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Problematising mainstream Spanish antiracism: race, racism and whiteness

Abstract: In Spain, anti-racism is of scarce relevance for public debates; besides, it has mainly been discussed in relation to non-EU migrations until recently, and its historical link with colonialism is generally unacknowledged. Within this context, the article analyses the problematisations of 'race' and 'racism' performed by hegemonic stakeholders in the fields of anti-discrimination, Roma inclusion and immigrant integration policies (public servants, NGOs, experts). The fieldwork materials illustrate that, in this understanding, 'race' is rejected not only from a scientific-biological perspective but also as a social-political category. Also, racism is depoliticised and theorised in a twofold manner: a) as a matter of stereotypes, prejudices and lack of information about the 'Other'; b) as the aggressive acts of explicitly racist individuals/organisations. The structural, historical and institutional dimensions of racism are addressed only as a background context, or even negated by public policies. By not confronting the uneven, material power relations (re)produced by racism, this approach reaffirms 'institutional whiteness' as the underlying perspective of mainstream Spanish anti-racism.

Keywords: race, (anti)racism, institutional racism, whiteness, Spain.

1. Post-racialism in Spain

According to Sayyid (2017), European countries are post-racial in a different way from the United States. In the US, 'race' has been a politically significant category until recently, triggering social struggles, policy interventions and public debates. Conversely, 'the European Union has gone from racism to post-racism without an intervening period of anti-racism' (Sayyid, 2017, p. 20). In this vein, Lentin (2008b) refers to European societies as 'post-racist' rather than 'post-race'. In European contexts, 'race' was banished from public discourse by the aftermath of World War II. Even recent debates on multiculturalism (and its 'failure') were formulated according to the grammar of 'culture', focusing on the ability of minorities to integrate themselves into the national order rather than on the wider power relations conditioning their existence.

However, and despite this discursive rejection, 'race' as a social-political reality has not stopped being effective: rather, 'the silencing of race is at one with the racial markings of the social forces producing that silence' (Golberg, 2006, p. 359). The aim of this paper is to discuss what this silence implies: how are 'race' and 'racism' thought of, spoken or neglected? Which interventions are made possible by specific understandings of these concepts, and which interventions are hampered? I deal with a specific context, the Spanish, which presents significant characteristics. To begin with, the Spanish Empire contributed relevantly to the construction of modern racial categories through the colonisation of America (Quijano, 2000). However, the coloniality of racism is generally not acknowledged in public debates (Azarmandi, 2017). Secondly, and like other Southern European countries, Spain was significantly affected by non-EU 'migration flows' from the 1990s on. In this context, policies aimed at managing the 'cultural diversity' supposed by migration were promoted. It is in relation to non-EU migration that racism has mainly been addressed (Azarmandi, 2017), while the presence of non-white nationals from earlier times such as the Roma, or Black

citizens from the former colonies, has not generally been considered until recently. Thirdly, in Spain, racism prompted public debates only on very punctual occasions. On the one hand, it has mostly been considered as a phenomenon of times past, external to the history of the country. On the other, paradoxically, it has also been addressed as something ‘recent’, interpreted as a negative response to the challenges posed by contemporary migrations. In both cases, it is generally understood as the violent, isolated acts performed by extremist individuals or groups. It is only when such events take place (see, for instance, Calvo Buezas, 1993; SOS Racismo, 2001) that the media pay attention to racism as a public issue. However, anti-racist grass-roots movements that confront this narrative have emerged in recent years, emphasising the link between racism, modernity and the constitution of the Spanish state (see Garcés & Amzian, 2017); it is also thanks to the latter that racism has slightly started to be discussed out of the migration framework.

In sum, Spain presents a conglomerate of significant tensions that are worth investigating; however, few studies have addressed the problematisations of ‘race’ and ‘(anti)racism’ in the Spanish context (see Azarmandi, 2017; Gil-Benumea, 2019; Johansson, 2017). This paper is aimed at contributing to filling this gap. Based on the fieldwork conducted in Madrid and other relevant locations, I focus on the definitions of ‘race’ and ‘racism’ performed by mainstream Spanish actors involved in policies with an ‘anti-racist’ component (public institutions, middle- and large-sized NGOs, experts). Before starting the empirical analysis, I will clarify my theoretical framework and discuss its most significant concepts.

