



## “GO BACK TO YOUR LAND”? A CRITICAL OVERVIEW OF RACIST DISCRIMINATION IN PORTUGAL

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### Abstract

In the current contextual climate, the phenomenon of racial discrimination in Europe is prevalent across media, politics and education in the international community and EU societies seeing more of the global South within the global North. Racist discrimination is not limited to the EU and is based on gendered, racialised, ethnic/religious and other sociocultural markers reproducing difference. Structural apparatus of bias must, arguably, be considered and treated as an urgent societal issue in EU communities. This thematic overview discusses some of the perspectives of racism and other segregation in the EU and scopes records of discrimination within the Portuguese context to highlight the sociopolitical and legal urgency to acknowledge and counter racist prejudice in its overt and covert forms. The paper traverses across literature on racism in the EU, outsider-within experience, and EU records in Portugal to critically reflect to what extent the EU contains the global South within its colonial lingers and contribute to research on racial discrimination in EU societies towards anti-racist commitments across Europe.

**Keywords:** Racial Discrimination, Portugal, Critical Race Theory, Identity, Racism, EU

## “VOLTA PARA A TUA TERRA”? UMA VISÃO CRÍTICA DA DISCRIMINAÇÃO RACISTA EM PORTUGAL

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### Resumo

*No atual contexto, o fenómeno da discriminação racial na Europa é prevalente nos meios de comunicação, na política e na educação, tanto na comunidade internacional como nas sociedades da UE, que estão a ver mais do Sul global dentro do Norte global. A discriminação racista não se limita à UE e baseia-se em indicadores de género, racializados, étnico/religiosos e outros socioculturais que reproduzem a diferença. Os mecanismos estruturais de preconceito devem ser considerados e tratados como uma questão social urgente nas comunidades da UE. Esta visão temática discute algumas das perspetivas sobre o racismo e outras formas de segregação na UE, e analisa registos de discriminação no contexto português para destacar a urgência sociopolítica e legal em reconhecer e combater o preconceito racista nas suas formas explícitas e implícitas. O artigo percorre a literatura sobre racismo na UE, a experiência do “estrangeiro de dentro” e registos da UE em Portugal para refletir criticamente até que ponto a UE contém o Sul global nos seus resquícios coloniais, bem como contribuir para a investigação sobre discriminação racial nas sociedades da UE em direção a compromissos antirracistas em toda a Europa.*

**Palavras-chave:** Discriminação Racial, Portugal, Teoria crítica da raça, Identidade, Racismo, UE

## Introduction

The diffusion of fear and stereotypes of the ‘other’ from historical narratives until the contemporary period display systematic power imbalances which somehow reinforce the EU identity while exacerbating inequalities. Racism occurs across socially embedded distinctions interwoven between gender, race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, orientation, disability, cultural and socioeconomic markers. Racist and sexist ideologies mutually treat dominated groups—the “others”—as objects lacking full human subjectivity (Collins, 1986, p. 18). In the EU, discourses of selective supremacy are reinforced across societal frameworks and echo in international architectures and policies of human rights. These reproduce and subject non-Europeans, non-White, non-Westerns, into interlocked webs of racial prejudice if, and when, recognised, represented and subjected to embedded systems of social classification and differentiation in socio-political and legal spheres.

Yet, it is proclaimed by the EU that “racism strikes at the heart of EU values” (European Commission, 2020:25). For the conceptual purpose of this paper, discrimination is defined as any distinction, exclusion, restriction, preference, or unequal treatment directly or indirectly manifested and impairing fundamental freedoms and human rights in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life (Statistics Portugal, 2023: 30). Racism and racist discrimination are defined according to Council of Europe’s European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), as signifying the belief that a ground such as “race”, colour, language, religion, nationality or national or ethnic origin justifies contempt for a person or a group of persons, or the notion of superiority of a person or a group of persons (European Commission, 2020). Identities are not singular and intersect across social markers and discrimination thus impacting each person in different ways depending on their situated location (Crenshaw, 2013) and the societal and individual beliefs acquired about their relational social category and cultural (dis)empowerment.

