Race and Racism in the United States of America (USA)

This interview was conducted in August 2020, with the Bosniak-origin scholar Dr. Mirsad Kriještorac, who is an Assistant Professor at Broward College in Florida. Dr. Kriještorac has been living in the US, with his wife and five children, for almost 30 years. In addition to his academic career, Dr. Kriještorac has had a rich life experience in this country, as a father, husband, worker, professor, and finally, a Muslim. This interview was conducted by Assist. Prof. Dr. Bilal Ulusoy, Director of Kalyoncu University's African Research Center (KASC) on the topic of race, color and racism**.**

1. Do you think the concept of "hidden racism" is an institutionalized reaction of the existing bureaucratic system in the United States, or does it have much more personal reasons, personal implicit and explicit biases among the white majority?

We start from the belief that human beings and human nature are essentially good, equal in every aspect of their humanity and are therefore not racist. Human beings adopt ideas of racism and act upon them as a result of the structural conditions in which they live and which structures their views and behavior, which are created by those who hold power in order to try to increase or maintain that power. So racism exists primarily as a socio-economic mechanism to keep someone in a position to be exploited for the benefit of others.

Energy is the basis for everything, and since it cannot be created out of nothing it must be harnessed, either from nature or from someone else who has it. Racism, that society creates, accepts and adopts as its ordering principle of a society, provides a possibility for that energy to be harnessed from other human beings who are not seen as equal in their humanity.

Society created the construct that it is acceptable for me to use an ox's energy to plow the land and create wealth for myself. In exchange, I should feed my ox so it can work. The necessary part of this construct is that oxen are not human beings and so it is socially acceptable for them to be treated this way. The same principle works with other types of social constructs which are used for exploitation and which create class, race, or even gender roles. These constructs may be used to harness someone's else's energy for a cheap price, or to create other types of advantageous situations where one group is in a better position to utilize others' energy, resources and structures to benefit their own segment of society and not the others'. Sometimes

this is done at the expense of others and by selectively limiting access to collective goods to those lower-class groups. The second situation is a bit more common when we talk about today's racism, but let's not forget that slavery is also a form of expressed racism. Such constructs serve also to structure a social contract and determine who is included and excluded, who gets what, when and how in exchange for obedience, and who is to be provided with the sovereignty to rule in exchange for providing and maintaining privileges for those who obey.

Hidden racism is the result of both current and past institutional structures and of socially accepted – yet unspoken – norms, which in turn create and support collective or personal implicit and explicit biases that still operate in the US. Hidden and implicit racism is also often cloaked in legislative and normative wrappings where it structures behaviors and appearances which, knowingly or unknowingly, put some people at a disadvantage. At other times, when racism was explicit in the past, its effects now are not easily relatable to that past racism because they are being fully experienced much later, when the original conditions no longer exist. Meantime, things are also done to obscure the causal relations of past racism, and efforts are made to purposely forget what was done in the past, in such a way that there is no point of comparison for full understanding of the problem at hand. For example, efforts done to obscure the true reasons for many health problems among African Americans now, caused by the 1808 ending of exporting of slaves from Africa while continuing the practice of slavery, when the U.S. changed from being a slave-importing country to a slave-exporting country. These health problems found in the African American community are not the result of their poor choices. They are the result of structural conditions created by the system of practiced racism in the past and it is important to acknowledge them as such. In 2016, Sublettes published a good book on that era, *The American Slave Coast: A History of the Slave-Breeding Industry*.

When it comes to forgotten expressions of racism that are being fully experienced now, I can note a few more examples that many of us know.

During the era of Reconstruction (1863-1877), when the white people who worked for Southern governments were all removed from their jobs, and newly-freed black people were put in their positions, they, the blacks, became the face of white people's oppression in the South (as well as real competitors for jobs and resources). This is the time when the hatred towards black people developed in many ways into its present form because the competition for jobs and

resources became obvious, by and large through the bureaucratic workings of the state which organized that scheme during the Reconstruction Era, even if that result was not intended by the state.

Another important example of that past racism that resonates now is the development structure of Levittowns. These are white-only suburbs that were built during the era of segregation after WWII and became a source of wealth for many white people in the country. Affordable houses built just for whites in those Levittowns established a basis for good credit scores and favorable loan conditions, and allowed them the possibility to trade their valuable properties for different ones and still have a sizable amount money left over to invest in various things that could help them to further boost themselves socially and economically. African Americans, and other minorities, who were banned from those communities were left economically disadvantaged and vulnerable to further exploitation. We should always remember that wealth, as well as poverty, are primarily the result of family generational efforts and how past practices of racism can contribute to one's economic and social status.

