

# Toward a sociology of racism

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At the time of the institutionalization of Sociology as a discipline in Brazil, racism seemed restricted only to the United States – racial segregation, lynchings, prejudice, and discrimination – and derived from a scientific conceptual error – the biological concept of human races, with different capacities, instincts, moral and intellectual abilities. European anti-Semitism, even after the Dreyfus case, continued to be understood more in terms of religious and ethnic intolerance than racial intolerance. Only with the rise of Nazi-fascism in Europe and the execution of its wicked project to exterminate the Jewish race was it seen that racism was much broader and of much far-reaching effects than had been imagined. Yet still, the delusional belief remained that demystifying the concept of biological race would be enough to eradicate racism.

In our current century, the exponential growth of migrations to European countries, which became colonial metropolises in the past centuries, as well as the capitalist development of agriculture in other parts of the world, expelling populations of people of mestizo, Amerindian, or African origin from the countryside, already settled or resettled since the colonial period, have ultimately undermined the national imagination of Latin American and European countries. Racism once again flourished rapidly in these countries, now without biological races being

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evoked, shunned, or denied. A racism without races, some thought – in short, a properly sociological object.

The truth is that racism has become not just a journalistic or legal issue, as in the mid-twentieth century, but an object of sociological research and reflection. Or almost.

What we want to discuss in this *Tempo Social* collection is precisely this “almost”. If racism as an object has become fully legitimized in the contemporary Brazilian public debate, its sociological investigation is sometimes left undesired, certainly contaminated by the strength of political and discursive evidence mobilized by movements aimed at combating it. To put it bluntly: if it is natural and even desirable for Brazilian racism to be a premise of political movements that seek to denounce it, then racism should be a valid object of sociological research. The fight against racism depends on an understanding of its function and dynamics in society, hence the necessity for academic research to not presuppose it. In fact, as an object of investigation, racism is a phenomenon that is not so explicit or so simple.

It does not seem gratuitous to us that bibliographical production on the concept of racism has proliferated in recent years precisely in sectors of the academic debate that are more attentive to the public debate. Intellectuals of diverse approaches have endeavored to expose schematic syntheses of racism to a wider audience, sometimes seeing racism as a property of social structures (Almeida, 2019), sometimes as a social form arising from slavery (Sodré, 2023), and sometimes as an apparatus (Carneiro, 2023), among other visions. These works possess the merit of transforming racism, in the eyes of public opinion, into both a legitimate social problem and as crucial to the realization of democracy. However, their theoretical and synthesizing character does not split with racism as a premise: on the contrary, it extends it to total views about its mechanisms and effects on society.

Our intention here is quite different. More than presupposing racism and, based on this, developing social theories about its social ubiquity, we want to reflect theoretically and empirically on the minutiae and mechanisms of its social production, reproduction, and transformation. More than developing a total theory of racism, we seek to define its conceptual boundaries and empirical impacts based on sociological investigations attentive to its complexities. Racism has various manifestations, such as doctrines and discourses (ideology), attitudes and values (prejudice), discrimination (differential treatment), spatial and social segregation, institutions, organizations, and structures – which requires the use of various forms of observation, depending on the way it manifests itself. Some methods are direct, such as we can employ textual and discursive analysis, or when we work with explicit behaviors by using participant observation or documentary accounts. Some are indirect, such as when

we can only observe the differential consequences between racial groups, or when we must develop models to exclude explanatory alternatives. Empirical understanding is theoretically how all these dimensions are articulated in practice; today, this depends more on research about racism than on totalizing syntheses.

What leads us to use the concept of racism to analyze these doctrines, attitudes, values, behaviors, institutions, and structures are, however, two elements that must be highlighted by the analysis: (1) some implicit or explicit notion of race as a guide to action, justification, discursive logic, or the essence of identity; (2) the process of racialization, that is, social and symbolic practices shaping the formation and closure of groups with symbolic borders or inequalities that refer to the idea of race.

