

Challenging Racism through Human Rights Education

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Abstract

The paper examines racism in a global context while drawing on Australian examples of Indigenous peoples, immigrants and Muslims. The study poses questions about the limits of multiculturalism in public discourse and proposes that human rights education is a cornerstone to begin addressing systemic disadvantage and racism. In advocating a human rights approach to education, the paper presents ideas for the content and processes of how this might occur.

Introduction

Racism is one of the greatest scourges in the world today and a serious human rights violation. What is it that creates this blight, what forms does it take and how can it be overcome?

It is not popular to speak about racism. My own immigrant nation of Australia is portrayed as a multicultural success and most of the population would be outraged at the accusation. Yet there is little doubt that racism exists in all sectors of society – in the school, on the sporting arena, at the workplace and within public and private institutions.

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Defining race and racism is not easy. The old Darwinist constructs of race have thankfully been discarded and there is increased recognition of race as social rather than a biological construct. Definitions of racism are varied and focus on a mix of prejudice, power, ideology, stereotypes, domination, disparities and/or unequal treatment (Berman and Paridies 2008). Race and racism can refer to 'the attitudes and processes involve in categorizing, stereotyping and assigning value and power to people on the basis of their differences, including physical attributes (particularly color), and culture and language' (Quinn (2009: 93)

Inherent in racist constructions is a belief in the superiority of a particular group and the inferiority of others. From this belief groups are discriminated against, exploited or excluded as a means by which the dominant group in society exercises hegemony over those groups seen as subordinate (Hall 1980, cited in Quinn 2009). In this paper I intentionally use the term racism broadly to avoid becoming embroiled in definitions of race, ethnicity, culture and religion. This allows me to give specific attention to two racisms that have taken hold in Australia, relating to Indigenous peoples and to Muslims.

Discourses of Racism

'Race-thinking' has deep roots embedded in Enlightenment thought and the history of imperialism and colonialism. Despite the fact that the concept of race has been shown to be devoid of any scientific value, it still has a stranglehold over popular consciousness (Ratcliffe 2004). In many nation states, discourses on race, ethnicity and culture have formed the basis of national identity and have determined which groups are included within and who is considered as the 'other' (Gopalkrishnan and Babacan 2007).

Although racism is a lived reality for many people across the world, it remains largely a silent or invisible issue. It diminishes the social fabric of society, creates social tensions, and perpetuates social inequality and impacts on the life chances of the people involved Gopalkrishnan and Babacan 2007: 1).

Racism and xenophobia are not caused by isolated acts of individuals. Rather, racism expressed at the individual level is representative of 'an orchestrated effort by segments of the dominant society to wage a war on the poor and on people who by virtue of their race, ethnicity, language and class are reduced at best to half-citizens and at worst to a national enemy responsible for all the ills afflicting our society' (Macedo and Bartolome 2001: 6). Racism that is embedded in societal structures and institutions becomes so 'normalized' that it is rarely questioned.

Racism can occur across international borders and within nation states. I briefly outline the international sphere as a prelude to more contextual considerations including nation state responses to immigration and multiculturalism. I then turn to the question of human rights education as a transformative mechanism in the quest to overturn racist ideologies and practices.

Racism in International Relations

'New racism', a variation of colonial racism, has emerged where countries in the 'west' depict other nations as less civilized and inferior according to hierarchical constructions of human development. This form of racism frequently arises from international posturing in the 'new world', often by colonizing nations that attribute these characteristics to nations with a greater history of civilization and cultural development across many spheres which are perceived as a threat to western dominance.

Sivanandan (2007: vii) says that racism is imbricated in the socio-economic structure and political culture of a society. And, he says, if it once functioned to justify slavery, today it serves to justify imperialism. Any analysis of racism today needs to be situated within the parameters of globalism and globalization. He sees globalism as the latest stage of imperialism, which holds western civilization and values as superior to all others and insists on visiting them on the rest of the world and by the use of force if necessary. This accords with Edward Said's formulations on Orientalism that assume that the racialized 'other' cannot progress without changes imposed from the outside, involving the beneficence of the west (Seidman 2012). Human rights discourse that privileges western constructs extends from such propositions. Offord (2006) refers to the work of Zillah Eisenstein (2004) in acknowledging that the universality at the heart of the modern human rights movement is fraught with the dangerous legacies of a colonial western gaze. In the west the acceptance of this dominance is largely unquestioned as it is reinforced in many ways, including in media outlets.

