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education is not the solution: racism and abuse of power in schools and universities

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Education is often presented as the solution to overcome racist structures in our societies. However, there is a lot of abuse of power and racism happening in the education system itself. The more knowledge a person gathers without positioning and reflecting themselves, the bigger the power shift becomes in the frame of institutions such as schools and universities. Author and journalist Mohamed Amjahid shows how racism affects the daily lives of racialized people and underprivileged communities within the education system and how this problem can be tackled.

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I remember the image of Professor H., a tall man, very clearly. Dressed in an expensive suit, tie, and patent-leather shoes, he often strutted up and down in the front of the auditorium, and instead of giving a scientific lecture, he bragged about whose hand he had just shaken in Berlin, London or Brussels. He described every single one of his politician friends as “a very intelligent man”. Up there, where power resided, the world was still in order – unlike down here in the lecture hall, where the concept of university he had grown accustomed to slowly started to crumble. With every semester, there were more and more students in his lectures who didn’t (have the opportunity to) participate in an exchange program in the U.S. during high school. Instead, there was an increasing number of students who asked for an extension on their papers, because they were forced to work part-time for financial reasons, or who had to admit they had never read a single line of Kant or Hegel, because their parents didn’t provide them with a well-equipped library at home.

In one of the first lectures, Professor H. talked about “today’s exaggerated political correctness”, “unnecessary quotas”, and “di-ver-si-ty” – using air quotes while uttering the latter. In his eyes, university as an institution was going down the drain ever since it stopped focusing on grades, excellence, and personalities – unlike during the professor’s own youth: “Everything was better back then, what counted was (your) performance and talent”. The underlying myth of an unbiased meritocratic society where the only requirements for success are hard work and talent, is and always has been, of course, misleading. Studies show that White, male professors tend to sponsor White male students and promote them to leadership positions – hard work and talent often only play a marginal role. According to surveys published by the OECD, the social background of young people in Germany is an essential factor in determining their educational opportunities. There is almost no other industrialized country on this planet where the access to education is as restricted due to social circumstances as in Germany. What this means is that in this country children of professors more or less automatically turn to a career in academia, whereas the children of facility managers will probably end up working a similar underpaid job. In addition, BIPOC people as well as FLINTA face institutionalized discrimination at the university, for example with regard to appointment

procedures for professorships – as the decision-making committees are almost exclusively made up of White men. As a result, in 2021 almost 73 % of professors in Germany were White men. Others have significantly fewer opportunities to contribute their knowledge and their perspective on important questions of coexistence to academic as well as public discourses and debates. This whole new thing of "di-ver-si-ty", as well as the fact that the university slowly started to open its doors to people like me obviously enraged Professor H.

During the seventh session of Professor H.'s lecture, one of his PowerPoint pages showed a chart. The top line read "the criminality rate and its development over time", the line underneath presented statistics on immigration to Germany. The series of numbers didn't really make sense to me, but according to Professor H., they proved the following: "More immigration leads to more criminality". A closer look at the data, however, revealed that the professor saw a mono-causal explanation where there was none. Nevertheless, he presented his 'expertise' on immigrants in Germany and their seeming criminal energy as the absolute truth, and did so with unparalleled conviction and confidence.

I was sitting in the middle of the room, surrounded by only White students. All of them diligently wrote down every word – even though the professor didn't allow taking notes for didactic reasons. At least some kind of rebellion, I tried to console myself. Not a single person raised even a hint of doubt with regard to the professor's presentation. Nobody intervened, nobody uttered any concerns and pointed out that statistics like these were corrupted by crimes like 'illegal border-crossings' which can obviously only be committed by immigrants. Nobody explained that immigrant groups are younger than the average population, and that on average younger people commit more crimes. Nobody asked if the chart considered offences such as tax evasion. Nobody analysed that these statistics are often filled with racist prejudices of a homogenous research group. When I tried to ask a question, Professor H. deliberately ignored me and continued with the next topic. As the only student of colour I had no allies in this room. Being alone among White people I felt claustrophobic in situations like these. I know enough young Non-White students who couldn't deal with the pressure that came with it, and dropped out of university. Unfortunately, the entire system still lacks experience in dealing with this new diversity within former Whites-only spheres, but also the communication among affected Non-Whites is still largely uncoordinated. Too many of us are fighting alone.

During my first months at university, I also couldn't find anyone to talk about what I saw and experienced – for example the scribbles on the bathroom walls "Arabs = Hezbollah, we will bomb you to pieces!", or "White people will stay in power!", or "The proper place for a Turk is in the Kebab House – hand in your application at the food stand at the metro station". In seminars, fellow 'proper' German students talked to me in a paternalistic manner that I knew all too well. It was sometimes even worse than in the small town in central Germany where my sister lived where people explained the concepts of bike lanes and cemeteries to me. During a seminar on development policy, a fellow student told me I couldn't possibly have an unbiased opinion on this topic: "You're from a Third-World country yourself!" In a different seminar, Michael, Christian and their friends from the Junge Union[1] and the liberal student club, exclusively White students who, as Professor H., believed in the idea of a meritocracy, were sitting in the second row: up front, but with fold-up desks in front of them, of course. While a Chinese exchange student was giving a presentation, the White students whispered jokes about Chinese people to each other: "Oul plesentation about the intelnational lelations and films…". All I could think at that moment was: Well, here it is, the German White male young academic offspring, making fun of a Chinese

woman's English – with a poor imitation of a Japanese accent. But the real tragedy in all this was that in the foreseeable future, it will almost certainly be these White men who will make the decisions ‚among themselves' in politics, business, science and the media – decisions which will affect all of us. It remains a mystery to me to what extent some decision-makers in educational institutions and educational politics fight against inclusive learning spaces for everyone.