In this sense, we also want to distinguish ourselves from theoretical approaches, stronger yet not only found within European academia, that take racism as a synonym for any heavy essentialization. This perspective dissociates the concept of racism from implicit or explicit conceptions of race, removing any specificity from the category. In this sense, one can speak of “intelligence racism” (Bourdieu, 1993), “class racism” (Mauger, 2011), cultural racism or racism without races (Balibar and Wallerstein, 1991; Balibar, 2013) and even “racism of gender” (Souza, 2021). These examples promptly suggest that in this extended use, racism ceases to be an analytical category and becomes a metaphor without distinct use.

Thus, in our perspective, few misunderstandings can be as gross as the claim to conceptualize racial domination and, at the same time, reject the analytical use of the concept of race: the only concept that could describe in precise terms the subjective meaning of the social actions that guide such a work of domination. But Loic Wacquant’s latest book, *Racial domination*, demonstrates that this way of thinking strangely still finds a broad reception in academia – which tells us more about the political limits of racism research than about the scope of the field of sociology.

On the contrary, we seek to give a precise definition of race, in line with the advances of racial constructionism in philosophy (Glasgow, 2019; Haslanger, 2019; Bessone, 2020), but maintaining, at the same time, the Weberian heritage of social action theory, exactly to provide empirical research at the level of agents and not only of social structures. The texts gathered here make a joint effort to lay the foundations of what would be a sociological study of racism in Brazil without, however, inflating the concept in total theories or indistinct metaphors. We criticize the absence of an object or problem that can be scientifically investigated; we invest in how to more properly define what race and racism are; we reflect on the history of its problematization in the social sciences; We examine the foundations of a historical sociology of racialization; we discuss the studies of racial inequalities; We present empirical analyses of racism in legal institutions.

The reader will have, therefore, the opportunity to come across texts that, without denying their political engagement, theorize about racism as an object of research, seek to demonstrate its existence in concrete cases, both the way it operates and how it may be observed.

The first article of this collection, by Luiz Augusto Campos, deals precisely with the marginality of the theme of racism in empirical research on race in Brazil. Although the field is old and prolific, there are still few studies dedicated to understanding and explaining the concrete dynamics of the mechanisms of racial discrimination in the labor market, in affective relationships, leisure spaces, etc. For Campos, this is due to the perhaps excessive success of the analytical model proposed by Carlos Hasenbalg and Nelson do Valle Silva at the end of the 1970s and still widely used today. This model takes racism as a hypothesis to be tested through different quantitative studies that, almost always, indicate unjustified racial disparities. But as the model's creators themselves indicated, such studies serve more to collect evidence of the consequences attributable to racism than to discover its concrete dynamics. Despite this warning, racism went from a research hypothesis to an uncontested premise without first being taken as an object of investigation. Campos' article seeks to point out the general lines of a sociology of racial discrimination based on the few national empirical studies that work in this direction.

Antonio Sérgio A. Guimarães, in the second article of this collection, provides a historical overview of the interests of international sociology, particularly Brazilian sociology, in conceptualizing and studying racism. By reflecting on our country's sociology, he demonstrates its imbrication with North American and European national problems, and how Brazil's theorizations were shaped by such contexts. Such contextualization allows Antonio Sérgio to update his reflections on the concept of race, to define it more rigorously, and to explicitly name the elements present in the idea of race. Thus, he develops his previous, Weberian conception, which was based only on the subjective sense of social action. On the other hand, based on the Maussian concept of total social fact, and following Etienne Balibar, he explores how racism can be defined as a derivative of the idea of race, although sometimes without its nominal enunciation. Such a concept, therefore, intends to be analytically and operationally useful to study forms of contemporary racism, which are expressed in institutions and social structures, apparently without immediate human agency yet referring to racializing and racialized social groups.

The article "Historical sociology and interpretation of racism in Brazil", written by Matheus Gato, presents how different historical approaches to racism were given by the use and heuristic control of temporal concepts such as revolution, reproduction, formation, and event. All these concepts seek to explain how the formation of

racialized classification schemes is connected to the formation of social structures and the reproduction of social inequalities. The author argues that the challenge of the historical sociology of racism has been to describe and explain the unplanned process of constituting social groups as races, as well as the hierarchies that give them meaning in various domains of social action. Yet its specific object is how the racialization of social experience has developed over time.