Within the Sovereign State

Similar to the international sphere, the 'superiority' project within nations is unchallenged through media discourse and pronouncements about illegal migration, Indigenous dysfunction or crime committed by immigrants. More insidiously a sub-text exists about threats to the dominant society in terms of values, norms and cultures. Although discredited in public discourse, the notion of assimilation rather than cultural plurality pervades many western nation states such as Australia and the UK. This has been named by Fozdar (2012) as 'saming the other'. Rampant nationalism has also taken hold in a number of contexts. Through nationalist constructions symbols abound with the prevalence of flags and slogans, which in colonial societies like

Australia may stem in part from unspoken recognition that the land was in fact stolen from its Indigenous inhabitants; the white presence hence requires affirmation. Since the colonial invasion of 1788 white Australians have been positioned as the owners of the nation (Gehrmann 2012).

Touraine (2000: 158-159) speaks of ways to bring about cultural unification of societies through an imposition of absolute controls on individuals and groups whose interests, opinions and beliefs are divergent, encouraged by a conviction that the 'light of reason' must prevail. The cornerstone of nation states is often seen as the establishment of political, social and civil rights and membership denotes both civic and cultural belonging (Babacan 2010). Yet evidence points to ongoing exclusion, marginalization and disadvantage. The so-called 'progressive' or scientific model has not only led to the destruction of ethnic groups but has plunged some minorities into marginality (Offord 2006: 159). Indigenous groups are among those who have experienced this descent into marginality, despite increasing recognition internationally and within many nation states. For example, even though the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples has passed through the United Nations system, Indigenous peoples in a number of countries are still relegated to the lowest rung of the socio-economic ladder and subjected to systemic discrimination and racism. Policies continue to be imposed upon them that negate Indigenous aspirations, needs and rights.

Other examples of minority marginalization come from Britain. Kundnani (2007) speaks of multicultural Britain being under attack with disturbing intensity. He argues that new forms of racism have spread and that these are linked to systemic failure to understand the causes of forced migration, global terrorism and social segregation. He adds (2007: 180):

The result is a climate of hatred and fear, directed especially at Muslim and migrant communities, and the erosion of the human rights of those whose cultures and values are perceived as 'alien'.

Immigration

Although immigration and multiculturalism are intimately connected, they tend to be delinked in public policy, with the former seen as a rational nation-building project and the other as contested ideology.

Institutionally, the way race-thinking materializes is perhaps nowhere clearer than in the field of migration where nations are increasingly putting up their shutters to keep out those seen as what Weber and Pickering (2007) describe as 'illegalized travelers'. Xenophobic responses to such migration emerge throughout the globe.

Contemporary migration raises two key issues: the rights of individuals as citizens and notions of belonging and identity (Babacan and Singh (2010). Babacan and Singh argue that modern constructs of citizenship are organized around a fixed relationship between the state, the territory and the citizen. Rights to citizenship are hence linked to belonging to specific nation states. Further they state (2010: 2):

Within such a structure, identity, which is shaped by historical and social factors, is premised not only on self-perception but also on perception by others. Individuals and communities possess overlapping identities.

Governments such as Australia and Britain make judgments about the desirability of potential new citizens on the basis of their ethnic, cultural or 'racial' identity (Ratcliffe 2004). Australia's immigration policy has always been socially engineered so the arrival of undocumented migrants (asylum seekers) has confronted the nation. Somewhat paradoxically, legislative and policy measures purport to control discrimination on the basis of race, while a public discourse speaks of nation unified around a common value base.

Is Multiculturalism A Confidence Trick?

Multiculturalism is increasingly portrayed as sheer rhetoric to mask what is happening below surface level. It is sometimes limited to celebration through music, food and cultural events. Although this is to be applauded, it fails to interrogate ideologies in societies that cling to universal conceptions of rights. This plays itself out in a number of ways.