2. How would you describe discrimination in US society today? When we talk about "discrimination" as a term, do you mean discrimination based on visible human traits or social and cultural one?

You made a good distinction with the second part of the question.

It is of course a social and cultural kind. Cultural realm is where the constructs are created that allows racism and discrimination to take place. This is why movies and other types of entertainment and cultural artifacts were instrumental in creating the possibility for racism, as an idea, to take hold and flourish. They are used to normalize those norms we mentioned in the beginning, which makes it acceptable to harness energy of "others" for little in exchange as if they are expendable beings. Even science was used, and sometimes still is, to peddle racism with ideas and "findings" about people with higher IQ that support such orientations. I am not talking about if those "findings" are "true" or "not" because such discussion would make these claims worthy, while they are not; I am talking about the intention or purpose of those "findings." Remember that even Marx said that to pose a question is to structure the answer, so it would be interesting to think of a guiding idea that those who measure things like that have.

And so again, racism is essentially an ideology and it takes place in a society in the realm of culture that afterwards manifests itself through economic and social interactions that we previously described.

3: What do you think about the relationship between racism and modernity?

It is a very strong one, and it is not easy to separate today's racism from modernity. Not only because what "modernity" has brought to the humanity, modern slavery and concurrent economic system, but even what the very term modernity suggests is racist in its essence.

Social science gave up on the concept of a so-called "primitive man," finally realizing that no man is a primitive man. Now, the scientific consensus is that all men are modern.

Yet, the notion of modernity implicitly still has a linear Eurocentric evolutionary understanding of the world nested within itself, and based on those ideas racism is justified. This is even more pronounced if you look at definitions of modernity offered by those who are peddling those types of ideas. I do not want to speculate if those people who are supporting the notion of modernity, are aware of all the implications of the terms they use to describe the pillars of the concept, but frankly, it does not even matter whether they are aware of the racist vision that the concept of modernity implies. Derald Sue (2005) defines racism to be "any action, intentional or unintentional, that is based on race or skin color and subordinates a group or individual based on their skin color or race" and so intentionality is not necessary for racism to be operational. When it comes to "modernity" we need to understand the essential part of it as a normative ordering ideology and reject it as an attempt by some Europeans to tout their racist visions of the world as the only acceptable paradigms. The foundations of the idea of modernity are steeped in the European view of history as a process of dialectical change, where development builds upon itself through violence, but all within races and civilizations which are usually seen as closed and isolated containers. Those ideas which support the notion of modernity which has occurred as a result of the dialectical workings of history were first offered by Hegel, but were expanded most famously by his disciples, Marx and Engels and we should examine their writings in terms of racism to see the tie between the two.

Building upon the acceptance of modernity as an evolutionary "progress," Marx explained how the British pushed Indians into modernity as a positive and necessary thing to be done to a people who do not have their own history (as a dialectic evolutionary mechanism) and did not reach a level of modernity necessary to be left alone to live as they wished, or as "birth pangs" (as Madeline Albright justified the invasion of Iraq to "encourage" democracy and modernity there, when then-President Bush frequently noted how "civilized nations" need to do something to help local people to replace their political regime with democracy). So Marx wrote about colonial India and its inhabitants, in his famous reference, as a people with no history to initiate the mechanism of dialectics, glorifying the violence that was done to them as an alternative necessary mechanism to produce conditions of modernity there:

> ***Indian society has no history at all, at least no known history.*** *What we call its history, is but the history of the successive intruders who founded their empires on the passive basis of that unresisting and unchanging society. ..* ***The British were the first conquerors superior, and therefore, inaccessible to Hindu civilization****. They destroyed it by breaking up the native communities, by uprooting the native industry, and by levelling all that was great and elevated in the native society…* ***The work of regeneration hardly transpires through a heap of ruins. Nevertheless it has begun****… That unity, imposed by the British sword, will now be strengthened and perpetuated by the electric telegraph.*

To further describe racism that many proponents of modernity like Marx held, we can mention a statement from his work *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy.* He stated that **"the Germans have long since shown that in all spheres of science they are equal, and in most of them superior, to other civilized nations**," to further justify the racist notion of "the white man's" burden that Germans share with other Europeans, towards "lesser" peoples.

Together with his closest confidant, Friedrich Engels, Marx makes numerous other horrendous comments on other non-Germans such as Slavs, "Negroes," Bedouins, Jews, and Chinese. These comments are well known, but we still study and learn what these scholars of modernity wrote as if these are genuine ideas to be considered, built upon and reckoned with today.

