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How to Be Less Stupid About Race in France

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I was recently invited to speak at a university conference on white supremacy and systemic racism in Europe. During the last session of the day, a white woman scholar and expert on far-right movements felt perfectly at ease using racialized language like “ghetto” to describe an immigrant neighborhood and, nearly within the same breath, defended Islamophobia as “rational.” When called out and challenged by several other scholars (including white colleagues), the woman insisted that she was “not talking about race” and suggested that her use of “ghetto” was merely an “anthropological description.” *As if anthropology, of all fields, has ever been immune to virulent racism.* The conference organizers did not intervene. I watched, in dismay, as a distinguished Black Muslim scholar – also an invited guest—walked out of the room and left the conference altogether, understandably offended. Soon thereafter, we were all informed that *hors d’oeuvres* and wine were waiting down the hall.

It turns out that just a few of us at this conference understood white supremacy as a worldwide system of power established over the last several centuries in the aftermath of European colonialism, capitalist exploitation, and transatlantic slavery, while many others thought of white supremacy as something else altogether, something much narrower. Earlier in the day, I gave a talk entitled “Beyond the Far Right: On the Difficulties of Theorizing Systemic Racism and White Supremacy in France.” With right-wing populism sweeping Europe and the United States alike, ‘white supremacy’ is gaining some cache in the public sphere. As I argued in my remarks, relatively few scholars seem to know (or want to know) that white supremacy is not merely a new, menacing trend or extremist movement. It is far easier for white scholars in particular to study white supremacy when they externalize it as a loathsome thing that other people do. I suspect the woman mentioned above would be rather surprised to learn that the white supremacist status quo is held in place not only by the European nationalists she analyzes, but by the same quotidian deployment of racial (il)logics and denial on display in her own rhetoric. Or perhaps she knows quite well and doesn’t care.

My first book, *Resurrecting Slavery: Racial Legacies and White Supremacy in France*, suggests that critical race theory offers a well-established, though underutilized, interdisciplinary framework for theorizing the dynamics of white racism in France and other European nations. Scholars who are interested in dismantling racial domination must assert a robust understanding of white supremacy as a systemic, widely pervasive phenomenon. In my latest book, *How to Be Less Stupid About Race: On Racism, White Supremacy and the Racial Divide*, I describe and debunk the “KKK Fallacy”—the ontologically and politically anemic notion of white supremacy as extremism or white nationalism that has long held sway.

When we understand white supremacy as I define it—the social, political and economic dominance of people socially defined as white—we are forced to admit that white supremacist racism is the *only* type of racism that has ever been institutionalized in Europe and the United States. And, importantly, we must recognize that white supremacy reigns within academia itself, including scholarship on France and the Francophone world. White supremacist logics and practices are on display on an everyday basis within our professions, from whites' unearned privilege and dominance within academia, to their outsized role as epistemic gatekeepers, wielders of resources, over-representation in positions of power and decision making, as well as racist discourse in classrooms, faculty meetings, and conference panels.

So where do we go from here? What can anti-racist and anti-oppressive knowledge production look like in the context of white supremacy? To begin with, I think it is important for scholars to acknowledge that France is, to use Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's term, *already* a racialized social system and, more specifically, a white supremacist society. For too long, the literature on comparative race has overemphasized the differences between the so-called "French model" and "Anglo-Saxon" modes of dealing with race. While national particularities matter, we must be careful not to miss the white supremacist forest for the contextual trees. In so doing, we must highlight France's historical and ongoing role in establishing white supremacist racism as a global system of power, through scientific racism, colonial domination, and ethnic chauvinism. Critical race theory and scholarship on systemic racism provide ample intellectual resources for illustrating how France became a white supremacist society.

Secondly, we must be clear that 'colorblind' rhetoric – whether from the French state itself or from individual academics – reinforces white supremacy. In France, it is still common for public intellectuals and politicians to insist that while there are racists in France, France is somehow (magically) not a racist society. Rokhaya Diallo, a French Black Muslim activist, writer and filmmaker, received endless vitriol from the French mainstream for referring to *racisme d'état*. Academics can and should play a leading role in combatting the intellectual dishonesty and revisionism of the French majority population who would like to impose their "white ignorance," to borrow Charles Mills' formulation, by misrepresenting racism as a sporadic affair that has no relation to institutionalized practices and patterns of discrimination favoring whites and disadvantaging racialized minorities.

Finally, as I also argue in *How to Be Less Stupid About Race*, those of us engaged in the work of anti-racism in and outside of the academy, must continually disrupt efforts to establish a false equivalence between whites and racialized minorities. While many whites in France refuse to acknowledge institutionalized racism and white supremacy, there is widespread belief in the specter of "anti-white racism," made only worse by the hysteria surrounding rapper Nick Conrad's politically charged, rhetorically violent anthem *Pendez les Blancs*.¹ While negative attitudes and individual acts of violence against whites undoubtedly exist, it goes without saying that whites have never been an oppressed minority in France. Making white supremacy more

¹ Gardette, Hervé. February 7, 2019. "Comment parler des Blancs?" *France Culture*. Available online: <https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/du-grain-a-moudre/comment-parler-des-blancs>.

visible as a system of power involves documenting both whites' social, political, and economic domination as well as the bodily, existential, social-psychological, political, and economic harm (past and present) visited upon racialized minorities. In so doing, scholars of France can and should advance anti-racist and anti-oppressive pedagogies by centering the knowledge and experiences of those socially defined as 'non-white.'

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