

*Gaby Franger*  
(Ed.)

**Roma Rights and Discrimination**  
**The Pursuit of Reflective Social and Educational Work**

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Image 1: Silent memorial: Metal shoes on the bank of the Danube in commemoration of the Jewish Hungarians who got shot there by "Arrow Cross Party" members in 1944 and 1945.

Image 2: Community based remembrance on Budapest's "Freedom Square" near the parliament to remember the 1944 deportations from Hungary to Auschwitz.

Image 3: IP Budapest: Report of the workgroup "Advocacy Work"

Image 4: National memorial in Berlin in commemoration of the genocide on the Romany created by the Israeli artist Dani Karavan in 2012.

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Maria José Casa-Nova

## Thinking about Difference: Some notes on the Role of Social Scientists as Transformative Intellectuals

### Introduction

These reflective notes are no more than a modest contribution to a discussion on ways of understanding the diversity of human beings and the task of together constructing knowledge with students and peers.

I have been reflecting on the 'Other' for more than 20 years, obviously including myself in this broad set of 'Others'. Although this might not give me any added legitimacy to speak about difference, it does, however, translate into an enormous responsibility, not just as a social scientist committed to producing knowledge that could contribute towards humanising societies, but also as a teacher, who has been trying to transmit scientific knowledge and encourage critical thinking and emancipatory citizenship among students.

This knowledge and attempts to develop critical thinking among students begin with an apparently simple *initial reflection*: we recognise the difference of others because we are different from them. This means that difference is evident in the relationship between different people. And the relationship between different people can be constructed on the basis of *ethno-centrism* (as a form of thought and action, which considers cultural belonging to be the base of all other forms of belonging); on the basis of *tolerance* (as a form of thought and action which allows the other only the status of 'tolerated'; founded on the arrogance of the one saying they tolerate and who has the power to 'tolerate'); or on the basis of assuming the importance of building a relationship between different people, in which our difference is as vulnerable and exposed as the difference of all others (cf. Stoer & Magalhães 2005).

The *second reflection* is that all others have the freedom to act according to their perceptions of the social world, their interests, strategies, cultural and social dimensions, etc. and that all others are free to accept or reject ways of thinking which, normally, orient or limit the actions of human beings. This means that, at most, in terms of collective action, two cultures can be considered to be immeasurable. However, it is important to also

keep in mind that every individual does not interact with cultures in the abstract but rather with individuals with culture and reflective thinking and that each cultural universe is internally heterogeneous and hence cannot be viewed as a homogenous and unchangeable block.

### Culture as a social practice

This leads us to the *third reflection*: since culture is the result of a social practice (as Paul Willis mentioned in his classic book "Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs") this means that all cultures are socially constructed (they are the product of human action) and can hence historically be transformed. Cultures are dynamic and not immutable and part of their changes and their dynamism are the result of interaction between differences. Hence, each human being is the product and the producer of culture. If this were not the case, all societies would be perpetuated in an immutable manner, replicating *ipsis verbis*, without variations. This means that there is no culture, no cultural practice (insofar as human constructions) which cannot be questioned. If it were otherwise they would become dogmas and people who thought that way would be inflexible from the point of view of thoughts and actions, helping perpetuate, whether consciously or unconsciously, most of the structural subordinations in societies. This is what usually happens in all societies: every human being is the product of a process of primary socialisation within the socio-cultural group of belonging and the society of which they are a part. This process of socialisation in terms of norms and values which pre-exist the individual ends up by unconsciously constraining their ways of behaviour and is partially responsible for *strangeness-censure* with regard to the difference of others (which is often the basis for discrimination and racism) or *strangeness-curiosity*, with an underlying desire for contact with the 'other'.

However, every human being also has the capacity of 'agency', which is derived from a process of reflection about their own culture and the culture of the 'other' and is behind the individual as a producer of culture and, consequently, behind cultural and social transformation (again: culture as social practice).

In my view, the mental structures of thought, understood as an institution (institution in the sociological sense: as pre-established norms for action,

transmitted by means of the processes of socialisation and widely accepted by society, but also as a dialectic product between what is instituted and what is intended to be instituted against an established order), can function as one of the greatest obstacles and resistance to intercultural coexistence and social change or, on the contrary, it could prove to be one of the drivers of such change, de-institutionalising the norm, as a standard of conduct in effect in a given society.

