

reply: race, nation, class: a neo-marxist critique

Daniel Lieb and Sophia Schorr and Anna Kamenik

Racial discrimination is a phenomenon, which can be experienced in individual lives, in groups and communities, and in the structures of a global society. Racial discourses and the performance of discrimination are historical issues that are based on colonial and global relations. That's why the topic of racism needs to be laid bare as an individual sensitisation as well as a structural – political, social, institutional, etc. – challenge. Often, education is held up as the solution to this. By this we mean education in a wide sense that addresses people of all ages, knowledge or social groups. According to Étienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein's book *Race, Nation, Class – Ambiguous Identities* (1991), we want to add a neo-Marxist perspective on the discussion of racism in issue 13 of *on_education*. We recognise a marginalization of historical and structural voices because some articles in the volume risk individualising a structural phenomenon – that of racism. To unpack our critique, we begin with a short overview of what a neo-Marxist perspective on racism comprises. In the second step, we outline how our perspective can enrich the discussion by summarising the main points of the volume's texts and critiquing them. In the final step, we conclude our argument with reflections on speaking about racism and education.

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A neo-Marxist perspective on racism

A neo-Marxist perspective considers racism on a structural level rather than an individual level. The first and most important delimitation to a *classical* Marxist view is that class loses its privilege as the only important analytical category. Rather, class appears as one of many other categories such as gender,

nationality, and race. Nevertheless, class remains an analytical tool that lays the foundations for any other category. As Wallerstein states: “Classes are ‘objective’ categories, that is, analytic categories, statements about contradictions in a historical system, and not descriptions of social communities” (Wallerstein, 1991a, p. 84). In the postscript of *Race, Nation, Class* he argues that there are “‘intrinsic’ ambiguities in the very concepts of race, nationality, and class” (Wallerstein, 1991b, p. 234), which are based on the fact that the categories like race, nationality but also gender are due to a historical dimension and are constructed to advance capitalist oppression. For this reason, they are dependent on analytical categories, which construct a social term on differences instead of similarities. The second shift from Marxism to neo-Marxism is the revolutionary result. While Marx calls communism or socialism the ultimate solution, Balibar and Wallerstein see only a necessary change, but without an intentional idea – the idea of Marxist revolution and communism in the forms of an ultimate liberation is dead. As Balibar takes it: “It became clear that the ‘predictions’ and revolutionary ‘programme’ of Marxism would never be realized as such, for the simple reason that the ‘conditions’ on which they were founded – a certain configuration of the class struggle and capitalism – no longer existed, since capitalism had moved ‘beyond’ those conditions, and thus beyond Marxism itself” (Balibar, 1991b, p. 160). Therefore, the prerequisites are changed, and consequently so are the results.

Nevertheless, in a neo-Marxist manner, class remains in some way pre-ordered, as the world system of capitalism is based on the productive relationship of economical exploitation, to the extent that the historical productive relations build up the “‘raw materials’ of thinking” (Hall, 2004, p. 32). Therefore, racism appears as an ideological phenomenon, rooted in the history of Colonialism: What a neo-Marxist perspective can add to the discussion is a historicisation and therefore a non-natural explanation for the development of racism. Races, nations, and today’s ethnic groups are ‘inventions of pastness’ (Wallerstein, 1991a, p. 78). As reified groupings, races, nationalities, and *ethnic groups* are the result of the “axial division of labour” (Wallerstein, 1991a, p. 79) and lack an ontology that can be realised as *natural*. Or as educational scientist Aladin El-Mafaalani puts it: “The world can be best described in a racial way, if one ignores history” (El-Mafaalani, 2021, p. 25).

Racism as a structural and historical phenomenon – Fragments of critique

Taking the perspective just presented, we now look at the individual texts in volume 13 of *On Education*. As Thomas Geier argues in *Racism and Discursive Belongings*, “an educational and pedagogical analysis would have to consider that pedagogical institutions are also always part of racism and its discourses”². Put another way, education takes part in subjectification processes of its own. Therefore, “migration traps, irritates, and affects established social orders in a sensitive way” and shows symbolic and powerful – and therefore also racist – performances. The distinction between *us* and *others*, *good* and *bad* subjects, called *othering*, is an individual act but also a historical and discursive symbol. This argumentation requests marking racism as a structural and historical phenomenon and therefore as part of educational and pedagogical analyses and institutions. By focusing on migration, Geier follows Balibar and argues within neo-Marxist traditions in criticising social categories and showing them as the basis of modern society.

