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Taking racism beyond Dutch innocence

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Abstract
Explicit racism’s increased presence in Dutch public space did not lead to public recognition of the existence of structural forms of racism in the Netherlands until recently. Previously, I argued this denial was historically rooted in the construction of the Dutch self-image as charitable and open versus the framing of migrants as “weak”, “disadvantaged” others who need help from the majority group. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement changed this denial of structural racism in the Netherlands. Never before have structural forms of racism been addressed so widely and cross-racially in the Dutch public space and within institutions. Additionally, awareness of structural racism is growing among non-White young professionals, who previously thought their exclusion from or marginalisation within Dutch society was due to personal inability and lack of strategies to “adapt”. The increasing calls against institutional racism in the Netherlands mean unsettling the status quo and creating inclusionary spaces and practices.

Keywords
BLM, Institutional Racism, Solidarity, White Innocence

Between the events of 9/11 in 2001 and Europe’s so-called refugee crisis in 2015, a political atmosphere marked by the exclusion and othering of immigrants has become endemic to Europe. This pattern is highly pronounced in the Netherlands, where negative attitudes towards the cultures and religions of migrants – particularly Muslim migrants – visibly intensified at the turn of the century. The political murders of two Dutch critics of Islam (politician Pim Fortuyn in 2002 and artist Theo van Gogh in 2004) added fuel to the growing anti-Islam discourse in the Netherlands. This has manifested in an increasing number of parliamentary seats for the anti-Islam political parties: Party for Freedom (since 2006), led by Geert Wilders, and Forum for Democracy, led by Thierry Baudet (in March 2019). Thus, in recent decades, there has been a shift from somewhat subtle forms of exclusionary rhetoric in the public sphere towards a more blatant form of racism towards not only
Muslim migrants but also Black activists and a growing number of non-Black Dutch. Racist attacks are especially directed towards activists who publicly question exclusionary practices in the Netherlands. One such cultural practice is celebration of 5th December, with Black Pete (or Zwarte Piet, in Dutch) as one of its central characters. Black Pete is a Blackface boy who works as a helper of an old, white-bearded, White man, St. Nickolas (who is like Father Christmas). Many people in the Netherlands increasingly consider Black Pete character racist and are calling for the abolishment of his appearance in 5th December celebrations. Since the start of the ‘Black Pete is Racism’ campaign in 2011, there have been annual clashes between pro- and anti–Black Pete activists in the Netherlands and racist attacks on Black activists (see Rodenberg and Wagenaar, 2016; Van der Pijl and Goulordava, 2014).³

The growing presence of explicit racism in the public space, however, did not lead to a public recognition of the existence of structural forms of racism in the Netherlands until recently. In 2014, I published a chapter in the volume Dutch Racism, edited by Philomena Essed and Isabel Hoving (2014). In that chapter, I showed the historical and societal reasons behind the denial of racism in the Dutch context despite the fact that racist acts and statements in the public space had gained a strong presence. I argued that the historically rooted idea of the superiority of Dutch culture in Dutch migration discourse is linked to the categorical framing of migrants as ‘a problem’ in Dutch society. This framing has two components: a socio-cultural component that refers to migrants as groups with deviant cultures and a socio-economic component that frames migrants as weak individuals and groups that lag behind those who are White native Dutch. At an earlier stage in Dutch history (particularly in 1950s), these groups were considered ‘weak’ and comprising ‘unsociables’⁴ who had to be transformed into decent citizens (Lucassen, 2006). Later, in 1970s, this group was referred to as ‘disadvantaged’ (achterstandsgroep in Dutch) in policy documents and public debates. Developments in the Dutch welfare state from mid-1970s led to an increasing tendency towards discontent with existing inequality and, as a side effect, a fixation on helping people in the ‘weak’ and ‘disadvantaged’ migrant groups to become the ‘same’ (both in terms of economic and cultural parameters) as those in the dominant group. Consequently, all citizens were entitled to equal opportunities, but in some cases, it was more important to first ‘liberate’ citizens from their socially ‘disadvantaged positions’ (see also Lucassen, 2006). It thus became the task of the welfare state to worry about ‘disadvantaged groups’ and to introduce policies aimed at ‘freeing’ them from such (economic and cultural) positions. This provided the foundation for the Dutch self-image as a charitable and open society – an image that underpins present outrage against migrants and Black citizens, who are now viewed as being ungrateful when they highlight systemic racism or xenophobia in Dutch society.

This ‘white innocence’, as Gloria Wekker (2016) calls it, is shaped by the ‘colonial cultural archive’, informing images of the Self and the Other, which are normalized and reproduced in the processes of daily interaction. In the 1980s, Philomena Essed (1991, original 1984) introduced the concept of ‘everyday racism’ to capture this structural presence of racism in the Netherlands, consequently encountering strong criticism and even marginalization in Dutch academia (Essed and Nimako, 2006). The historically
rooted and normalized identity of Dutch society as non-racist made it almost impossible to accept the notion of racism as part of the Dutch self-image. This resistance to acknowledging the presence of institutional racism within Dutch society stayed intact for a long time because the supposed superiority of Dutch culture remained unquestioned and unexamined. The images of the non-racist national Self and the differentiated Other laid the foundation of the dominant Dutch discourse, which positioned generations of migrants as second-class citizens or ‘weak categories’ who need help.