2. Racism, race and whiteness

In the European context, after the defeat of Nazism, the category of 'race' was politically interdicted (Hesse, 2004); its mere use was interpreted as a support for doctrines that recognise the existence of different biological categories of human beings (Möschel, 2010). This understanding was influenced by four declarations on 'Race and Racial Prejudice' published between 1950 and 1967 by UNESCO, an organisation whose anti-racist strategy was mainly based on denying any scientific value to 'race' (Lentin, 2004). This mainstream perspective is particularly focused on ideologically marked criminal acts, committed intentionally by 'extremist' groups or individuals (Hesse, 2004). Thus, racism is confined to the realm of exceptionality — the Nazi aberration — and is conceived as a pathology utterly opposed to democracy and liberalism. In a 'softer' and more psychology-based approach, racism is reduced to a matter of false beliefs, misleading representations, stereotypes or prejudices that provoke discriminatory actions. Facing this scenario, the 'solutions' proposed by authorities are generally twofold: on the one side, a policy agenda based on information exchange, awareness-raising and education is promoted (Maeso, 2015). On the other, the anti-racist struggle is entrusted to the legal system — especially criminal law — and courts are expected to provide the victims with remedies, compensations and other forms of redress, in order to reestablish the 'normality' that has been interrupted by the racist act (Fitzpatrick, 1990, pp. 253).

This paper adopts quite a different understanding of racism. To start with, it links the emergence of racism to the colonial expansion of the modern period and the subsequent birth of European nation-states. The first racial classifications were established during the colonization of 'America', beginning with the designation of native populations as 'Indians' and its corresponding opposites: 'Spanish', 'Portuguese', and later, 'Europeans' (Quijano, 2000). According to this approach, racism is a *political project* (Lentin, 2004, p. 427), a

politics (in a Schmittean sense) aimed to tame ‘the antagonism at the heart of the distinction between Europeanness and non-Europeanness’ (Sayyid, 2017, p. 21). Also, the *coloniality* of racism should be stressed, intended not only as a matter of colonial origin (see Fanon, 1967) but, more broadly, as the persistence of the colonial matrix of power, which goes beyond the historical experience of territorial colonialism and continues to the present day (Maldonado, 2007).

Historically speaking, racism produced race ‘through the colonial designations of Europeanness and non-Europeanness, in various assemblages of social, economic, ecological, historical and corporeal life’ (Hesse, 2007, p. 646). From very early times, racism resorted to the inferioritisation of a wide variety of attributes such as skin colour, ethnicity, culture, religion or belief, origin, way of being, living, feeling, knowing (Grosfoguel 2016; Lentin 2008a). Thus, far from manifesting only the (supposed) interrelationship between genotype and phenotype, the idea of race refers to ‘the set of views, dispositions, and predilections concerning culture, or more accurately of culture tied to colour, of being to body, of “blood” to behaviour’ (Goldberg, 2006, p. 349). Race is a ‘discursive construct’, a ‘floating’ or ‘sliding signifier’ (Hall, 1997, pp. 5-6) used to express, in different ways according to specific contexts and periods, the uneven relationship between ‘Europeanness’ and ‘non-Europeanness’.

Mainstream conceptions of racism tend to miss a crucial point: its institutional/structural dimension, an aspect highlighted initially by Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael) and Charles V. Hamilton in *Black Power. The Politics of Liberation* (1967). Analysing the US context, the authors differentiated between an explicit facet of racism — *overt racism* — and a more invisible, impersonal one — *covert racism*. While the first, consisting of ostensibly violent

acts, is publicly condemned, the second 'originates in the operation of established and respected forces in the society' (Ture & Hamilton, 1992, p. 3) and usually goes unnoticed. However, it is the latter that more decisively contributes to the social, economic and cultural domination of Black (and, by extension, non-white) people. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of racism, emphasising the fact that racist practices are neither necessarily transparent nor intentional — sometimes they are even impersonal. The (re)production of racism is supported by a thick grid of discursive and non-discursive practices, *habitus*, ideologies (both explicit and embodied), apparatuses, knowledge(s), assemblages of human and non-human elements. According to this understanding, racism 'is characterized by the social routinization and institutionalization of regulatory, administrative power (e.g. laws, rules, policies, discipline, precepts) exercised by Europeanized ("white") assemblages over non-Europeanized ("non-white") assemblages as if this was a normal, inviolable or natural social arrangement of races' (Hesse, 2007, p. 656).

To conclude, I address whiteness, defined by Yancy as 'an ensemble of power relations that places whites in positions of advantage and power [...] whiteness remains a synergistic system of transversal relationships of privileges, norms, rights, modes of self-perception and the perception of others, unquestioned presumptions, deceptions, beliefs, "truths", behaviors, advantages, modes of comportment, and sites of power and hegemony that benefit whites individually and institutionally' (Yancy, 2004, pp. 6 and 8). Interestingly, Ahmed (2007) conceives whiteness as an 'orientation' towards things that shapes bodies, institutions and, more generally, the social reality, making some spaces of power more comfortable for certain bodies than for others. In this sense, she speaks of 'institutional whiteness' (Ahmed, 2007) as the 'given' state of things. Thus, on the one side, being classified as a white person implies occupying the privileged side of the racist power relation¹; on the other, hegemonic spaces of