The EU has taken steps towards eliminating discrimination with the UN, funding apparatus fighting

racism and advocating for “equality and solidarity for all in Europe” (ENAR, 2023). It is proclaimed that simply being against racism does not suffice as what is needed is to be actively against it, and Portugal is one of the member states that agreed to tackle racism on national grounds (European Commission, 2020). Racism and the perpetuation of racist discourses, although being consistently challenged and resisted in these realms, remain. In the context of the EU, mobilising anti-racism as a project within the larger realm of EU integration reinforces apparatus of European imperialism (Muller, 2021:16), as EU identity is secured through the insecurity of its ‘others’. Deep issues are observed by a universalizing approach to anti-racism (Ibid.).

Portugal, former coloniser power, in the early 1930s had the world’s third largest colonial empire behind only the United Kingdom and France, occupying a significant area of Africa and some smaller colonies in Asia (Gonçalves, 2021:3). Since then, Portugal has contemporarily seen several recent moments where the media has shed light on instances of racism and politics of hate against non-Portuguese people, Afro-Portuguese people, Roma people, immigrants, refugees and other racial minorities. Such attacks included: the police physical assault of a black woman who did not have a bus ticket; the racist slurs shouted at a Porto football player from Mali, who abandoned the match; and the murder of a black actor, shot four times by a neighbour shouting racist abuse. There were also acts of intimidation (e.g., silent vigil outside the NGO SOS Racismo, symbolising a Ku Klux Klan parade) and attacks against property (e.g., swastikas and racist slurs graffitied outside SOS Racismo). This can be traced to the rise of the far-right political party Chega, which gained its first seat in parliament in the October 2019 general election, and 12% of the votes in the 2021 presidential election. Recently, in 2024, a fragmented parliament became evident in Portugal’s recent election, where third place finisher, Chega’s seat count quadrupled from 12 to 48 caused shock across the continent (Kassam, 2024). Chega’s racist and xenophobic discourse has encouraged hatred and violent attacks against ethnic

minorities and people of colour in Portugal, conveying the dangers of populist and racist political discourse from the far-right parties (Casquilho-Martins et al. 2022:13).

Despite the presence of several organizations and government bodies including but not limited to: Portuguese Association for victim support (APAV), Commission for equality against racial discrimination (CICDR), and SOS Racismo working against racist discourse, the dramatic increase in racial violence and discrimination over the past years has been considered a country failure in addressing racism through its politics of denial. Despite their presence, these organisations' capacities are limited, and more is needed to be done across societal realms to raise awareness, lessen hate and increase societal security in Portugal for all, through inclusive reparations for historical wrongs towards peace and security within and across EU communities.

### Outsider-within

While policy and organisational records provide statistical data, institutional and quantitative data is often limited to sample. Mechanisms of mistrust in societal apparatus may contribute to hesitation to discuss racial stigma and impact data on racial discrimination. The outsider within standpoint of women and racial minorities, one of many distinct groups of marginal intellectuals enriches contemporary sociological discourse (Collins, 1986). This portrays layered identities shifting their positioning from marginal and irrelevant to critical and central to decolonise harmful knowledge canons. It is argued that "racism sustains and rearticulates sexism" and that "in the case of Black women, race does not exist outside of gender and gender does not exist outside of race" (Parker & Lynn 2002:12). Despite the mere social construction of race or gender, these continue to be core significant markers in our world (Crenshaw, 2013: 1296). Differential racialisation is the notion of intersectionality and anti-essentialism; that no person has a single, easily stated unitary identity" (Ibid.). Women are most affected due to multiple markers

of inequality such as gender and race combined, facing double patriarchies (Loza, 2023). Different identities and individuals' intersectionalities lead to diversely varying ways of experiencing reality in interlocking webs of oppression (Collins, 1986). In Portugal, the phenomenon of discrimination affects women (17.5%) more than men (14.5%), as well as younger people, aged between 18 and 34 (18.9%) (Statistics Portugal, 2023: 24).

