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What is Institutionalised? The Race-Class-Gender Articulation of Stephen Lawrence

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Abstract

The consistent denial of allegations of institutionalised racism by the majority of police officers in spite of the contradictory confessions of a few top ranking officers suggests that the meaning of the term is not yet clear to all those involved in the debate. Institutionalisation means something unambiguous in sociology, however, and this meaning should be shared with the wider public in order to differentiate stark ignorance from ideological hoo-hah. The paper will conclude by carrying the debate beyond institutionalised racism and including a discussion of the institutionalisation of race-class-gender articulation. Note that this paper will use the term institutionalised racism in preference to the preferred one of institutional racism.

Introduction

According to the Chambers English dictionary, to institutionalise is to turn something into an institution; to confine someone to an institution; and as a result of such institutionalisation or confinement, to cause to become apathetic and dependent on routine. Sociology borrowed this idea long ago and set out to elaborate it as a way of carving a niche for its discipline compared to biology or psychology. In other words, the problem of racism in the police force is not simply a problem of racist attitudes held by some individual bad eggs in an otherwise normal force (although that is a serious problem in itself) but also a deeper problem of the reliance on routine in an apathetic way.

Stephen Lawrence, a black teenager studying for the A-Levels, according to a unanimous verdict returned by the Inquest jury in 1997, 'was unlawfully killed in a completely unprovoked racist attack by five white youths on 22 April 1993 (Macpherson,1999). His best friend, Dwayne Brooks, managed to escape their racist attackers and called the police and the ambulance. When the police arrived, he told them that the five white youths shouted, 'What, what, nigger!' before attacking them. Although the police arrived much earlier than the ambulance, they did not give any first aid to the 18 year old as he lay dying in what they saw as a large pool of blood, claiming that they thought that he was in a recovering position and denying suggestions from lawyers that they refused to help in order not to dirty their hands with black blood. Although the police were given positive information that could have led to arrests, they refused to make any arrest. Even when one of the attackers was picked out from an identity parade, the police suggested that the survivor who positively identified him was probably guessing. The police confessed that one of their officers was carrying a clipboard at the scene of the crime and was asking people for information but later he could not remember anything he was told and he had no record of any notes he may have taken.

Later the police mounted video surveillance on the suspected attackers and caught them on tape boasting about how they were going to cut black people up but at the same time, one of

the officers was seen socialising with the gangster father of one of the suspects under the pretension that he wanted to 'cultivate' the gangster as a witness (against his own son?) but without any instruction from the officer in charge to do so. That same cultivating officer was the person assigned to protect the surviving witness during the trial even though a photograph of him and the father of one of the suspects sitting in a car was already known to the police at that time. The case against the suspects was dropped after the police claimed that the eye-witness account of the survivor was unreliable. Subsequently, they arrested him while he was on a public protest and promptly charged him only for the judge to throw out the case. In search of justice, the parents of Stephen Lawrence attempted a private prosecution against the suspects but when that collapsed, they launched an unprecedented campaign for a public inquiry into the way that the police handled the investigation into the murder. It was only then that the above facts became widely known to the public.

During the public inquiry chaired by Sir William Macpherson, this heated exchange took place between Michael Mansfield, QC, representing the family of Stephen Lawrence, and Inspector Steven Groves who was in charge of the scene of crime operations that fateful night:

Groves: I thought that what we were dealing with here was probably a fight.

Mansfield: I am going to put to you Mr Groves, that I suggest to you very clearly, this is one of your assumptions because it is a black victim, was it not?

Groves: No, sir. You are accusing me of being a racist now, and that is not true. I would like it noted that I do not think that is fair, either. You have no evidence that I am a racist.

Mansfield: If I ask you if you are a racist what will you say?

Groves: Of course I am not. I could not do my job if I was a racist. It would not be possible, it is not compatible (Norton-Taylor, 1999).

Although the police officers investigating the murder of Stephen Lawrence (like most police officers) denied that they were racist, they confessed that they saw it as just another case of gang fights among inner city youths. Following severe criticism of the conduct of the investigation in the Macpherson report, the officers involved took early retirement except one senior officer who only announced his early retirement when the disciplinary hearings against him were approaching and who was only convicted on one count out of eleven and was simply cautioned by the disciplinary hearing in 1999. As the Inquiry reported,

There is no doubt whatsoever but that the first MPS investigation was palpably flawed and deserves severe criticism Nobody listening to the evidence could reach any other conclusion. This is now plainly accepted by the MPS. Otherwise the abject apologies offered to Mr and Mrs Lawrence would be meaningless (Macpherson, 1999: 4).

