictionary [OED] (2022) defines the term systemic as a fact or phenomenon 'relating to a system, especially as opposed to a particular part'. Considering the phrase 'relating to a system', one can start to think about particular social systems (if we consider a given collectivity as a social system). The second part of the Oxford definition, 'as opposed to a particular part', also gives us some clues as to how systemic could be understood. This second part of the definition signifies that a systemic phenomenon or action runs through the structures of the collectivity with little exceptions. Sociologist Auguste Comte (1929) perceives system as an integrated whole which means that what happens in a part of the whole affects other parts of that whole. Comte argues that a critical condition to maintain the system in good order and for it to progress is for each element to cultivate more altruism (Durkheim, 1895), which signifies working harmoniously with the other parts.

Case supporting the hypernormalization of systemic racism

Now returning to the notion of systemic racism, how does it meet the conditions of systemic proposed in the Oxford definition and in Comte's theorisation. Both in the USA and the UK as well as most countries struggling with racism, there is a sense that racism touches all spheres of society: employment, health care, policing, education and government and the justice system, etc. (Hetey & Eberhardt, 2018). Let us consider some of these areas in more depth to elucidate the case.

In education and employment, for instance, there have been countless reports on how racial disadvantage is prevalent in British and American schools. In both countries, the underperformance of black and minorities is well documented. In the UK, the unemployment rate for these minorities has been consistently more than twice than their majority counterparts for decades, currently standing at 10% compared with just 4% for the white population. This sustained minority disadvantage in education and employment has led Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1995) and Miles, (1974) to speak of migrants as being a reserve army of labour which is drawn upon only when there is a shortfall in the majority labour force. Hack-Polay (2019) has spoken of the Ghettoisation of minorities.

In policing and the justice system, it is well documented that black and minority people are twice more likely to be arrested (Hetey & Eberhardt, 2018) and to receive long term sentences for petit crimes compared to their white counterparts in the UK and the USA (ibid). The disparities in the way in which the police deals with law and order in different communities has been prominently exemplified in recent years by the killing of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd and many other black and non-white people in the USA; the mishandling of the killing of black teenager Stephen Lawrence in the UK; the numerous murders of native people in Canada; policy violence against

North Africans and Black Africans in France. These high-profile examples represent only the tip of the gigantic iceberg of black disadvantage in policing and the justice system. In an investigation of the Stephen Lawrence case in the UK, Sir McPherson found that the police force is 'institutionally' racist (Anthias, 1999). This institutionalism of racism has resonance in many other countries and social areas. The attempted insurrection of the Capitol Building in the USA on 6th January 2021 and its light handling by the police and law enforcement forces has been highlighted as further evidence of the colour of policing and justice (Broadwater & Fandos, 2021). The majority of the insurgents were white participants and only 50 arrests were made. This sharply contrasts with the mainly black protest again the killing of George Floyd and against police brutalities where several dozens were arrested, tear gas fired and the National Guards speedily deployed in great numbers. In reality, the lenient response to the 6th January Capitol Riot was because these 'protesters' were white and therefore handled less harsh (or not prosecuted at all in many cases), which stands in sharp contrast to the military response to nonviolent BLM Movement.

In healthcare, evidence suggests that during the COVID-19/pandemic access to treatment is not colour-blind (CNN, 2020), meaning that Black and minority people experienced less favourable treatment. Most patients who are refused the ambulance service to hospital are minorities. At the same time the number of deaths among healthcare workers disproportionately affected black and minorities people because they are over-represented in the low paid end of healthcare jobs which have more exposure to covid-19 and patients.

In government, there is an under-representation of black and minorities at every level: local government, state/provincial government and central government. In Britain's history, there has never been a minority prime minister nor deputy prime minster. There is no minority leader of a major party and minorities are also under-represented in ministerial positions. In Canada, the first black leader of the major political party (Green Party) was only elected in 2020 after a century of Canada's existence as country (CBC, 2020). The number of Black members of parliaments and senators is derisory.

