

Institutionalised and Ideological Racism in the French Labour Market

Written by Jodie Bradshaw

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“[H]ow far differences of race [...] are going to be made, hereafter, the basis of denying to over half the world the right of sharing [...] the opportunities and privileges of modern civilization” (Du Bois, 1970, 125). As racialised physical differences do not inherently result in race-based social hierarchies in modern labour markets, numerous explanations have emerged for the variable entrenchment of such hierarchies. Among them are neoclassical models, which explain race-based discrimination as resulting from individuals’ positive taste for discrimination (Becker, 2010) or from the imperfect information available to economic agents (Arrow, 1972). However, subsequent scholars have expressed concerns that treating racism as stemming from the misapprehension of information risks “relegating questions of race to the individualised domain of ignorance and irrational prejudice” (Anievas et al., 2014, 9). Therefore, existing research can expand its explanatory power by also accounting for the institutional and ideological underpinnings of race-based social hierarchies.

As scholars such as Frymer have argued that “institutions [...] shape politics in ways that cannot simply be explained through ideology” (2016, 359), this essay seeks to evaluate the impact of institutionalised racism and ideological racism, respectively, in the modern French labour market. This is a significant line of enquiry as the causes we attribute to social hierarchies shape the correctives we advance and their effectiveness. To examine this, the essay must first put forward evidence that racial hierarchies exist in the French labour market. In the following section, an overview of the institutionalist argument will be presented, alongside evidence of institutionalised racism in the French labour market. This will be followed by an outline of institutional solutions proposed to abate these hierarchies. This essay will then demonstrate that institutional reforms have limited utility while the ideologies of white racial framing and colour-blind racism continue to occupy dominant positions in French public discourse. This informs the essay’s conclusion that, due to institutionalised racism’s entanglement with hierarchical ideologies, institutional solutions cannot be successful until an ideological shift is undertaken. In turn, while these factors’ interdependence means that their influence cannot be definitively evaluated in isolation, ideological explanations for racial hierarchies in the French labour market appear to have greater weight.

Racial Hierarchies in the French Labour Market

Social hierarchies can be measured by the inequalities that they create, which are reflected in differential access to power and treatment (Clark et al., 2017). Race constitutes an “opportunity-shaping” identity (Mosse, 2018, 433). One of the forms this takes is in the stratification of the labour market so that racialised groups have unequal access to employment opportunities and wages (Arestis et al., 2014). Numerous studies have shown that in France, individuals experience economic marginalisation and exclusion as a result “of their perceived or presumed race based on their skin color” (Léonard, 2014, 78). However, because of legislation prohibiting the collection of state-level data on racialised minorities in France (Commission Nationale de l’Informatique et des Libertés, 1978, 10), these groups are statistically invisible. This makes it difficult to retrieve “data on the systemic nature of racism and discrimination” (Beaman, 2021, 106). To work around this, scholars have had to make inferences based on implicit racialised differentiations practised in French society. For instance, field experiments testing job applications show that employers respond differently depending on the presumed race of the applicant (Castel, 2007). Curricula vitae (CVs) with the presumed characteristics of a white person were five times more likely to receive a favourable

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response to the application than CVs with the presumed characteristics of someone of North African or sub-Saharan African origin (based on names, residence, national origin, and photos) (Castel, 2007).

The lack of racial statistics also leads to the motivation of racial discrimination being misattributed to xenophobia (Goldman, 2020). Therefore, indicative evidence of racial hierarchies can be drawn from the asymmetrical economic integration of immigrants. For example, immigrants “from former French African colonies” face three times higher unemployment rates than French citizens (Zauberman & Lévy, 2003, 1068). Likewise, the descendants of immigrants are also more likely to be (1) on temporary contracts, (2) in unskilled or part-time work, (3) unemployed, and (4) to remain unemployed for much greater periods of time than individuals born in metropolitan France (whose parents were French when they were born) (Beauchemin et al., 2016). Moreover, survey evidence shows that a quarter of young people from non-European origin state that they have been discriminated against on the basis of their foreign origins (Galland, 2006). This feeling of stigmatisation is particularly intense among men of North African origin and young immigrants from Asia and sub-Saharan Africa (Galland, 2006). While definitive conclusions cannot be drawn in the absence of racial statistics, the existing evidence nevertheless suggests that racial hierarchies likely do exist in the French labour market. Granting this assumption, this essay now turns to the causes of these hierarchies.