Touraine (2000) gives the example of schools in France, which create the favoring of central categories that present obstacles for innovators and for children from minority groups. Although Indigenous peoples as original owners of the lands are not part of the multicultural discourse, the same features characterize the approach in Australia for Indigenous children. There is an argument of 'equality' in terms of compulsory education and a uniform curriculum. But such approaches diminish traditional Indigenous learning styles and are one of the reasons why Indigenous children drop out from schools with alarming frequency. And to make matters worse Indigenous parents are 'punished' in some Australian jurisdictions for the failure of their children to attend school by removing social security provision.

Anti-multiculturalism takes a number of forms. Muslim commentator in Australia, Waleed Aly (2011) expounds some of these. He says:

- Zygmund Bauman criticizes it on essentially cosmopolitan grounds, arguing that it offers only 'negative' rather than 'positive recognition that is basic tolerance, rather than equal participation;
- Johann Hart suggests that it artificially deems minority cultures to be monolithic static artifacts in a manner that denies people their individual agency; and
- More seriously it is seen as an assault on the majority population, that nations have surrendered themselves to the politics of minority separateness that has nurtured radical Islamism. Muslims

in this view need to be told how to behave; if they are invited to retain their cultural identities they will proceed to inflict their 'backward cultures' on the majority.

Human rights advocates expose the implications of a limited multicultural discourse. Halal food, the wearing of the hijab or nikab in public places, Islamic schools and asylum seeker boat arrivals are fused with terrorist rhetoric. We see absurd myth-making circulating in the public sphere: Christmas celebrations won't be allowed; the holocaust won't be taught in schools; banks will stop producing 'piggy banks' in which children save money as they will all offend Muslims!

In many countries 9/11 has become the symbol for racialized responses in the west and dehumanization and demonization of Muslims. It has become almost axiomatic that we must look at everything today through the lens of 9/11 (Sharruck 2002). Critics of Muslim immigration travel the world to propagate fear of Muslims. In a 2013 visit to Australia, Dutch politician Geert Wilders called for bans on Islamic migration, the cessation of building of mosques and the conversion of Muslims, while proclaiming the superiority of western culture. Conversely as noted by Australian Muslim of Pakistani origin Hanifa Deen (2010), twenty years ago anti-Islamic prejudice did not occupy public space with mainstream Australia largely indifferent towards Muslims. She says (2010: 205):

Twenty years ago Muslims across Australia were more or less a contented lot: they had freedom of religion, could build their mosques and schools with less trouble from local councils; the law was even handed; racism and religious vilification were publicly decried; hijab-wearing women were not scared of going out in public.

She sees various flashpoints for change including the first Gulf War in 1991 and more intensely after 9/11 after which hardly a month passed

without a headline placing Australian Muslims under the spotlight. This date became a defining moment for Muslims in the West.

The call for 'tolerance' as proposed in the white liberal discourse is paternalistic. This call does not question the asymmetrical power relations that give its adherents privilege. White liberals are hence willing to work for cultural tolerance but not to confront issues of inequality, power, ethics, race and ethnicity in a way that would lead to social transformation and greater humanity and less racism (Macedo and Bartolome 2001).

If we can understand what drives racism then there is some opportunity for it to be tackled. Although there are multiple interpretations on the causes of racism, the fear factor is a critical component. In Australia overt and covert discrimination against Indigenous peoples from the rights afforded to others, can be perceived as fear of collective approaches to life and a relationship with the land that is antithetical to neo-liberal capitalist paradigms.

Fear since 9/11 has been directed at migrants, particularly Muslim asylum seekers. Not only is there fear of terrorism but also fear of erosion of Australian values and their replacement with non-western values. Invasion anxiety is no longer linked to warfare but to migration, with border-thinking seeping through society. Fear constructs an environment that depletes a sense of belonging for minorities and cultural diversity is not meaningfully considered as a force for inclusion or exclusion (Babacan 2010).

Transformation through Human Rights Education

French social theorist Alain Touraine (2000) asks 'Can we live together'? Human rights education needs to take the position of 'How we can live together'?

The way human rights awareness takes place is often reactionary by exposing human rights violations and racism that have occurred internationally or domestically. At the practice level prescriptive manuals develop, cultural sensitivity training takes hold, pedagogical trials exist and debates abound as to which levels to provide human rights education.