The examples can go on and on. We cannot cover all areas of the social system but these examples show the degree to which the social system displays widespread and embedded disparities in opportunities for various racial groups (DiPrete & Fox-Williams, 2021; Hack-Polay, 2019) in different countries. The evidence of widespread and embeddedness of racial disadvantage meets the first criteria in our established definition of 'systemic'.

Enduring rhetoric and Structuration Theory
Enduring rhetoric: empirical evidence
A further significant point that supports the case for systemic racism is the temporal endurance in our societies. Despite formulated legal frameworks to protect different races, the social system as a whole has shown a significant inability to work effectively towards equality for all. In the UK, the Race Relations Act was formulated in 1956 but progress towards race equality has been slow. If almost a century since the legal framework came into effect, the debate about race equality is still raging, then there might be significant flaws in the application of the legal framework or its enforcement (Kirton & Greene, 2015). This points to a systemic aspect of the perpetuation of systemic racism. In the US, since Black people earned the right to vote in 1867 (Pruitt, 2021), there have been reports of tampering with their ability to exercise this critical right. For instance, recently, some polling stations have been closed without rationale in areas with Black majority, making it difficult for Blacks to vote (The Guardian, 2020). And suspicion of systemic

discrimination is further reinforced when at the same time, there is a curb on postal voting which traditionally enabled Black voters whose work patterns did not allow them to present themselves physically at the polling stations to vote.

With the abolition of slavery in 1833 (that is that's almost 200 years ago), equality for Blacks and minorities was supposed to abound (National Archives, 2022). However, the difficulties experienced by these groups in emerging as recognized actors in the social structures testifies to the fact that there might be a latent drive to maintain them in the former condition (Horowitz, 2019). The voices of minority groups and campaigners are dismissed as conspiracy theory and troublemakers. Thus, arrested, tortured and imprisoned or murdered (Martin Luther King; John Lewis; Malcom X). Yet, openly declared racist groups such as the British National Party (BNP) and White supremacists in the USA. have faced no vigorous action (and have been condoned in some political arenas), perhaps to perpetuate the status quo in race relations and minority disadvantage. The persistence of race inequalities could be understood through Giddens (1979) Structuration Theory. Racial slurs have even been professed by serving prime ministers and presidents, with utter impunity, e.g. Boris Johnson, the British Prime Minister, likening the Muslim women wearing hijab to letter boxes (BBC, 2018; Woolley, 2022).

The hypernormalization of racism and inequality in workplaces can be conceptualized through Giddens (1979) structuration theory. The eminent contemporary British sociologist argues that structure concerns rules and resources. He contends that these are organized in a way that they "bind time and space in social systems", and with the persistence in time and space, they develop more independence, thus becoming systemic. This is significant because, as the author puts, these systems then become 'legitimate' structures embedded in the collective consciousness and are used by social actors (and political actors) to justify their actions. Thus, this becomes "the essential recursiveness of social life is constituted in social practices, making structure simultaneously the medium and the outcome of reproduction practices" (p. 81).

In relation to discrimination and inequality, we can therefore conceive that their perpetuation is explained by their developing properties (or structures) that survived the test of time (centuries of western domination) and space (across the western geo-political sphere). To argue the case for systematic racism or discrimination in western workplaces, we have sought to examine Gidden's three tests for the qualification of systemic in his structuration theory: Interaction, Routinization and Explanation. *Interaction* is the individuals and groups' encounter with the social system, i.e. how they internalize and deploy in practice the knowledge and ideologies acquired either normatively or structurally. These could be blurred in time and space but are "constantly reconstituted within different areas of time-space" (p.86). Racism and discrimination against the colonized have gone through different phases during the western conquests and domination and taken different forms as we earlier asserted, e.g. from slavery to colonialism, then to neocolonialism. The second test for establishing the systemic nature of things is *Routinization*. Through routinization, social action is institutionalized and give rise to a social order which inextricably helps to reproduce social frameworks. Finally, there is *Explanation*. Giddens views explanation as the articulation of the language to convey the recurrent narratives and ideologies. The author believes that the creation of an accurate syntactic field enables language to be normalized and the stance taken by institutions validated. An example of this can be seen in the papal decree of the [Right of Discovery] which enabled European conquerors to seize land

from Native Americans, a practice that was perpetuated for a few centuries as it was legitimized by the courts in the so-called free and democratic world.