As an Egyptian arriving to study in Coimbra in 2012, at 21 years of age for a UN Alliance of Civilisations Summer School discussing these very matters, the first taxi driver I encountered upon arriving at Rede Expressos bus station weeks later, in my first visit returning from Lisbon back to Coimbra, greeted me with a disdain for my inability to speak Portuguese rather than warm welcome. As a polyglot, when I tried to communicate saying good evening and my destination in English or French, the western languages I know, not my mother tongue due to my own education and knowledge that people will not speak Arabic here, he was quick to shout: "estamos em Portugal, fala Portugues, c\*\*\*\*\*". This translates to 'we are in Portugal, speak Portuguese... followed by what I later learned was a common curse word used for emphases. It was scornful. It remains clear in my memory. With an understanding of languages, I understood what he wanted to say. Foreigners are not welcome unless they speak Portuguese. Erase your roots. We only speak one language. In this and more instances, I saw indirect and direct racism towards myself and others, in speaking of other nationalities, outsiders, like in any other country.

I was even more surprised to see racism by a worker in Serviço de Estrangeiros e Fronteiras (SEF), what was back then the local foreign residence office to renew my residency also regarding language, incapacity to speak English, speaking fast Portuguese in a scornful way. Looking down on every client she encountered. Deriving a thrill of her rudeness. Abusing administrative power in a corrupt, unprofessional way. To need a lawyer just to be able to book an appointment or have a witness to the racism, having a Portuguese lawyer by my side to legitimately renew my residence

is racism. I, myself, should have been treated with respect, and full human dignity. My case is not as bad as they unfortunately get. SEF has been closed since closed due to corruption and discrimination, after the death of a Ukrainian citizen in Lisbon airport, Ihor Homeniuk, who was physically assaulted by SEF guard in 2020. Insisting on speaking the language without being welcoming enough to speak another may be an act of neocolonialism. It could also be because they did not speak another language, but how then, is your work to deal with newcomers, with foreign residents? In Egypt, tourists are met in their languages as people in the tourism and transport sectors have had to learn to accommodate foreigners. No foreigner is expected to speak Arabic upon arrival in Egypt. Perhaps this is a colonial linger?

Many years later, living in Coimbra for almost a decade, as I was walking my dog in my neighbourhood, a local bag shop worker in Baixa, thinking I am Spanish, followed me to my place shouting, "go back to your land" after many days of the death stare just for me being, existing, walking in the society I live with my terrier who lives forever in my heart. The persecution felt for doing nothing harmful to society is a memory I tried to depersonalise and dissociate from. Threatening me, following me home, to call the police, for nothing. I was shaken by the attempted intimidation and said, "call the cops, I live right here". Say my dog urinates in the street. It was not even near any shops. By then I knew enough Portuguese to say that and shut my door. What kind of abuse is this, following me home, yelling? My dedication to pick-up after my dog (never did not, I abide by the law), was credited by another neighbour and even posted on his blog as an example to Portuguese people. She was clearly being racist, communicated by her slurs. I tried not to take these moments personally, but how could I not? Is it not personal when it is about your accent, appearance, cultural identity, your roots? Thinking I am from a neighbouring country, a European country, I was treated like this, showing the implications for people thought to be from the global South and all foreigners alike.

Censorship of racist experience casts a veil on them. Researching racism allows for societal

trajectories to be exposed. Of course, most people in Portuguese society were friendly and kind, many spoke English and when do not, are helpful in speaking slowly and explaining the language. While the actions of some do not speak for all, racist encounters reveal how racial prejudice bellows and echoes in Portuguese streets and communities. Only by asking how and why, racism begins to be cured, to remove the spread of societal disease. Most Portuguese people have been welcoming and helpful in learning Portuguese, keen to learn about my cultural roots and mystified by Egypt's rich history. The few examples do not represent the Portuguese population and different people experience racism in different ways, moments and levels. These examples, among many, however, have resonances in everyday society. Direct accounts of racism may be used as scientific data about racism to shift the perspective from which we acquire information and lessen the chances of further discrimination in having these voices heard. These examples may be a representation of colonial lingers in Portugal, and they certainly stand against the idea that Portugal is not a racist country.

### **Critical race theory and racism in Portugal**

Critical race theory (CRT) is explored as a crucial point of departure to the epistemological choices informing the work. CRT, emerging from legal studies, informs that attempts to address and eradicate racial inequities must be grounded in the socio-historical legacy of racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). This is a socially transformative theory which is understood as a process; constantly evolving as a methodological, conceptual and theoretical movement (Taylor, 1998). It disrupts and challenges racism in education (Solórzano, 1998) and other sectors, and thus is continually developing (Rema & Darquillius, 2017). CRT can be informed by other multidisciplinary areas such as sociology, psychology and political science scholarship.