power, even if traversed by non-white bodies, are generally made ‘on a white scale’. In this sense, the concept of ‘white supremacy’ has not necessarily to do with organisations such as the KKK or Nazi groups, but rather it is a more specific way to express the racist power relations affecting Western societies (see Beliso-De Jesús & Pierre, 2019). Although this approach may suggest that whiteness is a mere synonym for ‘racism’, it has the advantage of concretely referring to which categories of people are favoured by racist power relations — and, conversely, which ones are damaged. As I will argue in the empirical section, it is not irrelevant whether racism is condemned in general and abstract terms or it is directly related to whiteness: while the first action may imply a rhetorical distancing from racism that does not necessarily lead to concrete actions, the second is more likely to visibilise uneven power relations to which no one is external.

3. Contextualisation and methodology

So far, most Spanish politicians have not perceived racism as a public issue requiring specific interventions (see Fundamental Rights Agency, 2012, p. 10); accordingly, anti-racism does not exist as a specific area within official policies. However, a vaguely ‘anti-racist’ field may be inferred to exist at the intersection of different political spaces that, to different extents, somewhat have an ‘anti-racist’ component. It is the case of the anti-discrimination framework, which was established following the approval of the EU ‘Racial Equality Directive’ (2000/43/E) and contains specific provisions regarding ethnic and racial discrimination. Immigrant integration policies address anti-racism too: for example, the Ministry General Secretariat for Immigration and Emigration was responsible for drafting a ‘Comprehensive strategy against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and other related forms of intolerance’ in 2011, under the government of the Socialist Party; besides, consultative

platforms exist under this umbrella that also intervene in (the few) debates on this issue. Finally, and under the pressure of Roma organisations, the policies implemented in the context of the *EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies* have recently started to consider the struggle against anti-gypsyism as a due task. According to this fieldwork configuration, the materials discussed in this article proceed from the following sources:

- written documents (institutional statements, reports, handbooks, surveys, meeting minutes, policy programmes, brochures) mostly related to Spanish anti-discrimination, Roma inclusion and immigrant integration policies, selected according to their relevance and representativeness of mainstream discourses. The time range covers approximately until 2018;

- observations of public interventions, events (both online and offline) and institutional spaces related to the policies above;

- thirty-eight interviews conducted in Madrid and other Spanish locations, between January and April 2019 and in October 2019. The actors interviewed have been classified in the following way:

- a) Non-mainstream anti-racism actors (five interviews): organisations/activists who disapprove official policies and their understanding of racism. Given the focus of this paper on mainstream anti-racism, I have not directly resorted to these conversations; however, they have helped me achieve a more comprehensive perspective on the anti-racist debates taking place in Spain;

- b) Mainstream anti-racism actors (fifteen interviews): medium- and large-sized NGOs, foundations, organisations participating in official anti-discrimination, Roma inclusion and immigrant integration policy frameworks. They generally receive public funds of different types and are involved in policy-making through consultative platforms and other types of

organisms, such as the ‘Council for the Elimination of Racial or Ethnic Discrimination’ (an equality body established according to the Racial Equality Directive), its ‘Assistance Service to Victims of Racial or Ethnic Discrimination’, the ‘State Council of the Roma People’ or the ‘Forum for the Social Integration of Immigrants’. On several occasions, the same organisations active in immigrant integration or Roma inclusion also participated in the anti-discrimination framework. Most of my interlocutors coming from NGOs were also supportive of ‘progressive’ statements, sympathetic to the political left (considered more engaged in Equality and Non-Discrimination policies) and to the Socialist Party, which had been governing Spain since June 2018, after eight years of conservative governments;

c) Institutional actors (eleven interviews): public servants (or similars) involved in policymaking in the aforementioned fields at state, regional and local level;

d) Representatives of expert knowledge (five interviews): publicly recognised experts, scholars, consulting services, stakeholders involved in the drafting of plans, strategies, policy assessments, surveys;

e) Legal actors (two interviews): lawyers, judges.

The interviewees represent a significant part of the universe under inquiry, which is not particularly extensive. Besides, there is a certain ‘interchangeability’ between the ‘political’ and the ‘non-governmental’ sphere: thus, current ‘experts’ could have previously been institutional stakeholders, NGO leaders could have previously been into politics or vice versa. It is, therefore, a tentative classification, based on what I considered to be the primary characterisation of each actor during the fieldwork period. Finally, I have transcribed and analysed all the interviews and classified the discourse fragments according to different thematic nodes, helped by a qualitative data processing software.