The climate crisis is described as an aspect of racism in Inken Carstensen-Egwuom and Birte Schröder’s essay. In a multidimensional way, the climate crisis is interwoven with society as an *intergenerational* and *intragenerational* issue and a stage for coloniality-based racism. Besides racism and its (re)production, Carstensen-Egwuom and Schröder propose a perspective of sustainability

education for “developing transformative, liberatory educational approaches”. Their perspective takes the converse approach to the neo-Marxists: Sustainability education and transformation want to make people think about a good future for all people – in a global and generative way. Based on this utopia they think about necessary new structures, education, and social values. Inasmuch as we need to analyse the past and present along with its historic inequality in race, nationality, and class to build a positive future, sustainability education and neo-Marxism meet each other.

Jason Arday describes the experiences of people of colour at British universities. His argument includes, *inter alia*, that there are fewer examples of non-white PhDs and professors, so people of colour and especially black women – as an intersectional marginalized group – become marginalized in the institution and in the process are also held back from furthering their career in academia. Arday concludes that “diversity continues to be a barometer for either organisational adaptability or resistance to racial and intersectional equality”. In addressing racist structures at British universities, we argue that such an essentialist reference seems unhelpful in solving the multiple challenges posed by racism. By ascribing experiences of marginalisation to each ethnicised, gendered, etc. group, Arday fails to address essentialism as a product of discrimination itself, so that mutually exclusive groups appear as suppressed but self-contained groups. In relation to Étienne Balibar, Arday’s argumentation is trapped in a ‘turn-about-effect’ (Balibar, 1991a, p. 25), wherein a pedagogy of diversity gets entangled within the same thinking patterns as the criticised phenomenon: that of ethnic, gendered, etc. essential attribution. In this way, the described experiences appear as specific to a certain group of people and fail to interact with the experiences of others. As a further point of criticism, we assume that there can be no “space for people to enact scholarship that challenges institutions to live up to and broaden their missions” as Arday claims. In this respect, we follow the argument of Karim Fereidooni, who empowers the perspective of Critical Race Theory on racism and education.

However, while emphasising the universal discursive power of racism in education and the impossibility of non-racist spaces as well as expounding a historisation of racism in European colonialism during the era of enlightenment, Fereidooni forgets to contextualise the invention of human races in the broader causation of the development of the capitalist world system, as Wallerstein (2012) developed it during his academic career. This invention was not – as Fereidooni assumes – the diabolical idea of Western philosophers but one that is mirrored in the classification of humans into those who have become exploited for their labour and those who have become *overexploited* (Balibar 1991c, p. 211). From a neo-Marxist perspective, this classification came first and has been the structural source of a latter ethnicisation and dehumanisation in the context of colonisation. Especially in keeping with Fereidooni’s suggestion – that while white European philosophers imagined racism at their desks, in the following centuries this *armchair-ethnologist* perspective went on a triumphant march across the world – we encourage the view that the invention of races has been a result of two parallel developments: first, that of colonialism and therefore of structural exploitation of the population on the African continent, and second, the attractive enlightenment that led to the necessity to order the world and to justify its interrelationships.

According to the ideals of the European enlightenment, especially the declaration of universal human rights – which also led to the important educational theory of humanism – it seemed necessary to legitimise the hierarchisation of human beings. A welcomed explanation for this circumstance, that some humans consume the resources of an exploited continent while others are slaves that are overexploited, is that the latter group of humans is of a different, lower race. The

turn-about-effect of Humanism and Racism mentioned above (Balibar, 1991a, p. 25) contains these exploitations, that seem, in the ideology of colonialism and racism, to be a humanist project (Sarbo, 2022, p. 45). As a result, it would seem to be the white man's burden to bring culture to the uncivilised nations – even if it requires the use of force: “With racist knowledge, one can exploit and suppress with the best conscience: one does not take, one gives” (El-Mafaalani, 2021, p. 31).