I cannot resist mentioning one more statement by Engels that might be applied to me as a southern Slav, "the Southern Slavs, are nothing but the human trash of peoples, resulting from an

extremely confused thousand years of development" (Friedrich Engels, "Der Magyarische Kampf" in Blackstock and Hoselitz, 63-64).

Engels believed that Aryans, defined as white Northwestern European people, were the superior race, and should we not consider his beliefs when we accept ideas of modernity that rose from his and Marx's notions of history as a dialectical mechanism that shapes the world and also shapes the notion of modernity:

"The plentiful meat and milk diet among the Aryans and the Semites, and particularly the beneficial effects of these foods on the development of children, may, perhaps, **explain the superior development of these two races**." ("Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State" in *Marx & Engels, Selected Works in One Volume*, Lawrence & Wishart: London, 1980).

These ideas are the foundation for what it is now referred to as modernity. So how can we accept modernity without also realizing the racist beliefs and everything else it implies? I certainly cannot, although some suggest we should.

More of such ideas are expressed by other philosophers and thinkers who built the idea of "modernity," but I hope you can get the point out of these few examples.

4. How would you analyze American racism in the Trump era?

It began to show its ugly head somewhat timidly, cloaked in terms that sound acceptable in the European cultural space. Protagonists and media call it "alt-right," "white nationalism," or other names like that. But what does white nationalism mean in a multi-racial country if not racism or a racial preference for whites over non-whites?

As a student of nationalism, I know however that such idea has nothing to do with nationalism. Nationalism cannot divide a single American nation among racial lines. Even more, nationalism cannot build itself upon such universalist terms as whiteness and still remain nationalism. As Benedict Anderson wrote, "nations are imagined political communities that are imagined as both inherently limited (so it cannot be an entire racial group) and sovereign. They are always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" as opposed to the views of racism." He concluded that "dreams of racism have their roots in ideologies of class, rather than in those of

nations: above all in claims to the divinity of rulers, and "blue" & "white" blood and breeding among aristocrats only.

Anderson called upon us not to forget that the start of the nation was conceived in ideas and language, not in blood (as racism is), and that one may be invited into the imagined community of a nation through naturalization. So those euphemisms, "white nationalism" and the "alt-right," are just a linguistic cover for what they really are: racism.

Asserting these ideas into mainstream discourse began even before the last elections, but after them those essentially racist ideas and norms took center stage more boldly. Now, racism is openly on center stage again, and it is referred to as the racism that it is, and now it cannot be ignored or dismissed easily by the U.S. and other European-dominated societies any longer. So, in a way, it is good that we can now openly see racism as it is, and are forced to deal with it, embrace it fully, or reject it in all of its forms.

Do not misunderstand and take this to mean that Trump has created or even enabled racism. Remember that you should not hate the messenger when he brings you bad news. President Trump cannot and should not be blamed for all the ills of society. He only became a leader of a country that has all these systemic issues to recon with. But, even with all the deficiencies in the U.S. in terms of unresolved racism, as a European I can say that the U.S. is a significantly more tolerant and less racist country than most of other European-dominated countries. U.S. society is also much more willing to confront racism, and it is generally much more possible for people to try to challenge it openly. Our reality is far from perfect or even good, but in my opinion, it is far better than all other European dominated societies. The same could be said for racism in non-European societies, where it also exists and thrives nowadays. Just look at India or China, or even some Muslim countries.

5. Do you face racism in your professional life?

Yes. Muslims have been racialized in the Western world for quite some time (even before 9/11). Muslims in general are imagined to be the lowest race, to whom all kinds of things can be done, and that type of bad attitude towards Muslims became accepted by everyone, whites, blacks, Asians, Hispanics and any other group. Like most other Muslims who live in the West, I

have experienced anti-Muslim bias and hostility many times, especially when I enter a public or official sphere as a Muslim.

For example, the nature of my profession requires me to travel to conferences and meetings, and to do research, and everywhere I am treated as a permanent suspect or stranger. When traveling, people like me are subjected to humiliation (what they call "additional security screenings"). However, the majority of people, both black and white, think that it is acceptable that Muslims could be treated that way just so that they can "feel safer." Essentially, their sense of safety is built upon my harassment. If that is not racism, then I do not know what is.