As producers of scientific knowledge and as teachers who construct classes (and knowledge) with their students, social scientists have an added responsibility in developing a reflexive and critical thought in students as citizens, acting as “transformative intellectuals” in the sense of the term as indicated by Aronowitz and Giroux. According to these authors (1992: 157), a transformative intellectual seeks to create a public sphere where not only is it possible for a critical discourse to appear, but which also enables a broader participation of teachers, students and parents in decision making processes. As transformative intellectuals, teachers seek “to make the pedagogical more political and the political more pedagogical”, which means, “introducing education directly in the political sphere (...) and using pedagogies which treat students as agents, problematising knowledge, making it significant in order to be critical, in order to make it emancipatory.”<sup>1</sup>

In other words, this is the type of social scientist and teacher who, being aware that societies are constructed in a hierarchical manner, seeks to contribute towards attenuating social inequalities and, possibly, building the bases for a paradigmatic shift (and not just sub-paradigmatic, i.e. within the same paradigm). This would mean the construction of societies of emancipated citizens, i.e. autonomous, reflexive, with an active voice; of middle class societies, free from the domination that some socio-cultural groups consciously or unconsciously wield over other groups or within the same group.

#### *Structural subordination and symbolic violence*

This leads to a *fourth reflection*: when we reflect upon (and work with) difference and the multiple forms of social subordination to which

<sup>1</sup> Free translation from the Portuguese Edition.

numerous groups and individuals are subjected – apart from the importance of preventing, limiting or acting on visible, flagrant, inhuman ways (I am intentionally making a value judgement here) in which some people, or individuals belonging to certain cultures, act against other people or individuals (physical and/or cultural extermination, etc.), it is also important to think about what Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron (1970) called “symbolic violence” – “violence” because it is an imposition; “symbolic” because it is not viewed as an imposition. This is a kind of violence by those who wield different types of socially valued power over all the others who do not have such power and are hence at different and structurally subordinate levels in different societies (according to gender, phenotype, age, physical deficiency, class, cultural belonging, etc.). This structural subordination and non-recognition of the other are often the basis of actions of extermination, genocide, etc.

#### **Discrimination, multiple discrimination, intersectional discrimination and racism**

That large part of humanity which is structurally subordinate in societies is structurally subject to a discrimination and racism that Carmichael and Hamilton (1967) have termed “institutional racism”, which is transversal to the different institutions that constitute different societies (being the basis for making inequalities seem natural) is also one of the reasons for what Nancy Fraser (2000) called a “lack of recognition” of the status of many ‘others’ as equal human beings (whether intra-group or inter-group).

In this sense, becoming familiar *with* and reflecting *upon* the concepts of discrimination, multiple discrimination, intersectional discrimination and racism are fundamental in order to highlight the consequences of certain structural forms of thought when they occur.

#### *Discrimination*

From a semantic point of view, discriminating can mean distinguishing and differentiating, but it can also mean treating an individual or group of people in an unfair manner.

From a scientific point of view: “Discrimination refers to any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference which is based on any ground such as

race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status, and which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by all persons, on an equal footing, of all rights and freedoms. Discrimination is about exclusion and subordination, and it effectively conveys an explicit message of difference and inferiority of the victim” (Makkonen 2002: 4).

Hence, discrimination means developing a type of action that places the ‘other’ at a level of inferiority and, consequently, subalternity. This subalternity can also be aggravated if the discrimination which caused it is rooted not in a difference perceived to be inferior but in multiple differences. For example, being female, Roma, disabled or from an underprivileged class combines four socio-culturally hierarchised differences (within and outside a group) which could place such a woman at an inferior level of subalternity, which means that there is also a gradation within the hierarchised perception of difference (within and outside the group).

#### *Multiple discrimination*

According European Commission Report (2007: 15) “In a historical context, the concept and definition of “Multiple Discrimination” was introduced in the late 1980s and has been explored and the concept developed mainly by sociological and legal scholars.”

For Timo Makkonen (2002: 1), “The idea that people can belong to several disadvantaged groups at the same time, and suffer aggravated and specific forms of discrimination in consequence, was first recognized and termed as ‘multiple’ or ‘intersectional’ discrimination in the late 1980s and in the beginning of the 1990s.”

For Sarah Hallett (2003), Multiple Discrimination describes a situation where discrimination takes place on the basis of several grounds operating separately.

According to this latter definition, each cause of discrimination would be implemented individually, which, from the point of view of discriminatory action, does not seem to make much sense since each variable rarely operates in isolation. One can, however, consider that the social contexts for everyday interaction can cause different individuals to perceive each of

the hierarchised differences they encounter in a different manner, some of these differences intersecting and producing more or less profound discriminatory effects.

In this sense, perhaps it would be more suitable in analytical terms to speak of intersectional discrimination or to use the concepts of multiple discrimination and intersectional discrimination as pertaining to identical realities.

#### *Intersectional discrimination*

In effect, the intersectional analysis is “evolved into an understanding that all grounds of discrimination may interact with each other and produce specific experiences of discrimination” (Makkonen 2002: 9).

The concept of intersectionality seems to present great heuristic value for understanding how the classic and structural categories of discrimination, such as class, gender and ‘race’, operate in everyday life as well as the body, as the physical image that each person projects for others, bearing in mind that these (and other) categories of differentiation produce distinct effects and degrees of discrimination according to the contexts in which social actors move.