These decision-makers often have trouble with the (relatively new) ability of vulnerable minorities to be vocal and visible in the discourses of academia and educational policy. And one does not even have to make it to university to witness this: Even in schools, numerous White actors openly resist any emancipatory, anti-racist discourses and paint themselves as victims – or send others forward instead. To this end, a young White female high school student, motivated by her White female teacher, commented on a talk I gave in Stuttgart[2] in early 2020 on the topic of White privileges in the German educational system: „I once was bullied by 15 Turks in elementary school", she said, and pointed out that White people were also oppressed in Germany. I made one thing clear first: bullying is unacceptable, no matter the victim or the perpetrator. It was also important to me to point out the difference between bullying and institutional discrimination, and that 15 elementary school students of Turkish descent in Germany did not have the power to institutionally oppress someone, even if they were to be supported by every person of Turkish origin or even every non-White person in Germany – because what counts is an individual's position as part of a majority or minority. Other essential factors are the shared history and relationship between a majority and minorities, as well as who holds the power.

There simply is no such thing as reverse racism, as it is called in anti-racist jargon. This thought experiment (because that is all this is) describes the discrimination of Whites by non-Whites. In order for this to be possible, however, humanity would have to travel far back in time and reverse colonialism, so that my ancestors could occupy Madrid, Paris or Berlin, exploit Europe's natural resources, and create a world order where Africa, parts of Asia and South America were the centre, and Europa and North America the periphery. Waves of immigration motivated by economic and political reasons would make their way from the North to the South. And then maybe White people would be systematically oppressed by societies and nations dominated by non-White people and – who knows? – would be enslaved and so on and so forth… If this was what had happened, then yes, maybe we could talk about racism against White people. However, as we all know, this is not the case.

So, I asked the student whether any of these 15 former classmates went to her high school[3]. She shook her head. "The reason for this is the systematic discrimination against non-White children within the German educational system", I explained. This White high school girl, no matter how she had ended up at this disgraced school packed with children of colour because of the state's education policy, was apparently one of the few who made it out. The vast majority of the rest, probably mostly non-White students, has been used as underpaid cannon fodder within the German job market for the less qualified. The young woman nodded.

The bullying, she explained, consisted of her bullies hiding her sneakers once, and her having to walk across the gym barefoot. Another time, "the 15 Turks" had put pebbles in her shoes, causing her to get hurt while putting them on. This is not nice and should not have happened. However, this sort of bullying is not systematic oppression (as is racial profiling for example), not institutional discrimination (like it happens against People of Colour in the housing market), nor structural discrimination against non-White people (as it is traditionally the case in the German school

system). And these realities, and this was important for me to emphasise, are not just the subjective points of view of the people affected. They can be quantified. They are real. They have been described, reviewed, and they are available to be read a thousand times. My impression was that at the end of our conversation, the student understood the difference between bullying and discrimination against students of Colour. Judging from the look on her face, her teacher, however, did not. Or maybe she didn't want to?

Both Professor H., as well as the teacher from Stuttgart, are only two of the countless examples demonstrating perfectly how emotionally attacked decision-makers react in these situations where structural problems within the system they are responsible for are being addressed, made visible, and being criticised. Professor H.'s research is poor, to say the least, neither valid nor reliable – if one can call it research at all from a critical methodological point of view. The teacher from Stuttgart is a bad role model for her students with her mindset being clouded by prejudices and with her continuous attitude of feeling insulted. In a diverse society, a front row made up of privileged high school students does not produce responsible citizens capable of solidarity. This critique is not even about the sensitivities of the racialized people, it is about the quality of education and research.

To expose issues such as racial bias in social science (its methods), factors which intentionally discriminate when it comes to the decision which school a child goes to (the structural exploitation of racialized bodies) or the composition of a bourgeois canon (Eurocentric discourses) not as normal but *normalised* enrages those responsible for them. This reaction is even obvious and somehow relatable. I understand that it can be uncomfortable to be suddenly looked at by critical students and pupils, authors and scientists. However, there is one thing the history of European knowledge production taught us (the former exclusive objects of examination): you get used to this kind of look.

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Mohamed Amjahid is a freelance investigative journalist and author. He regularly researches various topics such as police violence in Germany or the upheavals in the Middle East and

North Africa for several major media outlets in Germany. In 2017, he published his debut *Among Whites: What it means to be privileged* with Hanser-Berlin. His second book *Der weiße Fleck: Eine Anleitung zu antirassistischem Denken* [*Whitewash: A Guide to Antiracist Thinking*, Editorial Team trans.] (Piper) was published in 2021. His newest book *Let's Talk About Sex, Habibi: Liebe und Begehren von Casablanca bis Kairo* [*Love and Desire From Casablanca to Cairo*, Editorial Team trans.] (Piper) examines body politics, sexuality and the (post-)colonial gaze in North Africa.

1. The *Junge Union* is the joint youth organisation of the CDU/CSU coalition, two conservative parties in Germany.
2. A city in Southern Germany.
3. In Germany, there are different types of secondary schools, traditionally distinguished based on the academic level of the education provided, as well the diploma students receive at the end. This particular student went to a Gymnasium, which is considered the most advanced type of secondary schools traditionally preparing students for higher education/university.