6. What could be the norms/borders of racial visible profiling through the eyes of the usual white American citizen?

If we are still talking about Muslims, I can describe it like this: When I apply for a job I have to constantly wonder about my public Muslimness, if my beard is longer than what might be considered socially acceptable, or if I can ask for free time on Friday so I can perform my religious duty of *jumma* prayer and how that might be seen as too religious (with a wrong religion). If you ask the same question to a Muslim woman, her concern about being profiled because of her public appearance is even more pronounced if she wears a hijab, and many of your students are probably familiar with that themselves even outside the U.S. This type of attitude has become so prevalent that it is no longer limited only to non-Muslim societies. Unfortunately, these same prejudices can be found and felt even among peoples and officials in some Muslim majority countries as well. At the same time, attitudes and policies towards other formerly pariah groups changed. These types of changes show the power of ideas and norms, as well as who creates them and for what purpose. Remember, we noted earlier that hidden racism is also often cloaked in legislative and societal normative wrappings, which structure perceptions, behavior and appearance which, knowingly or unknowingly, put some people at a disadvantage**.** And then for people who look visibly different, being black or Muslim, any public appearance presents a risk of someone being offended by their presence, and because of that their ability to get jobs, benefits or entitlements that the rest of the society fully enjoys, are denied to them.

7. How would you analyze the existing unemployment problem, considering racial differences in today's American labor market in accordance with your personal observation?

The problem of racism and unemployment is deeply steeped in the educational system. We all know that today's labor market is very competitive on the level of skills, knowledge and education. When you work in public universities and colleges with large number of African American students, you can see that their situation is compounded by the inadequate education they received from elementary school all the way through high school and college. But that poor education from the public school system again goes back to the same structural arrangements imbedded into the overall societal system of stratification of races that was noted earlier. A few such structural conditions maintain the educational status quo and white dominance over those who are deemed racially inferior, and through a cultural hegemony over the society those conditions provide for lingering effects of racisms to continue.

We begin by establishing that this country is as great as it is because of an important principle that was built into its foundation, which is the principle of equality and opportunity, with pluralism and competition among different groups and people.

Competition in America takes place in society at large, but that competition is often between religious groups. Race and religion are interwoven together within system of churches, so schools that those groups have founded are critically important in the process of competition. To better comprehend the full effects of racism and inequality that this system has created and how those private schools compare with public schools which serve most black and other less affluent communities, let's briefly look at how many of the so-called Ivy League schools were established by religious groups and religious institutions.

We can begin with Harvard University, which was established by religious Puritans who migrated to New England and by 1636 had founded Harvard in anticipation of the need for **training clergy** for the new commonwealth, and a "church in the wilderness." In the 1700s the students at Harvard were required to observe rules of pious decorum and ultimately to prove their fitness for the bachelor's degree by showing that they could "read the original of the Old and New Testament in the Latin tongue, and resolve them logically." Even the early motto of Harvard "Veritas Christo et Ecclesiae," meaning "Truth for Christ and the Church", testifies to

its religious origin. Although Harvard University **ended required chapel attendance** in the mid-1880s, the school remained culturally Protestant and has worked actively to retain its religious and cultural orientation throughout its history.

Yale University also came to be as a dream of the Reverend John Davenport, the Puritan religious leader of Northeast New England, to establish a theocracy and a college to educate its leaders. According to the early histories of Yale, a group of ten ministers led by the Reverend James Pierpont of New Haven met in 1700 to found a college. For two centuries, all of Yale's presidents were ministers, and only in the 1900s did Yale's Board of Trustees elect its first lay president. Yet, Yale still does not forget its religious roots in furthering its mission. According to its own historians, Yale is founded as "the Collegiate School to educate students for Public employment both in Church and Civil State," and has worked ever since to accomplish its mission.

Another great university in the Northeast is Princeton University, in New Jersey. It was founded in 1726 by William Tennent, a Presbyterian minister who, along with fellow evangelists, preached and taught an approach to religion and life that was the very essence of the Great Awakening period. The seven founders of this great college were all Presbyterians.

How about Georgetown University, the oldest Catholic and Jesuit institution of higher learning in the United States? How about Boston College, founded in 1863 by the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits) to educate Boston's predominantly Irish, Catholic immigrant community? What about Loyola University, a private Catholic research university in Chicago. Founded in 1870, Loyola is still one of the largest Catholic universities in the United States.

In this story of competition we certainly cannot skip New York City and its great institution Columbia University. Its history began in 1754, with the first classes held in a new schoolhouse adjoining Trinity Church, and that began the mission of the great Columbia University. The school eventually grew to become King's College, where the future leaders of colonial society could receive an education designed to "enlarge the Mind, improve the Understanding, polish the whole Man, and qualify them to support the brightest Characters in all the elevated stations in life."

