



Acknowledging Racism

"Before we as a society can liberate ourselves from the grip of racism, we have to acknowledge that it exists, and that it is not something which has been blown out of proportion; neither is it the figment of some people's imagination." (Adrienne Shadd, in McKague, 1991)

There is very little debate that racism is a problem of international scope and import. While it is fair to say that many Canadians recognize this, and are committed to overcoming racism internationally, there appears to be a refusal to recognize that racism is an issue in Canada, both presently and historically. One of the main problems which makes this denial possible is a tendency to characterize the issue of racism according to very specific events. For example, when we think of the main examples of racism historically, the images that often spring to mind are of slavery in the United States, apartheid in South Africa or the Holocaust. What we fail to recognize are the daily examples of racism that made these events possible. Inherent in this limited understanding is a tendency to assume both that these problems are in the past and that they do not occur in Canada. In order to understand racism it is essential to first realize that racism is serious and pervasive. By looking at the definition of racism we begin to uncover the problem of racism in Canada.

Defining Racism

"Systemic discrimination "means practices or attitudes that have, whether by design or impact, the effect of limiting an individual's or a group's right to the opportunities generally available because of attributed rather than actual characteristics.... It is not a question of whether this discrimination is motivated by an intentional desire to obstruct someone's potential, or whether it is the accidental by-product of innocently motivated practices or systems. If the barrier is affecting some groups in a disproportionately negative way, it is a signal that the practices that lead to this adverse impact may be discriminatory". (Abella, 1984).

If asked, most people could easily offer a simple definition of racism. In fact, the Oxford Dictionary offers the simplest definition of racism as "prejudice based on race", and this is how most people understand the concept (1988). However, once we start to analyze this definition, it becomes apparent that racism requires a far more complex definition. The primary problem with this definition of racism is that it contains an assumption that is invalid, that there is a scientifically determined category of race. Although we have been socialized to believe that people can be differentiated on the basis of race, that there are certain biologically determined differences between peoples, humanity cannot be divided into groups distinguishable by biological properties (Satzewich, 1998). Such a distinction is arbitrary, unscientific and works to perpetuate divisive assumptions about people. Yet, the concept of racism remains very real in that human societies continue to function as though races do exist. Thus, race as a social concept continues to be a root cause of human inequality.

Racialization in any element of a system or sub-system has the capacity to instill racialization into systemic practices, that is, to support or transmit racialization within the system. Unless constant vigilance is maintained, elements of a system may also spread unnoticed racialization into its practices." (Commission on Systemic Racism in the Ontario Criminal Justice System, 1995).

Racism takes many forms, although it is usually understood in the individual sense. Essentially there are three main forms, individual racism, systemic racism and cultural racism (Henry, Tator, Mattis & Rees, 1995). **Individual racism** manifests itself in individual's attitudes and behaviours, and is the easiest type to identify. **Systemic racism** consists of the policies and practices of organizations, which directly or indirectly operate to sustain the advantages of peoples of certain "social races". This type of racism is more difficult to address because it is implicit in the policies of organizations and often unconscious. **Cultural racism** is the basis of both other forms of racism, as it is the value system which is embedded in society which supports and allows discriminatory actions based on perceptions of racial difference, cultural superiority and inferiority.

Thus, racism is not only an attitude, but it is the specific actions that result from this attitude which impact upon, marginalize and oppress some people. In acknowledging and defining racism it is important to recognize that racism affects people not only on a theoretical level, but in the wider structures of society, most notably in the systems of education, justice, media, policing, immigration, and, employment, as well as in hate activity and government policies.

"... Canada, as a party to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, has resolved to adopt all necessary measures for speedily eliminating racial discrimination in all its forms and manifestations (Canadian Race Relations Foundation Act, 1991)."

WHERE TO GO FOR MORE INFORMATION

Selected Print Resources

Abella, Rosalie Silberman. (1984). **Equality in Employment: The Report of the Commission on Equality in Employment**. Ottawa: Supply and Services Canada.

Abella, Rosalie Silberman. (1984). **Égalité en matière d'emploi. Rapport de la Commission sur l'égalité en matière d'emploi**. Ottawa : Approvisionnement et Services Canada.

Boyko, John. (1995). **Last Steps to Freedom: The Evolution of Canadian Racism**. J. Gordon Schillingford Publishing Inc.

Centre d'études ethniques de l'Université de Montréal. (1996). **Le Racisme au Québec: éléments d'un diagnostic**. Montréal: Gouvernement du Québec, Ministère des Affaires internationales, de l'Immigration et des Communautés culturelles.

Henry, Frances; Tator, Carol; Winston Mattis, Tim Rees. (1995). **The Colour of Democracy: Racism in Canadian Society**. Toronto: Harcourt Brace & Company Canada, Ltd.

McKague, Ormond. (1991). **Racism in Canada**. Saskatoon: Fifth House Publishers.

Razack, Sherene H.. (1998). **Looking White People in the Eye: Gender, Race, and Culture in Courtrooms and Classrooms**. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Satzewich, Vic.(ed.). (1998). **Racism and Social Inequality in Canada: Concepts, Controversies & Strategies of Resistance**. Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing Inc.

Sibony, Daniel. (1997). **Le racisme^a ou la haine identitaire**. France: Christian Bourgois Éditeur.

Selected Websites

Artists Against Racism, <http://www.vrx.net/aar/home.html>

B'nai Brith Canada, <http://www.bnaibrith.ca/>

Beyond Prejudice, <http://www.eburg.com/beyond.prejudice>

Canadian Centre for Multicultural and Intercultural Education, <http://www.ccmie.com>

Canadian Human Rights Commission, <http://www.chrc-ccdp.ca/>

Canadian Race Relations Foundation, <http://www.crr.ca>

Commission canadienne des droits de la personne, <http://www.chrc.ca>

Commission de droits de la personnes et des droits de la jeunesse

(Gouvernement du Québec), <http://www.cdpdj.qc.ca/>

Conseil canadien pour l'éducation multiculturelle et interculturelle , <http://www.ccmie.com>

Cross Point Anti-Racism, <http://www.magenta.nl/crosspoint>

Ensemble contre le racisme, <http://www.antiracisme.org>

Fondation canadienne des relations raciales, <http://www.crr.ca>

Racism Stop It! (Department of Canadian Heritage), <http://www.march21.com>

Mettons fin au racisme (Patrimoine canadien), <http://www.le21mars.com/>

Urban Alliance on Race Relations, <http://www.interlog.com/~uarr>

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