4. ‘Race is not a thing’

During the negotiation of the Race Equality Directive, EU member states reached an agreement to include the following statement: ‘The European Union rejects theories which attempt to determine the existence of separate human races. The use of the term “racial origin” in this Directive does not imply an acceptance of such theories’ (Council of the European Union, 2000, pp. 22). Accordingly, some member states did not even mention ‘race’ in their transposition laws or added nuances and footnotes (Guiraudon, 2009). In the Spanish transposition law (62/2003), the expression ‘racial or ethnic origin’ was replicated without any explanation; however, this was mainly due to the inattentiveness of José María Aznar’s conservative government, accused of doing a ‘poor cut and paste job’ (Guiraudon, 2009, p. 537) by scholars and civil society organisations. Indeed, a more profound analysis illustrates that Spanish actors are very cautious with using the word ‘race’ (see also Azarmandi, 2017; Flores, 2015; Gil-Benumea, 2019; Johansson, 2017). For example, an evaluation report of the Comprehensive Strategy against racism claimed:

The use of the word ‘race’ is scientifically incorrect and less and less acceptable. Even if we copy that term, it does not imply that we agree with its use. We understand that we should use national origin, culture or skin colour. All of that, without detriment to using the term racism, which is perfectly acceptable (Secretaría General de Inmigración y Emigración, 2015, p. 114).

In a similar vein, a handbook addressed to public servants, aimed at achieving more effective equality policies, stated:

Even though the European Union does not have an official definition of ‘racial or ethnic origin’, it usually implies belonging to a minority group which shares common features such as language, culture,

geographic origin, belief, etc. When speaking of this type of discrimination, it would be preferable to avoid the term 'race' given that, although it is commonly used to refer to groups with a different racial or ethnic origin, it currently has no taxonomic value and is applied only to domestic animals (Ministerio de Sanidad, 2014, p. 37).

Although recognising that, in a colloquial sense, the word 'race' is sometimes used, the statements above suggest its substitution for more 'correct' terms. However, while referring to a biological conception of race, they do not even consider race as a social-political construction affecting material power relations.

The interviews with mainstream anti-racist actors point to similar trends: they generally avoided the word 'race' and preferred less compromising expressions such as 'migrants' or 'immigrants', categories indicating nationality ('Chinese', 'Spanish', 'Moroccan') or ethnicity. To a lesser extent, indications of geographical origin ('Maghrebi', 'Latin American' and, on fewer occasions, 'Afrodescendant') or religious belonging ('Muslim', 'Jewish') were also used. I am aware that categories based on nationality, origin, ethnicity or religion do not escape from racialisation: however, what is relevant is that my interlocutors used them as 'least bad solutions', attempting to avoid more explicitly charged terminologies. Accordingly, the term 'race' appeared sporadically², and mainly in a colloquial sense. Whenever a more analytical reflection was done, it was to derogate the utility of such a term. For example, this is how a member of the 'Council for the Elimination of Racial or Ethnic Discrimination' criticised the previous name of this body ('Council for the Promotion of Equality and the Non Discrimination of People on the Grounds of Racial or Ethnic Origin'):

Can anybody explain to me what racial origin is? If race is not a thing, then what is racial origin? Is there anything more racist than the name 'racial origin'? Race is not a thing; racism is. Race is not a thing;

racial discrimination is (interview with a member of the Council for the Elimination of Racial or Ethnic Discrimination, 1/3/2019)³.

In a similar vein, a representative of expert knowledge explained racism in the following way — interestingly, she took for granted that I shared her views on racial categories:

In social psychology, racism is basically linked to the idea of prejudice; that is, a negative attitude towards a social category based on race. As for the race issue, you know better than anyone, don't you? Race in itself is a very controversial concept [...] Even though some approaches resort to this term, "ethnic prejudice" is mostly used at the present day, acknowledging that minorities are not different races (interview with a representative of expert knowledge, 4/10/2019).

Other racially charged words also were used infrequently: for example, 'Black' was mostly mentioned in a colloquial sense, or with the aim of manifesting distance from its use. The director of a renown equality body at the local level went even further, rejecting not only 'racial or ethnic origin', but also much more nuanced expressions such as 'Afrodescendants' (interview with a local institution, 4/3/2019). Interestingly, the term 'white' appeared even less frequently, and when it did, it was generally criticised for being useless in analytical or political terms. Finally, the expression 'whiteness' was never mentioned — nor do I know if mainstream actors were aware of this category.

In sum, the rejection of racial categories is indicative of an anti-racist strategy aimed at discrediting biological conceptions of race. However, 'officially negating race does little to remove its consequences' (Lentin, 2008a, p. 497). It is questionable that the mere criticism of racial categories contributes effectively to the dismantling of racist power relations, nor does it prevent race from being 'the unspoken subtext' (Goldberg, 2006, p. 335) of many policies. Besides, it is striking that most mainstream actors did not even consider that expressions such

as ‘race’ or ‘white’, intended as political categories, could be used in a different manner, as a way to visibilise the differential privileges granted by racism to some categories of people (while inferioritising others). In the theoretical section, I have argued that it is not irrelevant whether racism is condemned in abstract terms or it is related to uneven power relations. From this point of view, the absence of whiteness is significant.