Institutionalised Racism

From an institutional perspective, divisions on the basis of physical differences only become salient when political and economic structures shape them “into meaningful realities” (Alesina & Ferrara, 2005, 25). This is because social and economic relations are embedded in institutions. Due to this embeddedness, social hierarchies and inequalities are perceived by institutionalists as an internal dysfunction of the system rather than having an exogenous source. Racial hierarchies are much more likely to be embedded in institutions if “institutional dynamics” are “temporally impacted by racial cleavages” (Frymer, 2016, 356). This co-emergence has led some scholars to argue that states and markets are racialised structures (Gore, 2022). The idea behind this is that political actors structured such institutions to secure their own advantaged position while being underpinned by “racial concepts, commitments, and aims” (King & Smith, 2005, 75). Institutionalised racism becomes cyclical as race-based exclusion further entrenches racial identities, which then reinforce “economic, social, and geographical differences that become marked by racial categorization” (Frymer, 2016, 358). The longitudinal effect is that these identities and their differential treatment become institutionalised. In this account, incentives to uphold racial hierarchies persist “even as societal attitudes appear to be changing” (Frymer, 2016, 356). In other words, institutionalists such as Frymer (2016) argue that it is the institutions which normalise and rationalise race, not ideologies.

In line with this argument, scholars have argued that racial hierarchies in France systematically derive from structures rather than individual acts of racism or racist ideology (Simon, 2015). According to this argument, racial inequalities in France stem from the everyday functioning, rules, and conventions of the system (Simon & Stavo-Debaugue, 2004). This significantly disadvantages individuals who are perceived to be members of stigmatised racial groups (Simon & Stavo-Debaugue, 2004). For some scholars, the French state has actively and “systematically institutionalized educational, cultural, social, economic, and political inequality” for racialised groups (Hayward, 2007, 372). In the economic realm, institutionalised racism often takes the form of curbed access to the French labour market (Chabal, 2015). However, this realm also intersects with other domains of racial hierarchies. For example, the spatial segregation of racialised groups leads to their hyper-concentration in regions which are acutely affected by unemployment, such as the French *banlieues* (suburbs) (Chabal, 2015). Under these circumstances, awareness of discrimination and its pervasiveness are difficult to pinpoint because they arise from indirect processes and seemingly banal conventions and procedures rather than overt and explicit acts of racism. However, for institutionalists, these racial hierarchies can cease to play a role in modern labour markets if we implement institutional solutions.

Institutional Solutions and Their Limitations

From an institutionalist perspective, the embeddedness of race in institutional dynamics (such as the labour market) is not permanent, and institutions can respond effectively to new incentives (Frymer, 2016). Following this,

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“entrenched social inequalities and widespread [...] discrimination” are seen as symptoms of “social and economic policy” failure (Hargreaves, 2007, 5) rather than an inevitable state of affairs. For interventions to be effective, they must take measures which address the structural causes and socio-political context (Deveraux & Sabates-Wheeler, 2007) of social hierarchies and their ensuing inequalities. Given that “inequality is strongly influenced by a country’s prevailing institutional arrangements”, public policies can alleviate inequality, namely by taking action to “regulate markets and develop more equitable institutions” (Clark et al., 2017, 498). This argument rests on an understanding of markets as socially and politically constructed networks, which governments have historically played a pivotal role in creating. The normative assertion is that the market economy must be subordinated to society, and policies seeking to dissemble the market from society must be rejected (Polanyi, 2001). In theory, the consequence of this approach is the de-commodification of the individual, whose livelihood is no longer dependent on the market (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Additionally, reparative policies which eliminate racial disparities in income and labour prospects are recommended (Darity, 2009). The logic behind this is that such policies would prevent “socially determined path dependence” as a result of individuals’ racialised identities (Davis, 2014, 1227). In sum, politico-economic incentives can be introduced to reduce the salience of racial hierarchies in the labour market and to mitigate their consequent inequalities.