Central to CRT is the understanding that how groups and subgroups are framed determines (dis)

empowerment (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001: 55). More than 1.2 million people (16.1%) have experienced discrimination in Portugal, most felt by people who identify themselves as gypsy (51.3%), black (44.2%), mixed origin or belonging (40.4%), women (17.5%), younger people (18.9%), highly educated (18.3%) and the unemployed (24.9%) with over 4.9 million people (65.1%) believing that there is discrimination in Portugal and 2.7 million (35.9%) who witnessed it (Statistics Portugal, 2023). Discrimination is thus felt across societal margins and its presence can no longer be appropriated or ignored. To introduce anti-racism action in the recruitment process, for example, mandatory training on unconscious bias for human resources professionals will be adopted (European Commission, 2020: 24). Before professionals reach the workforce, education of young people and Portuguese national school curricula should be urgently revisited.

CRT has “emerged from the legal arena to uncover the deep patterns of racial exclusion” (Parker & Lynn, 2002:12) and acknowledges the nuances in race and understandings of racial discrimination. CRT calls for multidisciplinary approaches across sociological, geopolitical and legal terrains to examine discriminatory frameworks which increase insecurity for certain groups in society. Since these exist across cultural landscapes, multilayered levels of identity and societal apparatuses, they must be investigated, and tackled, through diverse contextual locations. Representations on the relations between colonisers and colonised people may be lingering in contemporary relations between host societies and immigrants (Vala et al., 2008: 300). CRT is relevant to the Portuguese context to critically assess patterns of discrimination in EU societies, regarding EU minority national and immigrant identities to address the colonial ‘aftermath’ and whether colonialism simply took different names and approaches rather than finished. About 60,000 Ukrainian refugees had been welcomed into the country in 2022 (CERD, 2023) among other immigrant and refugee influxes including Syrian, Sudanese, Brazilian, Pakistani, and more.

Luso-tropicalism abstracts the impact of Portuguese colonialism somewhat praising Portuguese

colonial relations, to say that the Portuguese were ‘better’ colonisers than other EU nations. Can we derive conclusions on colonial relations from ex-colonisers’ top-bottom perspectives? Do these echo colonial tendencies and reinforce overt and covert discrimination? One of the greatest signs and catalysts of systematic racism is the denial of prejudice in Portuguese society (Lisboa Acolhe, 2022). Evidence conveys that the luso-tropicalist representation about colonial relations may protect Portuguese against the public expression of overt prejudice but does not protect them from new and hidden forms of prejudice, such as covert cultural inferiorisation (Vala et al., 2008: 300). Racism has also been evident in Portuguese football, where male players are most subjected to racism, especially during games (Neves et al., 2023: 11).

Abstractions of the understanding and analysis of racial discrimination include the weight of every instance of violence, how it is dealt with, and how it resonates to a larger scope and range less directly albeit strongly. There are direct and indirect resonances of discrimination whereby an instance of direct violence against a group or individual based on ideological reasoning reinforces “waves of harm” (Iganski, 2001) and vulnerability to other people from that group, due to its’ psychological, social and political consequences on other members, and people seeming to belong to the group. The vicious cycle of mistrust also implies that numerous victims of racial discrimination suffer in silence or blame themselves for their predicament (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001:43). This mirrors how groups perceive societal apparatus would treat them and induces internalised burden, responsibility and self-censorship of racist experiences due to societal structural censorship. Racist police brutality and hate speech by political parties has increased and circulated in online and offline spaces (Casquilho-Martins et al. 2022:13), shifting the symbol of police, supposedly the first in contact to keep the peace and enforce the law, for minorities. Only 8.8% people reported contacting authorities following the situations of experienced discrimination (Statistics Portugal, 2023: 26). There are several criticisms of how the state pretends to evade racism including some political

narratives which are circulated and legitimated in academic discourse. These contribute to the self-assuring idea of the country as modern and developed, by overemphasizing immigration and downplaying emigration in Portuguese society, in addition to the implication of demographic changes and institutional responses, with the false presumption that making difference visible, is a sufficient achievement (Araújo, 2013:27).