5. Problematisations of racism

As discussed in previous sections, mainstream narratives understand racism as a matter of stereotypes and prejudices rooted in lack of knowledge of the Other or, alternatively, as a pathological, violent inclination of extremist individuals or groups. Both narratives have emerged consistently from the interviews, although the first has been detected more frequently. To a lesser extent, a third narrative was also found, pointing to a somewhat ‘structural’, ‘historical’ and, on fewer occasions, ‘institutional’ component of racism, although these dimensions were referred to in quite an indefinite way. On the other side, some actors engaged expressly in denying the existence of institutional racism. I now consider each of these discourses in-depth.

5.1 Racism as a matter of stereotypes and prejudices

According to this discourse, racism is mainly a matter of stereotypes and prejudices, originated in lack of knowledge of the Other and their culture, history or traditions. Here, racist discriminatory practices appear as the extreme consequence of the ‘subtle prejudices’ (Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995) and ‘ambivalent attitudes’ (Fernández et al., 2015, pp. 10) latent within individuals — including progressive individuals, often unaware of their

‘unconscious biases’ (Tate and Page, 2018). However, such attitudes can be countered by providing better information, fostering intercultural interactions and carrying out psycho-pedagogical interventions. This narrative is consistent with the public and written discourse of institutions, experts and mainstream NGOs and has occupied a central place across the different types of mainstream actors interviewed. I now consider some examples; in the first, a public servant involved in the making of Roma inclusion policies claimed:

In my opinion, it is a very important challenge to combat the discrimination occurring in Spain against Roma residents, which is also related to ignorance of their history, the circumstances they had to face throughout history... well, there are many stereotypes (interview with public administration, 11/2/2019).

According to this view, ignorance, stereotypes and prejudices appear as the first step towards discriminatory practices. However, the racist discriminatory act is not a necessary result of stereotypes and prejudices; sometimes, the latter may generate unfair social representations without triggering concrete actions. This is, for example, the more nuanced way in which a handbook published by the Regional Government of Andalusia defines racist ‘rumours’:

Rumours are related to ignorance and fear. Most rumours about immigrants are based on fear of what is ‘foreign’, fear of the unknown; unfortunately, they end-up generating more distance from the autochthonous community. This situation, in turn, precludes mutual knowledge and the overcoming of fears and prejudices (Junta de Andalucía, 2015, p. 4).

Here, lack of information and fears are not directly related to racist conducts, but rather to a dynamic of ‘mutual distrust’ between immigrants and nationals. In other instances, this conceptual framework is used even to *negate* or *downplay* the relevance of racism, such in the following excerpt, proceeding from a public servant involved in anti-discrimination and Roma inclusion policies:

Well, let us see ... there is racism ... but not so much as we are told [...] Of course, cases are appearing in the press, such as a lynching against a Roma family in a town ... but I think we have made good progress, and most of all, we have to work on stereotypes [...] According to studies done, people claim to have problems with the Roma or migrants only in a few cases. Most cases are stereotypes (interview with public administration, 14/3/2019).

The narrative above does not negate the existence of racist acts; however, it presents them as an exception, an echo of the past. In this view, stereotypes are certainly an issue, but they do not automatically turn into discriminatory practices.

Another example of racism downplaying is the annual survey ‘Evolution of racism, xenophobia and other forms of intolerance in Spain’, conducted by a governmental body called the Spanish Observatory on Racism and Xenophobia (OBERAXE) since 2007 and possibly one of the most influential studies on this terrain. Although arguing that intolerant attitudes feed on stereotypes and prejudices, the 2015 edition observes the ‘practical absence of racist or xenophobic incidents’ in recent years (Fernández et al., 2015, p. 8). Later, the study differentiates between ‘racism’ — intended as an overt supremacist ideology — and a more nuanced ‘xenophobia’ — defined as a fear that the economic and labour interests of nationals can be damaged by immigration (Fernández et al., 2015, p. 31). In this view, the ‘subtle’ prejudices of Spanish citizens are presented as ‘ambivalences’ or ‘contradictions in the people’s attitudes’ (Fernández et al., 2015, p. 10) that most times do not get to trigger racist behaviours.