Yet, as Frymer acknowledged, “institutional forms [...] created patterns of [both] opportunity and exclusion”, resulting in “bifurcated possibilities” (2016, 359). This essay argues that this is due to the profoundly ideological character of institutional reforms, which is rooted in the type of society that those in positions of power seek to promote (Deveraux & Sabates-Wheeler, 2007). In the French context, while institutional efforts were made to overcome racial hierarchies in the labour market, they have largely been ineffective. For instance, despite the adoption of anti-discrimination policy, very few prosecutions are actually successful (Hargreaves, 2007). This is because the prohibition on collecting racial statistics makes it virtually impossible to prove that discrimination took place (Hargreaves, 2007). This circumstance is compounded by the fact that many institutional reforms tackling racial hierarchies in the labour market have been repealed. This includes articles from the Equality of Opportunities law (2006)—for example, article twenty-four required companies with over fifty salaried employees to recruit using anonymous CVs. After ten years of failing to implement the measure and non-compliance, the article was abrogated in 2015 (Simon, 2015). As well as this, affirmative action policies tackling systemic racial hierarchies have not been implemented in France (Fleming & Girma, 2021). This can be explained in part by public opposition to affirmative action, which rose to 67% in 2014 (Fleming & Girma, 2021, 341). According to Eric Bleich, this aversion to affirmative action stems from an ideological antipathy towards “race consciousness” (2002, 1070). It can be inferred from this that France has an institutional racism problem that cannot be dealt with institutionally (Léonard, 2014) because of ideological factors.

Ideological Racism

Ideology plays a critical role in anchoring racial hierarchies in labour markets in modern societies. While identities are socially constructed, they nevertheless have a constraining effect because individuals cannot control the meaning that others project onto their identities (Fine, 2009). This is important as it is by constructing and stigmatising racial identities that “ascriptive characteristics” are transformed into inequitable access to wealth accumulation, “restricted mobility, and differential economic opportunity” (Darity et al., 2006). Therefore, a prerequisite for de-commodification and individual mobility is the possibility for individuals to determine the weight that is given to each of their social identities (Davis, 2014). Where individuals cannot do this, and the boundaries between social groups are impermeable, social mobility is inhibited (Ellemers et al., 2002). This results in “non-economic physical attribute[s]” such as skin colour becoming racialised commodities that are used to uphold (1) existing power relations and (2) the dominance of certain social groups over subordinated groups (Darity et al., 2006). This affects the labour market and related institutions because “race and racism” are “fundamental organising principles” which are “deeply imbricated in all modern social formations” (Anievas et al., 2014, 2&7).

The predominant forms that ideological racism takes in modern French society are white racial framing and colour-blind racism (Léonard, 2014). White racial frames reinforce racial hierarchies in the labour market by justifying and enforcing “the racial hierarchization of Western capitalism’s labor force” (Feagin, 2012, 15). As well as this, white racial frames rationalise the power and privileges of white people while masking the prevalence of racial oppression in society (Feagin, 2012). This is achieved by drawing on “racial stereotypes and prejudices,” “racial narratives and

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interpretations,” “racialized imagery,” “racialized emotions,” and “common inclinations to discriminate along racial lines” to assert the superiority of white people (Feagin, 2012, 6). This is supplemented by colour-blind racism, which rests on the assumption that racism no longer exists (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). It follows from this that inequalities between racial groups are not the result of oppression but, instead, the choices made by individuals (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). This ideology further insists that questions of race do not weigh into the decision-making processes of policymakers and elites (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). The insinuation is that institutional and legislative measures taken to combat racial hierarchies are, therefore, colour-blind.