Is the claim by the police that racism, sexism and class prejudice are incompatible with police work convincing? Is it not possible for a police officer to remain on duty long before enough evidence can be found to prove that he or she was racist on the job before being disciplined? But even if the officer is not racist, is it not possible for the same officer to implement institutionalised racism by, for example, disbelieving the information from an eye witness, associating with the suspects, arresting the witness and charging him, and denying that the murder was racially motivated? Should they (the police) not have started investigating it as a racist crime, made prompt arrests, kept records of their investigation, and been more sensitive to the eye-witness? If the police deny being individually racist, why do they also deny the existence of institutionalised racism, is it because they do not understand what the term means? Moreover, was it simply a racist crime or was the murder also gendered and class-specific, very much like the police investigation?

The *Daily Mail* took the unprecedented step of naming the five white youth as racist murderers and challenged them to sue for libel if they are sure of their innocence but their mothers went on radio to deny the accusation and claimed that that if they had the money and if they could be guaranteed a fair hearing, they would sue the paper. The newspaper repeated the allegation and the challenge to be sued but we must not forget that the racist reports of the same newspaper in the past may have helped to fuel the racist violence that claimed the life of Stephen Lawrence. According to the *Daily Mail* editorial of 8 October 1985, following the protests of black people against police brutality:

Either they obey the laws of this land where they have taken up residence and accepted both full rights and responsibilities of citizenship, or they must expect the fascist street agitators to call ever more boldly and with ever louder approval for them to 'go back whence they came.

This editorial wrongly assumed that all black people took up residence here as migrants whereas many were born here like Stephen Lawrence and that only black people who do not

obey the laws of the land have anything to fear from fascist street agitators. Stephen Lawrence has proved (if anyone needed proof) that black people do not need to do anything wrong before facing institutionalised racist violence either in the form of slavery, colonialism, fascism or oppressive law and order politics. Such symbolic violence was institutionalised in the enlightenment movement that denied the humanity of Africans even while calling for universal brotherhood of man. It was perfected under colonialism and has been sustained by neo-colonialism, re-colonialism and internal colonialism (see Gilroy, 1993, Hall et al, 1978).

The Sociology of Institutionalisation

Different sociological perspectives offer competing approaches to the understanding of institutionalisation. This section will not attempt a comprehensive review of the competing perspectives but will simply give enough indications of what is known theoretically about institutionalisation. This brief treatment is arbitrary and not exhaustive since some adherents of some perspectives could be classified differently by other writers.

PERSPECTIVE	ADHERENTS	DEFINITION	APPLICATION
Marxism	Marx, Engels, Lenin, Gramsci, Luxemburg, Sivanandan, Cabral, Hooks, Hall, Davis, Rodney.	Emphasises that social institutionalisation is structured unequally with dominant race-gender privileged others who oppressed resist and struggle for justice.	Stephen Lawrence suffered from the fascist violence that is part of imperialist social institutions that encourage ideas of rich white male supremacy among poor white men whose false consciousness tell them that poor black people are their enemies.
Functionalism	Durkheim, Radcliffe-Brown, Parsons, Luhmann.	Stresses the consensual nature of institutionalisation under a collective conscience that is strengthened through systems expected and punishment.	Wrongly suggests that there is a consensus that those who killed Stephen Lawrence were the fascists and that they should be punished but the killers remain free and appear to be rewarded with false senses of heroism despite the fight to bring them to justice.
Rationalism	Weber, Giddens.	Sees institutionalisation	Suggests that a rational

	<p>Habermas, Beck, Mills.</p>	<p>as the bureaucratic establishment of administration of repetitive social justice would action that is have arrested the meaningful to all suspected killers concerned and is of Stephen supported by social Lawrence sooner norms under a without any system of rational personal domination that is considerations. legitimate as In other words, opposed to Weber saw irrational forms of English law as domination. historically denying justice to the poor because it is based on empirical justice rather than the rational bureaucracy.</p>	
<p>Post-Structuralism</p>	<p>Foucault, Fanon, Baudrillard, Lyotard, Frugg, Smart, Bhabha, Irigary.</p>	<p>Sees social institutions as fascist violence socially constructed of white youth systems of and the legitimate discourse of power force of the and knowledge officials derive designed to from the same subjugate, control source of the will and discipline. to dominate and so they must be deconstructed together.</p>	

Table 1: Chart of Key Perspectives, Adherents, and definitions of institutionalisation applicable to the articulation of Stephen Lawrence.