Based on the broader phenomenon of capitalised exploitation, it does not seem adequate to claim that education must enable everyone to ask him/herself “What do I have to do so that racism occurs a little less in my professional context?”, because such a question comes close to an individualist reduction of a structural phenomenon that finds its sources in the deeper causality of the accumulation of capital.

In the same critical manner, we must address Marko Pecak's claims for a *Romani Holocaust education*. Although he reveals a fine understanding of French Marxist Louis Althusser's (1970/1977) concept of an ideological state apparatus in addressing pupils' textbooks as an important part of subjectification, his demand for the addition of textbooks that refer to the Holocaust with regard for marginalised Romani perspectives brings with it the danger of setting victim roles against each other. Furthermore, his proposal of a stronger intercultural exchange with a focus on Romani groups also runs the risk of essentializing *the Romani perspective* on the Holocaust.

Christina Brüning and Ruth Hunstock describe racist German society and the connection “to our colonial past or rather a certain amnesia about this past”. Using the example of school textbooks, they show “dichotomising and hierarchizing representation”, “*white* narrative of progress” and “collective historical amnesia”. For that reason, awareness and “developing a moral compass to judge situations” is necessary for history students. Like Balibar and Wallerstein, Brüning and Hunstock show us the (re)production of social inequality in school.

Albert Scherr also shows educational inequality based on racism. He sees racism as a historical phenomenon that must be understood in the social context. Furthermore, he declares national differences because of “specific historical contexts as well as the intertwining of racism with the economic, political, institutional, and cultural features that characterise national societies”. For this reason, it seems necessary to allow “experiences of belonging, recognition and equality” in pedagogical institutions. Like Balibar and Wallerstein, he sees that racism can only be understood in the context of its social structure, which is why transferring a fully developed concept of racism with specific characterisations to other nations seems difficult.

Conclusion: A neo-Marxist approach to education and racism

In conclusion, we want to ask: how should one think and speak about education and racism against a backdrop of neo-Marxist insights? All the journal articles we critiqued focused in one way or the other on education. Education seems to be a *quick and dirty* solution to social challenges like racism; but racism also has structural, political, and economic components. That is why, in a neo-Marxist tradition, education cannot be the only answer to racism. Quite the opposite: it would be dangerous and short-sighted to refer only to education. Rather, there are many questions to ask in the quest for a racism-critical education: Who educates and why? Who should be educated and why? What are the aims and values of education? What is the importance of political or economic questions? Where is the colonial and structural inheritance? In a literal post-colonial (meaning non-racist) way we need to *first* open spaces for big questions and critical new ways to answer them. There will not be a single answer, there will be many. Maybe this is the largest of all irritations for Western and

colonial thinking.

Second, we need once again to tie structural forms of racism to the exploitation ratio. What liberal antiracism lacks is exactly this critical perspective, that racism's origin lies in the development of the capitalist world system and still finds its most important source in it (Roldán Mendívil & Sarbo, 2022, p. 29): "Racism is not a contingent accompaniment of capitalism but connected to it structurally. A society that is based on exploitation structurally, will always be instructed by the hierarchisation and suppression of some" (Frings, 2022, p. 16).

Third, if racism only gets addressed individually, as a problem of individual awareness, anti-racist activism, as well as an anti-bias pedagogy, must remain a Sisyphean task (Sarbo, 2022, p. 63; for the current discussion see also Elbe et al., 2022). In this sense, we force a neo-Marxist view on racism to analyse the given production relations and to understand the inner ratio of racism. We conclude, therefore, that this structural core of analysing racism has been marginalised in the issue of *on_education* discussed.

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1. Balibar and Wallerstein have also been attributed into a post-Marxist discourse. We call this perspective neo-Marxist, because we recognise as a post-Marxist theory rather efforts of a fusion of Marxist and postmodern theory (von Beyme, 1991) like Laclau & Mouffe (2020) and Laclau (2010) which focus a linguistic perspective. Provided that Balibar and Wallerstein lack such a postmodernist turn, we prefer the term neo-Marxist for this draft.
2. Unless otherwise stated, the non-evidenced citations have been taken from the respective articles.