Consistent with colour-blind racism, French republican discourse argues that the lack of economic integration of racialised groups is not the result of racial hierarchies or discrimination but instead due to the failure of individuals to assimilate into French society (Freedman et al., 2004). This is part of a broader aspect of French republicanism, which requires citizens to be “divested of all particularistic affiliations” (Jennings, 2000, 577). Indeed, a report by the defunct governmental advisory body, the Haut Conseil à l’intégration, stated that France “has always refused to recognize collective rights that are specific to groups or minorities” (1997, 14). The argument rests upon the idea that assimilation will effectively “negate the difference which gives rise to racism” (Freedman et al., 2004, 160). What is implied here is that difference inherently instigates fractionalisation, and therefore, society should be homogenous. Hence, the onus is put on racialised groups to take personal responsibility for their disadvantaged position in French society (Begag et al., 2007). This amounts to occluding the obstacles put in the way of racialised groups in the French labour market and blaming these groups for their economic adversity. This discourse is composed of white racial frames that downplay the impact and pervasiveness of employment discrimination to excuse inaction vis-à-vis anti-discrimination and affirmative action policies (Chabal, 2015). In turn, the ideologies of colour-blind racism and white racial framing constitute veritable barriers to dismantling racial hierarchies in the French labour market.

Colour-blind racism also manifests in France in the aforementioned outlawing of the collection of racial statistics. The rationale behind this legislation is that the gathering of racial statistics is perceived as “inconsistent with France’s constitutional principle of absolute equality” (Goldman, 2020, 100). Furthermore, it is argued that the act of assigning racial identities to individuals leads to the creation of hierarchies (Simon & Stavo-Debauge, 2004). Despite the intention of protecting racialised groups from deliberate discrimination, the outcome “is a blindness to discriminations that nevertheless do occur” (Zauberman & Lévy, 2003, 1092). This is debilitating for racialised groups as it disarms them from confronting the racial hierarchies that exist in the French labour market under the banner of formal equality. The policy feeds into white racial framing because it thwarts enquiries into racial inequalities through their concealment (Léonard, 2014). Specifically, cases of racial discrimination cannot be detected if racial categories cannot be deployed in order to identify the populations being discriminated against (Simon, 2015). Hence, racialised groups cannot fully benefit from protection by the law, while racial statistics are not available (Simon & Stavo-Debauge, 2004). It further exhibits qualities of white racial framing by minimising “specific race-related harms” in areas such as employment and unemployment (Beaman, 2021, 106). Consequently, this legislation helps to uphold the status quo because “[b]y ignoring differences, it establishes a system where only the dominant group can enjoy the full exercise of political rights” (Léonard, 2014, 85). In this way, institutional accounts do not wholly explain the persistence of racial hierarchies in modern labour markets. They should, therefore, be complemented with an ideological analysis.

Conclusion

Concerted efforts have been made by many European nation-states to uphold the illusion of the “First World subjects’ psychic political insulation from the hierarchies and violence in the global webs of dependency sustaining them” (Brown, 2010, 133). A necessary means by which this fantasy is sustained in France is the imposition of domestic homogeneity. One facet of this is the suppression of communal particularisms, which are perceived as divisive in a Republic which should be one and indivisible. However, “global movements of people and capital have eroded the separate spheres inhabited by the populations these stratifications produce” (Brown, 2010, 133). This has forced France to confront its own plurality and the pervasive racial hierarchies in its labour market. This essay has examined the difficulties France has encountered in dismantling these racial hierarchies through institutional solutions and public policy. A major source of this impediment is the ideologies of colour-blind racism and white racial framing. Until a critical re-evaluation of the egalitarian credentials of French Republicanism is undertaken, the impact

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of institutional solutions to racial hierarchies will continue to be stunted. In turn, it is argued that ideological approaches have greater explanatory value for the persistence of racial hierarchies in the modern French labour market than institutional approaches.

However, the problem of racial hierarchies is not a uniquely French one. Hence, Ramón Grosfoguel affirms that “policy changes at the level of the nation-state are obsolete in today’s world-economy” because of the global scale of “domination and exploitation” (2006, 183). This sheds light on the interlocking processes giving rise to racial hierarchies, including ideological and institutional dynamics as well as “long-standing legacies of inequality and prejudice that have not been sufficiently removed” (Frymer, 2016, 355). This means that the “hierarchical dualisms” that characterise modern labour markets are “but a particular instance of the behaviour that can be observed in society more widely” (Bigo, 2008, 533). Given the scale of the problem, it is perhaps compelling that the solution put forward by Grosfoguel (2006) is nothing short of the complete decolonisation of the global political economy.

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