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# Recognising and Confronting Racism in Europe



By Felicia A. Henderson (EMCCC 17), Founder, Henderson Advising

**Systemic racism is not only an American problem. The European experience demands a different kind of anti-racist conversation.**

The explosion of blatantly racist posts on social media following England's July 11 loss in the UEFA Euro football finals appeared to catch many observers by surprise. In contrast, the three Black English players who were the primary targets of this vitriolic **hate speech indicated** that they **expected** the racist **backlash**. Indeed, many fans of colour across Europe, including me, watched penalties throughout the tournament hoping players of colour for any nation would not miss because we predicted racist outrage would follow.

One explanation for the different reactions is a divide in the ability to recognise anti-Black racism in Europe. In November 2019 in its second **Being Black in the EU** survey, the European Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) found that 30 percent of people of African descent in Europe experienced race-based harassment and 39 percent felt discriminated against on the basis of race in the five-year period preceding the survey. However, an October 2019 **Eurobarometer survey** measured a decline, as

compared to 2015, in the number of people who believed discrimination on the basis of ethnic origin or skin colour (the term “race” was not used) was common in their country, with 37 percent believing skin colour-based discrimination to be rare or non-existent.

The deep disconnect extends into the workplace and even into the upper echelons of the European business community.

In my work with organisations, I frequently encounter reluctance to investigate or address racism as part of organisational culture diagnoses or equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) initiatives. This reluctance is often expressed with the refrain “We are not the United States.” While meaningful differences do exist between the US and Europe, I have come to understand the reflexive refrain as shorthand for at least three different challenges to recognising and confronting racism in Europe:

- limited knowledge of Europe’s role in colonisation and enslavement
- misapprehension of present-day inequalities in Europe
- adherence to European models of social cohesion and national identity

Examining each of the above challenges allows practitioners to develop strategies for overcoming resistance to including anti-racism work in EDI programmes for European businesses.

Although I use the terms “Europe” and “Europeans” throughout this piece, Europe is no more a monolith than the US. There is significant variability in attitudes between individual European countries and among individuals within each country. In practice, the general strategies discussed here must be adapted to each national context and specific organisation or audience.

### **“We don’t have the same history.”**

Europeans point out that the large-scale enslavement of Africans and their descendants was unique to the Americas, with most European countries prohibiting slavery in their continental territory. This argument appears to suggest that US history creates a unique moral obligation: Europeans supposedly have clean hands, Americans do not.

This implication ignores both the present moral imperative to build inclusive organisational cultures and past European complicity in creating the moral and commercial systems predicated on African inferiority and enslavement.

The number of European countries whose ships, merchants and often crews were involved in trafficking enslaved Africans across the Atlantic often escapes notice. The [Slave Voyages database](#) documents ships flying the flags of at least 16 European powers, including not only British, French and Portuguese flags but also those of the Netherlands, of Prussia and other German states, of certain Italian and Baltic republics, and, to the surprise of many, of Denmark, Norway and Sweden. A [recent Finnish book](#) painstakingly details the involvement of Sweden (and a number of Finns) in “colonial domination” on the Caribbean island of St. Barthélemy and in both the trans-Atlantic and inter-American trades in enslaved Africans.

Additionally, white Europeans benefit from the ideas of [European racial superiority](#) created to legitimise African enslavement.

What we fail or refuse to recognise about our past affects our perceptions today. As INSEAD Professor Zoe Kinias and I wrote in September 2020, research shows that among European *Americans* lack of knowledge about the history of racial oppression [predicts inability](#) to recognise contemporary racism. As this finding is tied to basic cognitive elements of information processing understood to be universal, we expect knowledge gaps in white Europeans to similarly undermine recognition of modern racism in Europe.

### **“We don’t have the same kind of inequality.”**

A second objection to anti-racism work relates to purported differences in how inequality manifests in Europe as compared to the US. This argument is often articulated as either racism is less pronounced in Europe than in the US or race is a less important factor in discrimination than “*insert another dimension of diversity*,” for example gender, class, religion, language or geographical origin.

This suggestion relies on at least two fallacies.

First, the notion that there is either overt, so-called “US-style” racism or no racism is a false dichotomy that ignores the multiple, harmful ways that both interpersonal and systemic racism can affect the lived experiences and professional opportunities of people of African descent. The question is not whether an American racism exists in Europe but whether *racism* exists. Evidence suggests it does.

Second, the argument that other dimensions of diversity are more outcome-determinative than race may reflect a form of denial or deflection. Research indicates that white Americans often do not view themselves as racialised subjects; in other words, they deny any white racial identity. In some circumstances, white Americans claim not to "see" race even when it is obvious that they do. This "inability" to see race is linked to ego defence mechanisms theorised as basic processes for reducing anxiety or internal conflict; we can, therefore, expect that white Europeans experience this same blindness when considering racial inequality.