It could be said that the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Sir Paul Condon, was following the structural-functionalist conception of institutionalisation when he denied that racism is not institutionalised within his force although he was led by the Inquiry to admit in a letter that racism 'can occur through a lack of care and lack of understanding... almost unknowingly, as a matter of neglect, in an institution' (Macpherson, 1999: 24). The Inquiry responded indirectly by pointing out the difference between admitting that something could happen and acknowledging that it is happening. The Inquiry called for the debate to move beyond the problem of definition to the problem of what is to be done 'about the racism within the service' (Macpherson, 1999: 31-31).

The structural functionalist view regards institutionalisation as something that contributes to the survival of the social system. Therefore, only those things that contribute to the system's need for survival can be said to have been institutionalised. Whatever is dysfunctional to the system is seen as an intrusion from the environment and such traits are supposedly identified and weeded out of the system in a cybernetic process eternally geared towards stasis and equilibrium. That is the view that led Inspector Groves into asserting that racism is incompatible with police work. Since police work is good work, it follows that anything that is not good, such as racism, cannot be seen as part of the institution of policing.

When Condon publicly warned 'leaders of the black community' to watch their backs because he was about to launch an operation specifically targeting young black males, he was exhibiting institutionalised racism-sexism-classism of the rational bureaucratic Weberian ideal

type. First of all, he has never warned 'leaders of the white community' to control their kids because 100% of drunk drivers or joy riders (who kill more people than muggers) are white or that there will be an operation targeting young white males (Agozino, 1997). In other words, even an officer who has admitted that he wants to eliminate racism from the police force could still carry on with institutionalised racism whether or not he acknowledges it. Some writers would like to argue that the policy statements of anti-racist racists, like Condon, represent a betrayal of the Weberian ideal bureaucracy but, as Bauman (1989) clearly illustrated in *Modernity and the Holocaust*, the rational bureaucratic logic is consistent with genocidal practices.

The bizarre investigation of the murder of Stephen Lawrence comes closest to the post-structuralist perspective in the sense that police officers are supposed to follow the truth and the rules and the seriousness of the crime, and so on, according to the rational bureaucratic ideal type of the administration of justice. Instead, Baudrillard (1996) would argue that they treated the crime as a *Perfect Crime*, or no crime, in other words. Baudrillard uses this idea to expose the naivety of the faith that modernism places on the role of truth in the criminal justice system when it can be seen that virtual reality plays as much role as socially constructed ideas of reality in the investigation of crime.^[1]

The best example of the application of the Marxist perspective to the institutionalisation of racism-sexism-classism remains (Hall et al, 1978). They analysed the politics of mugging and demonstrated how the moral panic was imported into Britain from America at a historically specific time and why deep social structural forces condensed the themes of race, crime and youth into the images of mugging and blackness. The moral panic was triggered off by the stabbing to death of an old widower by three youths, one from a black Caribbean background, one of a mixed race origin and one of a Maltese origin. Although the victim was white, the motive for the killing was robbery and no newspaper reported it as a racist crime. However, most of the newsreports presented 'mugging' as a black type of crime, a view that was backed by some politicians like Enoch Powel and some senior police officers. The analysis shows that long before the public were made to panic about mugging due to police war and media campaigns around sensational court cases. The police had institutionally defined the crime, linked it to black youths predominantly and mobilised for the war before declaring that there was a mugging epidemic. The result was that

the police in the black communities have come, progressively, to perceive the black population as potential threat to "law and order", potentially hostile, potential troublemakers, potential "disturbers of the peace", and potential criminals (Hall et al, 1978: 45-46).

This explains the institutionalised racist assumptions by the investigating officers that they were dealing with a fight even after it was clearly reported that Stephen Lawrence had been attacked by five white youths. The zeal with which the police and the media 'amplified' the crime of mugging in their campaign against it, differs markedly from the frequent denials and attempts to suggest that racist thugs are isolated individuals or groups whom the police presume innocent until proven guilty. In other words, racist violence is not amplified. On the contrary, the police do not take the investigation into such crimes as seriously as they take the crime of mugging. Hence there is no moral panic around racist violence. Instead there is a moral crusade by the victims and their supporters while the police maintain a stance of incredulity and pretend that they do not have the evidence with which to mount a successful prosecution.