But something has shifted with the arrival of the Black Lives Matter movement in the Netherlands. Black Lives Matter demonstrations have taken place in most Dutch cities. Those in Amsterdam and Rotterdam, in particular, gained national attention partly because of the large number of participants, combined with the possible risk factors related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Amsterdam Mayor, Femke Halsema, was strongly criticized by right-wing figures for not cancelling the first demonstration due to the number of participants being much higher than expected. The main organizers of the first demonstrations were anti–Black Pete activists, who collaborate together in the ‘Kick Out Black Piet’ movement (including groups such as ‘Black Pete Is Racism’, ‘Stop Blackface’ and ‘Black Queer and Trans Resistance NL’). Yet, there were varied organizers, which included feminist networks, in different cities.

In addition to street demonstrations, there have been an increasing number of online and offline discussions, debates and gatherings in the Dutch public space. One of the most prominent examples in the media is a heavy discussion that took place after a racist remark was made in June 2020 about the Black rapper and anti-racism activist Akwasi who took the podium at an Amsterdam demonstration during one of the most popular Dutch TV (football) programmes. One of the presenters of the programme (Johan Derksen) compared Akwasi with Black Piet. On a different occasion, the same presenter had compared the Black female politician Sylvana Simons to a monkey. The programme was also previously criticized because of anti-gay and anti-Moroccan remarks by different presenters in the programme. But this time, the impact was much higher than before. Many companies that advertise on the programme and the entire Dutch national football team – men, women and the under-21 team (not only Black players) – boycotted the programme all together in protest at the remark made about Akwasi. Another media example is when the chairwoman of the board of the Dutch Public Media (NPO) announced a theme day on racism that included a variety of programmes and conversations on racism and stated that this would be an ongoing area of focus. A growing number of newspaper and magazine articles and essays have been published addressing racism in the Netherlands. In addition, Prime Minister Mark Rutte invited some leaders of the Black Lives Matter movement in the Netherlands for a conversation at his office. However, he was criticized for not including the most prominent anti–Black Pete activists for that meeting.

Racism within academia has also been prominent in discussions within Dutch academic spaces and even in the most prestigious public bodies such as the Royal Academy of Arts and Sciences. Thus, Black Lives Matter demonstrations in the Netherlands have arguably led to an increased number of prominent discussions about structural racism taking place in the Dutch public space for the first time. Of course, neither discrimination
nor racism have been entirely absent from Dutch public discussions in recent years. Especially with the growth of Islamophobia and racism in the Netherlands, there have been strong rejections of blatant discrimination on many occasions. However, most of these reactions have addressed discrimination at the individual level and as something incidental. Discussions on diversity and inclusion have mostly been limited to organizations’ and institutions’ ‘good intentions’ to become diverse, without much actual diversity and inclusion occurring in practice.

In earlier studies on processes of societal and institutional inclusion and exclusion based on the narratives of refugees and migrants in the Netherlands, my colleagues and I showed that often assumed ‘good intentions’ in the Netherlands to include ‘the Other’ without clear actions to unsettle normalized institutional biases would not lead to the actual inclusion of minorities of colour (Ghorashi and Ponzoni, 2014; Ghorashi and van Tilburg, 2006; Ponzoni et al., 2017). Minorities are, at best tolerated, and at worst, marginalized; they are seldom included as full-fledged members of Dutch society who are valued for their contributions. They are expected to become ‘the same’ as the dominant group (read: White Dutch), yet they are never considered to be same-enough because of fixations on their Otherness and assumed lack of competences (Ponzoni et al., 2017). Having ‘good intentions’ fits well within the notion of helping the ‘weak’ as the foundation of the Dutch welfare state and the self-image of Dutch society as ‘well-meaning’, but it has actually blocked the actions needed to change the status quo. The persistence of a lack of cultural diversity in organizations and institutions is evidence that all the talk about diversity and inclusion in the past two decades has been hollow.

Before the arrival of the Black Lives Matter movement in the Netherlands, institutional forms of structural racism had never been addressed so widely in the Dutch public space and within institutions. And never before has there been such broad solidarity between people from a variety of backgrounds, including White Dutch people, in collectively addressing racism. In addition, there is a growing awareness of structural racism among non-White young professionals, who previously thought their exclusion from or marginalization within Dutch society had to do with personal inability and lack of strategies to ‘adapt’. The growing calls against institutional racism in the Netherlands mean unsettling the status quo and creating inclusionary spaces and practices. Generations of non-White Dutch are more self-confident than ever before to claim recognition and demand full participation in Dutch society. Dutch society can take advantage of this momentum to embrace a transformation of its ‘innocence’ into critical self-reflection and actions towards the inclusion of diverse groups by addressing institutional racism beyond ‘good intentions’.

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Notes
1. Referring to Gloria Wekker’s (2016) book White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race, which explores a defining paradox within Dutch culture: the denial of racialized discrimination and colonial violence on one hand, and systemic racism and xenophobia on the other.

2. In 2002, Pim Fortuyn was murdered by a White native Dutch animal rights activist. Fortuyn was a (White, gay) Dutch (anti-Islam, anti-migrant and anti-establishment) political figure. His murder fueled not only anti-left but also anti-migrant sentiments because of his clear stance on both. Theo van Gogh was a White Dutch publicist and filmmaker. Together with Somalian-born Dutch MP Ayaan Hirsi Ali, he made the controversial film Submission, deemed Islamophobic by many critics (see De Leeuw & van Wichelen, 2005). He was murdered in 2004 by a young Moroccan-Dutch man, which provided new justification for an even more extreme negative emphasis on Islam and for questioning the position of Muslim migrants in the Netherlands (see for more Ghorashi, 2014).


14. Based on personal and professional conversations and observations.

References