It may be easier for white Europeans to acknowledge discrimination based on categories that they accept as salient to their own identities, such as religion or national origin.

Focusing solely on eradicating religious or national origin discrimination ignores commonalities between these forms of discrimination and racism as well as the reported experiences of people of African descent. In the *Being Black in the EU* survey, when identifying the specific cause of the race-based discrimination to which they had been subjected, 27 percent of respondents indicated skin colour, 19 percent said ethnic origin or immigrant background, and 5 percent religion. The visibility of skin colour and prevalence of colour-based discrimination even leads in some cases to attempts to lighten skin, a dangerous and globally-problematic practice.

### **"We don't divide people into racial categories."**

A third distinction raised is the difference in approaches to racially identifying data. While in the US, data about individual racial identity is collected in most educational and business settings, such data collection in Europe is infrequent. The difference in practice results in large part from a belief in Europe that racial categorisation is legally prohibited or is harmful.

While the aversion to racially identifying data may be well-intentioned, it often renders EDI practitioners unable to fully assess race-based outcomes in European business: what is not assessed remains unaddressed. Progress requires understanding that EU law does not entirely prohibit the collection of racially identifying data. GDPR Article 9 includes numerous exceptions to the *apparent* prohibition; national laws mimic this framework, though permitted exceptions differ.

Businesses can (and several already do) call on their legal counsel to help design racial data collection practices that fall into the legally permitted exceptions.

In 2018, the FRA called upon member states to “ensure systematic data collection of reliable, valid and comparable equality data, disaggregated by racial and ethnic origin among other protected characteristics” in [FRA Opinion 5](#) stemming from its first *Being Black in the EU* survey. Business leaders can pressure national policymakers to comply with this exhortation so that rigorous data become more plentiful.

Overcoming the belief that official use of racial categories is *harmful* is the more difficult task. This belief is grounded in recent European history as well as important espoused values. The genocides perpetrated during World War II and more recent armed conflicts in Europe drive fear that such data may again be used for nefarious purposes. The EU exhortation mentioned above would suggest that, in weighing the *potential* harm of extreme misuse against the *ongoing* harm of racism, the scale now tips towards measuring and eradicating racial inequality (assuming safeguards are followed).

The values underlying resistance to racial categorisation relate to European models of national identity and social cohesion. France, for example, explicitly embraces universalism, elevating one common “French” identity above all others, including race. National identity is idealised to be accessible to all who share common values, though [surveys indicate](#) that in many European countries place of birth and religion are important defining characteristics. Unwavering adherence to this ideal creates a façade of sameness but prevents measuring the impact of the different treatment to which Black people in Europe are, in fact, subjected.

### ***Contextualising European anti-racism***

Because of the influence of US-based multinationals on their European operations and the demand from stakeholders globally for greater business involvement in social justice, European companies face heightened pressure to address racism. To have the greatest impact on their intended beneficiaries, EDI initiatives, including anti-racist work, must be tailored to the local contexts of inequality. Racism does exist in Europe, and yet it is important to recognise the meaningful ways that “Europe is not the United States.”



Nevertheless, arguments grounded in what I derisively refer to as “comparative oppression” are not simply misguided but in fact serve to **reinforce systemic inequality**. While the reflexive refrain can (and is sometimes intended to) shut down conversation, a thoughtful dialogue about both differences and commonalities – comparative equity – can inform EDI practice on both sides of the Atlantic.

It is essential that European EDI contexts be defined not with a US-centric lens but from the perspective of those who have historically been subjected to marginalisation and discrimination. The FRA opinion mentioned above specifically recommends that national policymakers “consult with representatives of population groups at risk of racial discrimination” in designing data collection measures.

A properly contextualised dialogue must begin with education about the historical roots of racism in Europe, including where possible country-specific details of participation in the slave trade, colonial exploitation and the ideologies that justified them. It must also include potentially uncomfortable discussions of the reality of racial identity in the European context, seeking to shed light on the extent to which European cultural norms and institutions are built around the false idea of a colour-blind Europe where racism does not exist. Practitioners must guide audiences toward a wider understanding of the multiple manifestations of racism and of the complex experiences of people with intersectional identities, so as to challenge the automatic categorisations many Europeans impose when considering inequality. By promoting data collection and by facilitating conversations that promote curiosity instead of complacency, organisations can become genuine agents of change, thereby pushing the societies around them forward.

#### **Find article at**

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/responsibility/recognising-and-confronting-racism-europe>

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