Discrimination, multiple discrimination, intersectional discrimination, all give rise to various forms and degrees of everyday subordination that, when articulated with the so-called “structural invariants” (such as class, gender and “race”, which appear socially naturalized and, therefore, are harder to deconstruct), articulate structural, institutionalized subordination with contextual subordination.

#### *Racism in its different logics: Inequality and differentialist*

As one of the most extreme forms of discrimination, racism lies at the heart of the structural subordinations that are the hardest to deconstruct, appearing naturally rooted in different societies, to a greater or lesser degree.

According to Michel Wieviorka (1998), racism consists of characterising a set of humans according to natural attributes, associating intellectual and moral characteristics to these attributes which are applied to each

individual belonging to that set of humans, thereby setting in motion practices of exclusion and inferiority.

A few years before the aforesaid book was published, Michel Wieviorka (1992) reflected theoretically on racism, classifying it according to a logic of inequality and a differentialist logic. The former, rooted in phenotype characteristics, of a biological nature, allowed coexistence with the other but discriminated on the basis of a hierarchised difference, be it through words or through appointments to jobs which structurally place them at lower levels of the social hierarchy. The second logic – a differentialist logic – is rooted in the cultural characteristics of the racial group, segregating them due to their difference, expelling them from spaces for sociability and work occupied by the majority socio-cultural group.

These two logics together constitute racism in its most complete and complex version: the other is classified as being biologically inferior and culturally unworthy of coexisting with the majority socio-biological group. This could give rise to practices of biological or cultural extermination, or spatial and social segregation.

While, scientifically speaking, it is wrong (and useless) to speak of the existence of 'races', the fact that individuals use this terminology socially in everyday situations makes a reflection on "race" and "racism" sociologically relevant, given its implications for the quality of life of a significant part of humanity.

In my view, it is a lack of recognition which often results in looking at others as not yet having achieved the category of human beings, since racism, in its most extreme form (physical extermination), tends to view the 'other' being exterminated as not yet having achieved the condition of being human, i.e. deeming them to be sub-human.

Institutional racism and a lack of recognition of social status (within each socio-cultural group or inter-group) are the basis for the greatest social injustices, resulting in the perpetuation of societies that are profoundly unequal at various levels.

#### *For a public sociology*

As a social scientist committed to a non-ethnocentric perspective of Human Rights, which aims to find common denominators in all cultures

with regard to the meaning of human dignity and respect (Casa-Nova, 2013a), I usually reflect with students (who will go on to be social educators, sociologists, teachers, etc.) that there is nothing which culturally cannot be questioned or subjected to reflection. This includes sacred elements (also the result of human construction). When the notion that cultural and social practices cannot be questioned becomes internalised, this legitimises (whether consciously or unconsciously) much of the cultural, social or other forms of subordination to which most of humanity is inclined, as though this subordination were an unquestionable dogma because it is part of cultural and social difference (such as, for instance, the subordination of women and human beings with non-white phenotypes). Of course, questioning and reflecting on cultural and social dimensions of one's own culture or the culture of others might or might not signify that the students, as professionals, will develop practices with a view to change.

However, as committed social scientists, in the sense of a "public sociology" as defended by Michael Burawoy (2005, 2009), viz a sociology that is a synonym for public discussion and dialogue about the fundamental direction of society, and a "critical public sociology", as defended by Joe Feagin et al (2009), i.e. sociology viewed as a "countersystem", identified with social injustices, we cannot help but engage in this questioning and reflection.

#### *A social intervention founded by professionals in the field*

In my daily life, as a social scientist who is also a teacher, I try to develop a reflexive, critical thought process in students and theoretically grounded actions that, without overlooking the specificities of contexts and processes, are capable of articulating these specificities with a political interpretation of the social order, with a view to promoting the de-institutionalisation of different ingrained subordinations that will be perpetuated if critical thought was not encouraged, coupled with actions aimed at building egalitarian societies from the point of view of legal-formal rights and exercising citizenship.

This means that, in my view, it is essential that any professional intervening socially be capable of interpreting reality and going far beyond prophylactic action and immediate and local situations, understanding that,

behind each situation observed (poverty, marginalisation, etc.) it is important to comprehend the underlying macro-structural causes and that such situations, as a general rule, are no more than the consequences of macro-structural causes beyond the control of individuals, leaving them in situations of extreme social vulnerability.

It is hence important to reflect with students, so that they understand and do not just conform with a subtly impositional norm subordinating certain groups with regard to others (as well as within each group), in order to contribute towards the construction of more humanised societies which are consequently more in keeping with fundamental human rights (Casa-Nova, 2013b).

In order for it to be possible to build processes of *integration for emancipation* and not processes of *integration for subordination and conformism* it is important to have a *political interpretation of the social order* so as to understand the implications of social intervention for the lives of people and groups.

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