Giddens's argument is that the presence of trust and tact is critical for the emergence of ontological security, as well as the organization of social reproduction. However, this trust has dissipated due to western abuses and volt-face in many situations, e.g. the abolition of slavery and its replacement with colonization; the suppression of formal colonization and its replacement with neo-colonialism, etc. Therefore, each time there is discontent, as opposed to reflecting on the true fundamentals of liberty and freedom and equality embedded in their constitutions, political systems and core philosophies, western nations replace an evil system with a more subtle and latent but more vicious system which is more difficult to detect and openly fight to eradicate. When it is discovered, organizations and politicians attempt to water down the systematic nature of discrimination by terming it unconscious, such as in the current fad and buzz phrase unconscious bias. however, in my view, there is hardly anything unconscious in discrimination and disadvantage because they are embedded and inherent in institutions that are consciously crafted (Marx, 1867).

Conclusion
In total, with the statistical evidence available, the protracted period of disadvantage suffered by minorities and the inability of governments to vigorously enforce equal opportunity and diversity legislations, it is difficult to refute the suggestions about the existence of systemic racism. In this article we have substantiated two key parameters that make the claim about systemic or systematic racism compelling: persistence and affecting all areas of the social system and the faintness or lack of political will to address the situation, which clearly reflects structuration theory).

      Western civilisation has constructed a system that implicitly favours white supremacy (e.g. colonization, neocolonisation, cultural imperialism and oppression against its own ideology of freedom, democracy, equality and diversity). Clearly the hypernormalization fits the framework of structuration, with the West initiating *interaction* with the outside world for one purpose (exploitation). To achieve this a complex system of institutionalized social and political actions and has been put in place through colonization and neocolonization (*routinization*). A systematic narrative is constructed (*explanation*) and that undermines and belittles 'others' as undeveloped, uncivilized, or developing countries.

      Thus, perhaps the final assumption to explain the persistence of inequalities and racism in western workplaces and global institutions is simply that the western centric global institutions and trade relations are constructed around white supremacist ideologies which implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) normalized discrimination and disadvantage against non-western people. Gidden (1979) puts that: "Agents—groups or individuals—draw upon these structures to perform social actions through embedded memory, called memory traces. Memory traces are thus the vehicle through which social actions are carried out". He continues that "…routinized social practices do not stem from coincidence, "but the skilled accomplishments of knowledgeable agents" (p.26). It is not surprising that Horowitz's (2019) paper found that most black Americans believe that the abolition of slavery did not bring dramatic material changes to their condition.
The way out of the hypernormalization of racism and race inequality in the workforce is therefore through the reformulation of those institutions that have long flirted with stereotypes, and these include the education system, the political system and popular culture (e.g. film and media). The education system, for instance could go through a more vigorous decolonization process which

will entail the inclusion on inputs from the long silenced voices of the former colonies. Historical accounts, scientific discoveries and contributions to political thoughts from outside the West require honest acknowledgement. For example, acknowledgement that the popular number system we currently use is made of Arabic digit; that Arithmetics and geometry have significant roots in Egypt, etc. Acknowledgement of these significant historical facts and crediting them to the rightful inventors from the South would show honesty of the West but also give confidence to the cultures that have been robbed of their heritage. In media, with more globalizing world, it may simply be that governments have to be courageous enough to venture beyond encouraging diversity of faces on our screen to mandate diversity (which is already 'enshrined' in 'inactive' laws).

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