Hall and his colleagues (1978) went on to argue that the institutionalised racism evident in the policing of the crisis of hegemony derives ultimately from the role of the authoritarian state as a partisan in the class struggle. They suggest that the working class movement is fragmented with sections of the black working class forced to struggle over crumbs with sections of the white working class especially when the post war boom ended in a cataclysmic burst that divided the nation and undermined the consensus constructed by the Welfare State. The scape-goating of black immigrants became fashionable populist rhetorics used by politicians to seek votes as if it was black immigrants that caused the economic depression. Although the views of the politicians were populist because they were widely shared in the society, Hall and his colleagues concluded that the political power of the State, including criminal justice agencies, makes the institutionalisation of prejudice and discrimination exceptional compared to the everyday racism that is shared widely in the society.

Compared to the above analysis of how conflict is tearing British society apart, the conflict functionalists theorise conflict as part and parcel of normal institutional practices. This approach to the analysis of racism proposes that the whole society, not just the police, still

survives on the fruits of the historical wrongs done to ethnic minority people and that the dominant ethnic groups seek to maintain the marginalised in positions of inferiority by perpetuating 'sets of advantages or privileges for the majority group and exclusions or deprivations for minority groups' (Rodriguez, 1987). According to adherents of the normal institutional practices approach, institutional racism 'is so embracing an operating principle that it no longer requires conscious or overtly racist acts to sustain it' (Rodriguez, 1987).

The opinion of the Chief Constable of Greater Manchester Police, David Wilmot, was close to a conflict functionalist view when he admitted on day 2 of part two of the Inquiry that the problem of institutionalised racism existed in his force, that he had racist prejudice as a young officer, and that he was tackling the problem especially in the 'Canteen Culture' of lower rank officers. As he put it, 'there was still institutional racism, both in an internalised way (just as in society) and an overt way' (Macpherson, 1999: 31). Institutionalised racism simply means that in Manchester, if street crime occurs in the Moss Side area, for example, the police would mobilise a stereotypical image of the suspect as a black person until proven otherwise. This working assumption would be held as normal by all police officers irrespective of their attitudes to black people and in spite of the fact that statistically speaking, the assumption has only 30% probability of being true given that the majority of Moss Side residents happen to be white.

Institutionalised Racism-Sexism-Classism

What is it that differentiates racist attitudes from institutionalised racism? The difference is that one is conscious and the other is unconscious. However, it does not follow that they are separate, on the contrary, they are articulated. Racist attitudes are tolerated in institutionally racist organisations and institutionally racist organisations encourage the development of racist attitudes. This paper focuses on a discussion of institutionalised racism instead of the Macpherson-favoured term of institutional racism which Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton introduced in their pioneering definition of the term (Carmichael and Hamilton, 1967).

The difference between the two terms is evident in the fact that institutional racism has been used by the Inquiry and the academics that submitted evidence to it as a reference to unwitting racism, a term that Lord Scarman preferred to allegations that the police was institutionally racist. Institutionalised racism suggests that the officers who implement it are not necessarily overtly racist but questions the assumption that they are not aware of the inherent racism of institutionalised practices. The difference here is an emphasis on the social construction of social institutions, hence institutionalised racism-sexism-classism as implemented by conscious social actors and not as something simply and exclusively left to the inhuman machinations of institutions.

Miles (1993) argues that racism is institutionalised in state policies of immigration when the political discourse was overtly and covertly racist even without politicians arguing openly that immigrants are racially inferior. Apart from a correlation between phenotypic differences and official policies of exclusion from entry, people who had previous right of entry without visas, immigration was institutionally 'racialised' whenever reference was made to immigrants being 'the cause of economic and social problems for our own people' (Miles, 1993: 74).

Miles illustrated this with a detailed analysis of how the Aliens Act of 1905 institutionalised anti-Semitism by seeking to exclude Jewish immigrants who had no means of supporting themselves in Britain. Although the Act did not mention Jews by name, the use of economic criterion to exclude poor Jews effectively excluded most of the refugees who could not demonstrate independent means of livelihood while allowing the rich Jews (the Jewess was simply reduced to the status of a dependent in this articulation of race-gender-class relations) to come with their money. Of course, it can be said that the immigration law today openly targets black immigrants for exclusion and even rich people of African descent have had their application for citizenship refused, in spite of their incredible personal wealth.