At the most basic level attempts to combat racism are ultimately designed to prevent or redress disadvantage and to ensure equal access to and ability to participate in social, cultural economic and political life (Berman and Paridies 2008). There is urgency to this task particularly in relation to the movement of people throughout the world, who become illegalized by receiving states and who are subject to negative reception and media hyperbole. We need to be able to contend with irrational questions that arise which vary according to context and content. For example, letters to newspapers often raise questions such as: why should we not give first priority to our own citizens for social benefits; are not our own values under threat; why should languages other than English be taught; why should we allow religious dress? Responses need to be carefully crafted to be educative rather than denigrating the holders of such beliefs.

Some solutions rest with legislative reforms often based upon the tenets of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, which refers to measures for both development and protection. Other measures by states include policies of 'affirmative action' that accord special rights to marginalized groups. Yet the legal and political structures that bind human rights into instruments, treaties and laws differ from the realities experienced in everyday life (Offord 2006). Human rights protections are often seen as the domain of law. But the idea of human rights is derived from many bases.

A logical starting point for transformation is Baden Offord's (2006) notion of the need for an ethics of engagement, an engagement with difference. He says (2006, p. 15):

As the international community has attempted to organize itself according to the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), conceptions of what being fully human implies have led to pressures for a sustained and principled exposure of the 'other'.

In the quest for of human rights education oft-quoted words of Eleanor Roosevelt in 1948 still have resonance:

Where after all do human rights begin? In small places, close to home, so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any map of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person: the neighborhood (s)he lives in; the school or college (s)he attends, the factory, farm or office where (s)he works.

This statement can be seen to direct us to counter racism at local levels and not just be complacent that international norms and domestic law and policies will suffice.

We need to bear in mind that human rights are activated by insights into normative references that are unquestioned and legitimated (Offord 2006). Human rights education to counter racism must be an emancipatory collaborative project for both the holders of false and hurtful beliefs and those at the receiving end. It must be underpinned by recognition of people's own race privilege when they are members of the dominant group in society and the benefits that affords to them and how this diminishes the rights of others.

There are a number of foundational elements to human rights education as outlined by Fiske and Briskman (2008), which can be the cornerstone of education against racism. These include the place of philosophical explanations that are pivotal to human rights pedagogy and content. Ideas about human rights have developed over several

centuries and provoke us to think deeply about existential and practical issues. Exploring philosophical roots presents human rights as dynamic, requiring active engagement and critical thinking. Incorporating philosophy and ethics equips students with deeper knowledge and skills in their human rights engagements. The political aspect of human rights thinking acknowledges that causes and solutions of most human rights issues, including racism, involve the political realm.

Historically, it is important for students of human rights to have some understanding of how the United Nations was formed and how the UDHR and other international conventions came into existence. History is important in discussing racism as incremental. In Australia the most recent racisms have built upon earlier racisms including the colonization and oppression of the Indigenous population and the White Australia Policy of much of the twentieth century. To teach anti-racism requires a re-exploration of history. For example Australian history is largely constructed around victims and victors; of Australia's participation in wars, of building a nation that was erroneously perceived as without people, and sometimes about waves of migration for the purposes of nation building. It contrasts the telling of Indigenous history about genocide, colonialism, denigration of cultures, loss of land, removal of children and exploitation.

An *anthropological* perspective, argue Fiske and Briskman (2008), challenges the notion that human rights are a western construct and creates awareness that human rights span every cultural and religious tradition. This enables us to understand human rights as moral and customary codes guiding how we live together, how we care for one another and how we resolve disputes. Holding up a cosmopolitan or anthropological view encourages us to consciously seek out the contributions of non-western traditions and hence enriches human rights inquiry and scholarship.

At a *practice* level, human rights education can contribute to positioning education recipients as actors in contributing to anti-racism. The work of some human rights educators is informed by the work of Paolo Freire (1996) whose critical pedagogy occurs through a process of collaborative dialogue and inquiry in which the method of education is as important as the content. Human rights education should incorporate practice and experience.

Conclusion

Racism is a construct and a practice that crosses national borders. Confronting and eliminating racism is a task for the international community including governments, academics, practitioners and educators. In order to eliminate racism and the harms that flow require multiple strategies. Human rights education is a forerunner to creating a climate for systemic change.

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