As it can be observed, this first narrative presents some nuances: sometimes it does not even mention ‘racism’ expressly, preferring more cautious terms like ‘discrimination’, ‘rumours’ or

‘prejudices’; sometimes it does, but reserving ‘racism’ only for the harshest cases. However, all these variants share a linear, unidirectional understanding of the relationship between cognitions, attitudes and conducts. Also, they depict racism — or whatever they call it — as a psychological phenomenon internal to the individual; although some actors recognise that racism can be conditioned by pre-existing social-historical-political factors, these are usually relegated to the background, as contextual elements. Discriminatory practices not necessarily depending on the pre-existence of racist prejudices, or happening at a more profound, structural level, are ultimately not acknowledged by this narrative. Besides, the knowledge of racism that is legitimated is generally based on the perceptions of the ‘population’ or ‘citizenship’ — mostly white people in the Spanish context — rather than on its effects⁴. In order to be consistent, this narrative needs to bypass the experiences of people who suffer racism in the first person, for whom racism is hardly reducible to a stereotype.

5.2 Racism as an aberration

This narrative is focused on the ideological features of racist practice rather than on its psychological dimension: it deals with the exceptional actions of individuals (or groups) marked by a pathological hatred against the Other. Violent manifestations of racism are approached from a legal perspective, especially appealing to criminal law. Called by Maeso (2018) ‘the narrative of the “true racist”’, this discourse ‘confines racism in contemporary Europe to residual instances and cases that are separated from the normalcy of democratic regimes [...] There is confidence in the law’s regulation and capacity for redress in *cases* of discrimination’ (Maeso, 2018, p. 12). The reference to extremist violence has emerged transversally to the different types of hegemonic actors; also, concern about the recent rise of the far-right, anti-immigrant Vox party (see Jones, 2019) was raised by many.

When approached from this perspective, racism is described in harsh, derogatory terms; an attitude of moral rejection is adopted and citizens are invited to ‘struggle against the *scourge* of intolerance and, in its most *extreme* form, discrimination, racism and xenophobia’⁵ (Gobierno de España, 2011, pp. 5-6), to ‘eradicate this *scourge*’ (Congreso de los Diputados, 2016, p. 17), ‘this problem which is a *true cancer*, a “*malignant tumour*”’ (Cachón, 2011, p. 28). Within this aggressive rhetoric, the effectiveness of anti-racism appears to be directly proportional to the condemnatory fervour. Another significant example is the 2016 edition of the ‘Raxen Report’, published by the ‘Movement against Intolerance’ and mainly addressed to hate crimes. This document portrays an emergency in which ‘hate’ and ‘intolerance’ are overwhelming: thus, priority is given to the legal prosecution of nazi and neo-fascist gangs — although ‘radical leftists’ are negatively depicted too. Institutions are blamed for their ‘laziness’ and lack of action, but at the same time, they are praised when sending ‘tolerant’ and ‘inclusive’ messages to the citizenship — speeches by the Spanish King, Angela Merkel, Pope Francis or François Hollande are positively highlighted (Movimiento contra la Intolerancia, 2016). Similarly, a representative of a very relevant NGO stated:

Racism, understood as it should, as an ‘ism’, a cosmovision [...], as a doctrine, there is just a little here [in Spain], very little [...] However, there are people, groups, organisations, behaviours, very extreme and polarised conducts, mainly based on ideological intolerance, or racial and xenophobic intolerance, that have led us to confirm the existence of a number of aggressions and deaths (interview with an NGO member, 1/3/2019).

This problematisation leads to an overvaluation of overt racism and, correspondingly, an undervaluation of its covert forms. Racism, thus, is presented as ‘an aberration rather than an embedded aspect of western state structures’ (Lentin, 2008b, p. 314). However, this view

should not be considered as incompatible with the first discourse analysed; indeed, both narratives have often emerged simultaneously during the interviews, formulated by the same interlocutors. In fact, the ‘aberrant’ acts of ‘true racists’ can be interpreted as the ‘maximum level’ of racism, the highest degree of prejudice, its ideologically overloaded version. Thus, the contradiction is only apparent. Discussing the depiction of Native Americans by Western colonisers, Hall takes up the Foucauldian concept of ‘system of dispersion’, used by the French philosopher to indicate opposing discourses that are ‘systematically related’ (1996, p. 214) and work in tandem, reinforcing each other. Accordingly, the switch from one anti-racist narrative to another by mainstream anti-racist actors can be interpreted in these terms. Besides, both discourses draw on an individualist approach to racism: to which *variant* will a person be ascribed is basically a matter of degree.