Indeed, all these schools produced almost all of the presidents and other important leaders in this country, and the clear purpose of these schools is to perpetuate and provide a dominant role for those groups and the ideas they want to advance in America and in the world.

Current President Trump attended Fordham University, a Jesuit school in the Bronx, for two years before transferring to the University of Pennsylvania, where he eventually got his Master's degree from the Wharton School of Business, with its own roots intertwined with a particular religious sects. So, even our current president, as amazing as it sounds, is the product of those private religious-founded schools.

On the other hand, if you want go and check the backgrounds of all the Justices of the U.S. Supreme Court, and most of the members of the Congress (including two "squad" fellows, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Ayanna Pressley), or even the leading and the most influential faculty at universities around the country, you will see that vast majority of them have one thing in common: they all attended those religious-established and -run schools. We should remember how Max Weber described those religions groups in his writings on the U.S., as closed and exclusive groups, especially towards people of different races. In many ways it is still the same. So, you can see how the system of racism and accompanying inequality that it produces was all-encompassing and overwhelming and very difficult to overcome because the public schools attended by blacks and other minorities are not meant to provide leaders for the nation, only to supply followers, and perhaps people for middle level management positions. As Berger and Luckman state, only a very limited group of people in a society engage in the production of ideas about what is real and good, the societal *Weltanschauung*.

Let's pause and contemplate over such situation for a second. Is such a situation really acceptable, that a public education system in a country is not good enough to produce people who could be leaders who engage in defining reality for their own country and people?

Since this society is organized on the idea of equal opportunity and unequal outcomes decided upon competition between individuals and groups, and then racism is used to run such a society, even for only some time, the ideas and norms it created structure conditions for the exploitation of those designated as racially-lower segments in a society, and in that way, this ideology provides a huge advantage for the dominant group. Even when you remove the shackles of open racism, the dominant group remains dominant, and exploited groups will remain in

difficult situations for many, many years to come. That forces us to revisit the principal idea of equality of opportunity that is the basis of the U.S. political system, which will suggest that all these differences and inequalities are the result of the choices that individuals themselves made, without any regard to the past practices of racism. Just in case, and to solidify such a structure, exclusive institutions that create leaders were created to maintain their situation of dominance in perpetuity. Important such institutions that guard cultural and political hegemony are the Ivy League schools in the U.S., which were all created during a time of open racism and slavery, exactly for the purpose of maintaining the dominance of racially-preferred groups in perpetuity.

They still do that in two ways: they maintain the rigor of learning and research at their institutions, while at the same time they also supply faculty and leaders for public colleges and universities throughout the country where those faculty then decide who to hire and who to keep there to teach students and, more importantly, what to teach them they and what standards of learning to adopt. In that way, the dominance of those exclusive and racially-restrictive groups is fully protected and it will remain.

In addition, let us not even look too far into the lesser issue of school segregation, which was meant to ensure the dominance of lower-class whites (as *lumpen-proletariat* or foot soldiers who keep the system in place as its street-fighting force). When segregation finally ended *de jure*, it continued *de facto* in various ways, through magnet programs, charter schools etc. When education somehow does reach the lower segments of society so they can finally begin to compete for good-paying jobs and improve their economic and social standing, then the outsourcing of jobs to other countries begins so that still-newer skills are again needed. While those new skills are then being acquired, the time is passing and wealth is further accumulating for the dominating groups. Since we know that wealth and poverty are primarily generational, meaning the economic conditions of the family a person comes from determines whether he or she has a chance for social mobility, then we can begin to understand how the problem of unemployment is often intricately intertwined with the structural exclusivity and racism of a society.

I mention all of this only to highlight how education is the root cause of the current unemployment and under-employment among those racism-designated lower segments of the society in the US. Under-employment is either a situation where people do not have a full-time

job which awards benefits, or now, more commonly in the U.S. (and elsewhere), a situation where many young people who finish school and college then cannot find a career or job in the area they studied. They end up working in retail jobs or some other type of dead-end jobs which have nothing to do with their studies. All these problems are rooted in the system of public education, which is increasingly under assault in the U.S. nowadays, and education which is still not able to provide society with the tools necessary to overcome the structural racism that has gripped the country for so long. But, the conversation about it is now front and center, and hopefully the US will manage to overcome those long-established systems and conditions that are keeping the country from becoming even more powerful and a beacon of freedom for the world. In order to solve a problem, you first have to openly face it.

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