Another criticism of the way Brazilian sociology has been dealing with the issue of racism in Brazil is specifically aimed at the so-called sociology of social stratification. In his contribution to the collection, Danilo França questions the premises of the quantitative research that have become the basis for the way we understand the material effects of racism in the country. In general, such studies would be excessively dependent on class structures typical of wage societies, based on a stable and formalized social division of labor, something that has never fully existed in Brazil and is becoming increasingly rare in the world in general. Moreover, this paradigm would focus excessively on the concept of “life chances”, demonstrating that the counterfactual and ideal model that it presupposes does not incorporate dimensions such as the extreme racial violence that exists in Brazil. As a challenge, França discusses how intersectional approaches would be more sensitive to the plurality of interrelations between race, class, gender, etc. for a more complex sociology of racism.

On the other hand, the text “‘Seeds of evil’: essentialization and agency in sustaining racism in socio-educational units in Rio de Janeiro”, redacted by Juliana Vinuto, takes as its guiding thread the naturalization of collective representations about adolescents who serve socio-educational measures of internment in the State of Rio de Janeiro, to problematize the notions of “structural racism” and “institutional racism”. The author demonstrates that the dimension of the agency of security professionals concerning the attitudes and values expressed by young people is a fundamental component to understanding the operation of racism in the context studied and its specificities.

The article by Luiz Lourenço and Luiz Gamboa on the racial selectivity of preventive detention decreed from custody hearings in Salvador, Bahia, illustrates the difficulties of making explicit the racism present within both public agents and institutions. On the one hand, the population that goes to the hearings is almost exclusively Black – Black or *pardo* of Afro-Brazilian origin; On the other hand, judges and legal practitioners profess explicitly essentializing and naturalizing prejudices against this population, all while denying any racial prejudice against them. Given the racial composition of this population, it is impossible to observe differential treatment between Black and white people. There are no white people. It is as if the judges were faced with subjects of a new “dangerous class”, of a character and

temperament that they believe to be intrinsically evil and socially harmful. The mission of these operators is to defend society, not the rights of individuals. Is racism present only in the racial selectivity of this new “dangerous class”? If not, how can empirical evidence be found for the racism of these public officials?

The collection also includes two additional contributions. Luiz Augusto Campos and Marcia Lima interview Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, an important sociologist and formulator of the notion of structural racism. A professor at Duke University and former president of the American Sociological Association, Bonilla-Silva addresses various topics in the interview, from his controversial theory that we are living in times of “racism without racists” to the setbacks of the anti-racist agenda after a brief period of progress with the brutal murder of George Floyd. Gabriel Delphino, in turn, closes the collection with a review of the book *Device of raciality* by Sueli Carneiro, a recently published work that resumes her reflections on her doctoral thesis.

We hope that the contributions gathered in this collection will help to strengthen reflection in Brazil on racism, a theme so central yet still deserving of more intense and sophisticated academic debate.

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## Abstract

### *Toward a sociology of racism*

If racism has become a fully legitimized theme in contemporary public debate, its sociological investigation is sometimes left unexplored. If it is natural and even desirable that Brazilian racism be a premise for the political movements that seek to denounce it, so too should it be natural and valid to pursue sociological research interested in understanding its dynamics. In this text, we highlight the general orientations of the authors of this collection toward the aim of producing a sociology of Brazilian racism attentive to its empirical mechanisms, social impacts, and internal logic. To this end, we highlight the centrality of an implicit or explicit notion of race in the processes of racialization and differential treatment.

Keywords: Racism; Race; Sociology; Race relations; Racial discrimination.

## Resumo

### *Por uma sociologia do racismo*

Se o racismo se tornou um tema totalmente legitimado no debate público contemporâneo, a sua investigação sociológica deixa às vezes a desejar. Se é natural e até mesmo desejável que o racismo brasileiro seja uma premissa dos movimentos políticos que buscam denunciá-lo, o mesmo não deveria ser válido para a pesquisa sociológica interessada em entender suas dinâmicas. Neste texto, destacamos as orientações gerais dos autores deste dossiê no sentido da produção de uma sociologia do racismo brasileiro atenta a seus mecanismos empíricos de funcionamento, impactos sociais e lógicas internas. Para tal, destacamos a centralidade de uma noção implícita ou explícita de raça nos processos de racialização e tratamento diferencial.

Palavras-chave: Racismo; Raça; Sociologia; Relações raciais; Discriminação racial.

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