5.3 Institutional racism (and its denial)

In her analysis of mainstream Finnish antiracism, which sheds very similar *results* to mine, Seikkula (2019, p. 104) observes that ‘the difficulty of addressing systemic practices is also characteristic of the meagre attempts to discuss structural racism, which is discussed infrequently’. Also, she claims that these attempts do not entail ‘a recognition of concrete practices or an encouragement for action against them’ (Seikkula, 2019, p. 104). Likewise, mainstream Spanish anti-racism is extremely cautious with this issue. To my knowledge, the only official documents which expressly refer to discriminatory practices happening within institutional contexts — without naming institutional racism, however — are the survey ‘Perception of discrimination based on racial or ethnic origin by potential victims’ (see Consejo para la Promoción de la Igualdad de Trato y No Discriminación de las Personas por el Origen Racial o Étnico, 2011) and the annual report of its ‘Assistance Service to Victims of

Racial or Ethnic Discrimination’ (see Servicio de Asistencia y Orientación a Víctimas de Discriminación Racial o Étnica, 2017). In the more informal context of the interviews, some actors from mainstream NGO related racism to certain historical-structural conditions. However, the references were vague and circumstantial and played a marginal role within their general discourse. Besides, the fact that ‘institutional’ or ‘structural’ contexts such as school, housing or labour market were mentioned did not imply their recognition as having a major role for the reproduction of racism; rather, they were considered as broader social contexts in which *individual* discriminatory practices could take place. This unacknowledgement was also reflected in the use of the language: it could be recognised that racialised pupils faced structural disadvantages in education, but racism did not appear as a key factor; also, ‘school concentration’ was discussed, but racial segregation was denied (interview with public administration, 11/2/2019). Similarly, some migrants and Roma populations were recognised to be living in ‘slums’ or in conditions of ‘substandard housing’, but the existence of ‘housing segregation’ was questioned (interview with an NGO member, 7/2/2019). A problem of ‘employability’ was deemed to exist among racialised people, but it was interpreted as a cultural predisposition, thus shifting the problem onto their shoulders instead of pointing to the racial segmentation of the workforce (interview with public administration, 14/3/2019). In short, even if structural dimensions were mentioned, they were generally connected to the narrative of ‘vulnerable groups’ rather than to racism per se (see also Maeso & Cavia, 2014).

In few instances, ‘institutional racism’ or ‘institutional discrimination’ were mentioned by members of mainstream NGOs; this was especially the case of those working in assistance services to victims of discrimination, who often had first-hand contact with such situations. However, the category ‘institutional racism’ was mentioned only in verbal discourse: neither

was it used in official publications by their organisations, nor did it reflect their official viewpoints. This ambivalence, especially in the case of smaller NGOs, has been explained by Lentin in the following terms: ‘While their internal discourse may be a radical one, they are forced to maintain a neutral political *stance* in the interests of retaining their much-needed funding’ (2008b, p. 317). However, the notion of institutional racism/discrimination adopted was generally interpreted narrowly, as discriminatory practices performed by individuals *working within institutions*. While the definition of institutional racism provided by Ture and Hamilton had some ‘strong’ nuances — it pointed to the institutional/structural logics of racism *itself*, as a system of power — the understanding of institutional racism later adopted in other contexts pointed to a ‘weaker’ interpretation (Hesse, 2004; Sayyid, 2017), as the sum of ‘individual’ racist acts occurred in the context of public administration. This seems to be the case for my interviewees. Besides, the seldom references to institutional racism found between mainstream actors tended to diminish as their status increased: in particular, public servants, representatives of expert knowledge or legal actors did not resort to this category. What is more: some of them expressly mentioned it with derogatory intentions. For example, an expert involved in policymaking stated:

Each time I heard ‘institutional discrimination’ during the meetings of [name of a participatory platform integrated by members of public administration and NGOs] I was dumbfounded! [...] Institutional discrimination, well... ‘The public administration discriminates’, well... Does the administration discriminate, or is it the people who work in the administration? It is a totally different thing! [...] Because institutional discrimination exists... in some cases. However, in most cases, it is specific individuals who discriminate, people who work in the administration and *discriminate* other people, but that is not institutional discrimination! It is not the whole institution discriminating! (interview with an expert involved in the anti-discrimination policy framework, 14/1/2019)

Another, sadder example comes from Madrid: there, on 15 March 2018, the Senegalese migrant Mame Mbaye died of a heart attack while escaping from a police raid against ‘illegal’ street vendors (see BBC News, 2018). After the event, various activists denounced the daily violence suffered by Black street vendors and spoke of ‘institutional racism’ in a broad, political sense — between them were Malick Gueye, spokesperson for the Street Vendors Union, and Rommy Arce, a local councillor with a migrant background. However, they were denounced by the police as slanderers (Infolibre.es, 2018). While Manuela Carmena, mayor of Madrid, praised the ‘correct management’ of the situation by the police and did not defend her councillor (El Plural.com, 2018), the ‘Observatory against Racism and Intolerance’ of the Autonomous Community of Madrid issued a public statement defending the police, condemning the protests following Mame Mbaye’s death and disregarding the demands put forward by street vendors and anti-racist movements (Europa Press, 2018). The latter organism was launched in 1998, six years before OBERAXE was established. *However*, despite its long trajectory, little information could be found on its activities; in recent years, it has not been particularly active, save for occasional declarations, international anniversaries or other highly symbolic activities. However, the Observatory felt compelled to intervene in this discussion, not to ask for a more in-depth investigation of the events but to deny the existence of institutional racism⁶. This example is indicative of a more general tendency: when concrete racist situations emerge that are not understandable according to the individualistic mainstream paradigm, the condemnatory fervour against the ‘scourge’ of racism is often replaced by self-absolving attitudes aimed to disregard its concrete manifestations and to undermine the ‘exaggerations’ of those who ‘call everything institutional racism’ (interview with an expert about the events of Madrid, 7/3/2019). It is especially the case when the behaviour of public institutions is put into question.