Hall (1979, 1980, 1988) warns that we should look beyond individuals and focus on institutionalised ways of doing things. According to Hall, in every society structured in dominance, race-class-gender are articulated or joined together in such a way that you will not understand any of these power relations in isolation from the others. For example, if Stephen Lawrence was a rich black boy, he could have been presented with a personal posh

car at his 17th birthday, hence there would have been no need for him to wait at a lonely bus stop, nor would his parents be forced to bring him up in anywhere called the Isles of Dogs. Moreover, if Stephen was a millionaire white, black or Asian kid, there is no way the police could have started investigating his murder with a routine assumption that he may have been involved in drugs gangs.

Secondly, if Stephen was a young black woman, perhaps the racist thugs would have gang-raped her instead of butchering her on the spot (although being gang-raped is not necessarily better than being murdered - some would say that it is worse than death perhaps because it could also end in actual murder). What this suggests is that racist-sexist violence is exercised against black men in a way different to how it is practiced against black women in some situations. Similarly, if Stephen was a girl, the police would have probably started looking at the way she dressed to see if she precipitated the crime. This is slightly present in attempts to demonise his grieving mother by accusing her of cop-bashing when, as a woman, she should stay at home and mourn while her husband is left to speak to the press in the reasonable way that men are supposed to understand things.

Enough has been said about what the police would have done if Stephen Lawrence was a white middle class male like his name-sake, the headmaster whose murderers were immediately apprehended even though they wore masks, perhaps because he was white and his killer was Chinese. However, the point being made here is that it is not only racism that is institutionalised in the police force. What we have is the articulation, disarticulation and re-articulation of racism, sexism, and class oppression within institutional settings. Jefferson (1992) is critical of academics who design increasingly sophisticated techniques that increasingly fail to detect 'pure' racism. According to Jefferson, this is a case of using increasingly fine mesh for sieving flour until the mesh is so fine that not enough flour is coming through to bake anything.

Conclusion

Racism, the word nobody likes. Whites who don't want to confront racism and who don't name themselves white recoil in horror from it, shun it like the plague. To mention the word in their company disrupts their comfortable complacency. To call a text or methodology under discussion in a classroom ... "racist", or to call a white person (to order) on her or his racism, is to let loose a stink bomb. Like a tenacious weed, racism (creeps) up everywhere - it has a strangle hold on everyone. It is cultivated and produced in families, churches, temples and state institutions (Anzaldua, quoted in Pfohl, 1994: 453).

This paper will end by echoing the call by Stephen Pfohl for scholars who are critical of racism to develop analysis of the theoretical and 'methodological significance of race as a social construct.' He proposes that this could be done through a twin strategy of opposing 'the continuing violence of racism' and opening the ears of scholars to cultural traditions that have been silenced for a long time by Eurocentric perspectives on world history.

Given the fact that white supremacist views have been well established in religious, scientific knowledge and political practice, the question is no longer whether institutionalised racism exists but what forms it takes and how effectively to combat it. In spite of the severe criticism in sociology regarding racist eugenic theories of race and crime, established criminologists still come up with mythical evidence of the inherent blackness of certain kinds of criminality (Gilroy, 1987). Some other social scientists minimise the significance of race by over-emphasising the significance of class and completely ignoring gender. Pfohl suggests that we should try to understand that (1) racial formations are socially constructed for the purpose of social control, (2) theory can play a role against racist violence, (3) the racialised standpoint of white culture should be studied and (4) nonracialised cultural difference must be affirmed given the reality of multiculturalism.

This paper has demonstrated that the debate around institutionalised racism should not proceed any longer without realising how racism is articulated, disarticulated and rearticulated with sexism and classism. Furthermore, the paper has argued that any debate on institutionalisation should be made sensitive to the rich sociological literature on the meaning of institutionalisation. Once this sociological meaning is grasped, scholars, activists and policy-makers would avoid the antiquated debate as to whether racism-sexism-classism is an institutionalised practice. Rather, we would all be searching for every manifestation of such

institutionalisation and searching for feasible solutions through the increased democratisation of civil society.

The paper has argued that no single theoretical perspective offers all the answers to the question of form and the solution to institutionalised injustice. Rather, some of the manifestations are better understood through some theoretical perspectives while other perspectives offer better explanations of some other manifestations or what could be considered the most efficacious solutions. I have not dwelt on what those solutions would be except by indicating that social theory should be used to assist the search for solutions by analysing the practical struggles of the people in their effort to live in a more just and democratic society. Others may disagree with my characterisation of certain perspectives but no one would question my guiding assumption that theory should be taken seriously in the practical struggle to end racism-sexism-classism.

Note

1 See Agozino (1999) for a comparative analysis of the competing perspectives.

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