Towards institutionalized anti-racism

RACISM   DEEP TRANSITION   A.I.

The global protests ensuing George Floyd's death have not only condemned racism in general, but specifically its deeply rooted systemic variant. Systemic or institutionalized racism, despite by some being framed as academic jargon, has real consequences and is responsible for structurally mistreating and marginalizing black people for centuries. Its ubiquity, tenacity and invisibility have even made us warry about if we will ever solve it. It seems that the only way to effectively combat racism is by fostering anti-racist socio-cultural, economic and technological structures that are as encompassing, resilient and normalized. A form of institutionalized anti-racism so to say. In this note, we allow ourselves to speculate to what extent we see a form of institutionalized anti-racism being materialized.

Our observations

· In an earlier note we discussed possible precursors for the general increase in moral outrage. (e.g. #Metoo, climate change). Possible explanatory variables that were being considered were increase of discretionary income, secularization, social media and globalization.

· The APM Research Lab presented a study which showed that three times as many black Americans died of the corona virus than white Americans, painfully emphasizing the structural marginalization of Afro-Americans in American society.

· A study in Nature Human Behavior published this year shows that black drivers are more likely to be stopped by the police. Interestingly, the statistics also showed that black drivers were less likely to be stopped at night, as the driver's skin color is harder to recognize by law enforcers.

· The support for Black Lives Matter has gone up from a net support of -5% in 2017 to +28% this year, seeing the biggest increase after the death of George Floyd.

· The Monmouth poll showed that 57% of the Americans believe that the police is more likely to use excessive force on black people than on white, as opposed to 33% who believed that the police is as likely to use excessive force on black and white culprits. Also 3 in 4 believe that racial discrimination is a big problem in the United States.

· Greg Glassman, Crossfit CEO has resigned due to enormous social media backlash after releasing controversial statements regarding the Black Lives Matter movement.

· A few big tech companies have announced that they upend their facial recognition technology. Amazon instituted a one-year moratorium on police use of Rekognition, while Microsoft will only provide access and Microsoft announced that they will refuse to share facial recognition technology with the police

Connecting the dots

The recent global protests, signs of criminal justice reforms and the enactment of anti-racism policies in public life, flirt with the promise of real change for the anti-black racism movement. However, given the long history of broken promises one cannot fully escape the skepticism that these gestures will turn out to be short-lived and result in empty promises as soon as the public eye has moved to the next pubic concern. Hence, Maureen Johnson deems institutionalized anti-racism, i.e. deeper societal structures that oppose racism, as the only way to combat its counterpart. Hence, instead of focusing on the proposed reforms, we will speculate, in the spirit of neo utopian thinking, to what extent the current surge of anti-racism could be attributed to a deep transition towards institutional structures,

Some indications can already be found in the way these protests have evolved over the past decades. From the '60s to the protests following Floyd's death, protests have become more global and diverse. This could indicate that the movement is gaining broader support in civil society and becoming more decentralized, making it harder for the entire movement to become marginalized or taken hostage by violent fractions. The decentralization is further reflected by the absence of a central charismatic leader of the magnitude of a Martin Luther King or Malcolm X. The documentary 'I am not your negro' shows the importance of their moral leadership (and their assassination) in the visibility and representation of the movement. On the other hand, the current absence of a central leader has the advantage of being less vulnerable and also creates the opportunity for a more amorph movement through which the heterogeneity of black identities and corresponding agendas can be represented.

When it comes to representation of black identities in mainstream media, we also see examples that oppose racism in a more nuanced way. Critically acclaimed movies like Moonlight and Dope or popular music artists like Frank Ocean or Childish Gambino have addressed the problems surrounding black hyper-masculinity and the issue of intersectionality, i.e. how the black identity combined with other identities (i.e. gender, sexuality, ethnicity) can result in special forms of discrimination. Black Panther, a $1.4 billion grossing Marvel movie, paints an optimistic afrofuturistic picture while also showing the nuanced positions within the civil rights movement.

In addition to traditional media, the rise of social media has probably even had a bigger impact on giving anti-racism a voice. Under the virtual umbrella of #blacklivesmatter, a vast coalition of activist groups and individuals is able to communicate, organize and create awareness on a global level. Civic journalism allowed the black community to expand on the aforementioned complexity and breadth of black identities and racist experiences. Furthermore, as the video of George Floyd's death exemplified, smartphones and social media created grass roots surveillance. However, the civic scrutiny does not only apply to law enforcement, but also to other organizations in which employees call out tokenism and superficial PC behavior. Furthermore, the presence of social media has also created a real time social forum in which organizations cannot withdraw from the conversation and have to take a stance on the matter. Digitization also supports anti-racism through the broad collection and publication of socio-demographic and socio-economic data. Statistics like disproportionate incarceration numbers, unemployment rates or corona deaths among the black community, have helped in uncovering the painful truth of social inequality along racial lines. As written before, data has a will of its own, as the mere availability of data can help create awareness on latent social injustices and, as the protests have shown, help incite action. With the availability of AI we could even go a step further and directly influence biased decision making. Even though AI systems have shown to be racially biased, AI actually has the potential to make the decision making process surrounding racial related issues more transparent and controllable. This also explains why some tech companies are hesitant to share their facial recognition technologies with law enforcers as long as the required regulation is not in place.

The dissemination and reinforcement of anti-racist values, is not only driven by people but also by corporate structures. On the one hand, we can interpret anti-racist statements (and action) from large commercial companies like Microsoft, Disney and Nike as capitalist cash grabs of a social cause. At the same time, these companies provide a serious platform, cash grab or not, for people who intrinsically and authentically seek social change and who are suddenly able to reach a mass audience.

The emergence of institutionalized anti-racism does not mean that we should become complacent with regards to racism. After all, the existence of anti-racist structures does not automatically mean that racist structures are on the decline. Also, one could even argue, that the structural repulsion of racism could even lead to more subtle and invisible forms of racism such as benevolent prejudice, aversive racism and tokenism that are harder to call out and to deal with. Nevertheless, these potential pitfalls are no reason to abolish this utopia, but as a starting point to realize this speculative future.

Implications

- As part of a larger trend towards moral outrage, we can see similarities with other protest movements. However, this does not necessarily mean that it will resonate as deeply as the black lives matter movement has, as it will depend on how broad (e.g. socio-economic, cultural, political) and deep the marginalization goes, and to what extent the specific movement itself is carried by economic, socio-cultural and technological structures.

- Companies will not be able to hide behind a façade of PC-marketing. Instead, companies will be judged on their track record and past actions.