6. Conclusion

This article aimed to investigate how ‘race’ and ‘racism’ are understood by mainstream Spanish anti-racist *actors*. The empirical analysis confirms the general observations developed in the context section and points to similar trends to other studies done in the Spanish context (see Azarmandi, 2017; Gil-Benumea, 2019; Johansson, 2017).

First of all, the notion of race was questioned categorically, resorting to the classical UNESCO standpoint and therefore arguing its scientific and biologic invalidity. Mainstream actors did not attend to the historical, social and political components of ‘race’, nor did they acknowledge the existence of counter-hegemonic approaches to this discussion. Particularly striking, in this context, was the lack of reflection on whiteness. This contrasts with the fact that anti-racist and racialised grass-roots movements, in recent years, have increasingly politicised the debate on racism (see Garcés & Amzian, 2017), visibilising *institutional* racism — as in the last case discussed — and problematising ‘race’ and ‘whiteness’ not merely as fake ideological concepts, but rather as painful realities experimented on a daily basis.

Secondly, in this hegemonic framework, the conception of racism fluctuates between two complementary poles: on the one side, it is downplayed to a matter of stereotypes and prejudices, rooted in fears and lack of knowledge; on the other, it is equated to the aberrant, ideologically charged acts performed by extremist people or groups. While, in the former narrative, racism is conceived as a psychological phenomenon, external to the national history and consubstantial with the human being, in the latter, it is considered as a pathological deviation to be countered by criminal law. These narratives are not mutually exclusive, but rather reinforcing; not by chance, they often coexist within the same actors. To a lesser degree, some interlocutors vaguely referred to the existence of underlying historical-contexts, intended as background elements for possible discriminatory practices; a minority — usually

NGO members giving their personal opinion — even spoke of institutional racism/discrimination, although understanding it in a weak sense, as discriminatory practices happening within public administration. However, this third narrative did not occupy a significant role within their discourse, nor was it relevant to the public discourse of their organisations. What is more: other mainstream actors — especially institutional ones — expressly minimised the relevance of institutional racism/discrimination or even denied it. To analyse how this denial works ‘into action’, I have also discussed a tragic event, illustrating how public discussions launched by grass-roots movements tend to be disregarded or even attacked by hegemonic ‘anti-racist’ actors.

In sum: the demonisation of racism as an aberrant ideology or, alternatively, its downplaying to a matter of personal stereotypes or prejudices, hinder its understanding as the result of more comprehensive socio-historical logics and hamper its recognition as something ‘ordinary’ and ‘practical’, even impersonal, reproduced through assemblages of practices. Besides, the cases discussed point to the non-performative character of anti-racist declarations (Ahmed, 2004): in the context of a structurally racist society, to publicly declare one’s anti-racist wishes is not sufficient to dismantle the uneven power relations determined by racism; sometimes, such declarations might even work as a way not to address them. In the Spanish context, this situation is worsened by both the scarce relevance of racism for public debate and the abstract character of many anti-racist statements. In particular, the moral condemnation of racial categories does not prevent them from being fully operative at a practical level; one of its consequences being the unquestioned reproduction of institutional whiteness, which so pervasively traverses the spaces of public policies. If white privilege is not named, let alone recognised, it will be inevitably left untouched.

Notes

1. As a white person, I have not been external to such power relations during the fieldwork.
2. During the interviews, I tried to adopt a 'neutral' language so that my interlocutors could feel comfortable. I generally avoided the use of strongly connotated words such as 'race' or 'whiteness' and paid attention to their use of the language. However, if the conversation led to it, I sometimes asked more direct questions.
3. In order to ensure anonymity, I have randomly altered the gender of my interlocutors and the date of the interviews.
4. To my knowledge, the only official study addressing racism from the perspective of its potential victims, in the Spanish context, is 'Perception of discrimination based on racial or ethnic origin by potential victims', published by the State Council for the Elimination of Racial or Ethnic Discrimination.
5. The italics within the following quotations are mine.
6. Also, as a subordinate organism to the conservative government of Madrid's region, the Observatory was possibly used instrumentally, in order to attack the progressive coalition governing the capital. Hence, the criticisms pointing at the 'tardive' defence of the police by Madrid's mayor (Europa Press, 2018).

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