There is a critique of the production of evidence and the means of proof of racism. The question prevails about the lack of reconstructive knowledge about the reality of racial discrimination. The recurrence of testimonials or defensive documents based on experiences or personal relationships: "I have African friends", asks whether these statements are significant in the analysis of racial discrimination as proof of it. The absence of direct accounts of racism contributes to the silencing gap and 'racist mechanisms of speaking about racism'. Rather than being anti-racist; the systemic denial and perpetuation of racism through racist language increases the problem and diminishes the voices of victims further. The recommendation for more mechanisms denouncing discriminatory practices, accessible to all and education on xenophobia is critical in the Portuguese context (Casquilho-Martins et al. 2022: 15) to unlearn the normalisation of racism in society and uncover racism for the social injustice that it is.

Critics of CRT claim that its legacy has "completely transformed the nation's schools into sites of Marxist conflict, pitting whites against minorities, the wealthy against the poor" (Pesta, 2021:23) or that CRT scholars are socialised by the ideological apparatuses of the West (Mocombe, 2017:84). These dichotomies arguably seek to ignore while cementing racism. Choosing not to focus on the significance of racial discrimination is a symptom of privilege while normalising racism as a normative apparatus in the EU is hypocritical at best. While CRT theorists may use western channels to resist racist apparatus within them, assuming reproduction of racist discourse by people of the global South reproduces the unequal grounds on which theories are made. This sustains and tries to steer its direction and possess critical anti-racist

discourse too, itself a racism. Anti-racism must be channelled through the same channels reproducing racism to counter public discourse of differentiation, preference and hostility.

Scholars have considered CRT's main principle is that racism is ordinary and not exceptional which makes racism hard to detect, much less address, and means that formal rules that demand colourblind treatment will be able to remedy only the most flagrant forms of it (Delgado & Stefancic, 2007:136). This implies that racism, in its more subtle, covert forms, is undetected and thus understudied and remains largely unchallenged. Moreover, the social construction of race and shared traits attributed to different groups implies a hegemonic division which is unrealistic. Shared traits across identities must be revealed as studies show that more genetic variation occurs within races than between them (Ibid.:137). Why then does racism go beneath the surface and why does it exist at all?

There are variances in subtle and blatant acts of racism, in access to Portuguese nationality for example or recognition as equals. Exclusion of Roma is evident in discourses inhibiting Ciganos from the possibility of fully exercising their citizenship, discriminating Roma by political proposals and speeches of a racist and xenophobic nature (Casquilho-Martins et al. 2022: 8). Combating structural racism would help all individuals in society across group affiliations to lead dignified lives. More investment is needed in actions towards empowerment, combating antigypsism, and rethinking national strategies, so that effective integration is achieved (Magano & D'Oliveira, 2023: 10) and other minorities.

Racist violence is said to be a "problem of public order, like normal crime, but it is also a problem of social cohesion" (Bleich, 2007:161). In this way, the sentiments, emotions and experiences of "victim groups and society as a whole are extremely important measures of policy effectiveness" (Bleich, 2007:161). Despite policies enforcing education for minorities such as Roma children, the "overall enrolment rate of Roma pupils at 3rd cycle and secondary education level is still low and remains at 18,6 % and 2,6 % respectively" (ECRI,

2022: 6). The lack of integration in Portuguese schools of minorities at an early age is conveyed, where other students may reflect societal and family views which prejudice against Roma people and may contribute to bullying. Furthermore, students may not see themselves represented by teachers. Lack of teacher attention, or belief in pupil success could also contribute to how children feel going to school and incentives to drop-out. On the other hand, Roma families may feel ostracised by society or that Portuguese culture and education may differ from their own standpoints, so they may allow children to drop out, realising they will never be fully integrated and perhaps, not wanting to be integrated to preserve their cultural identity and not have to erase it, or appropriate it, to be included.

Contemporarily, power must be used in "addressing racism in the criminal justice system, increasing voting power and political representation, combating hate speech, and striving for recognition of language rights" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001:113). The reflection of inclusive definitions of racism and racist violence in different national state legislations differs and thus impacts the data claiming to reflect statistics. The voice of victims is critical to work as it embraces a grass-roots approach to understanding the process of discrimination. It is important to ask whether "targeted groups feel like they are included and respected by the state, or do they feel isolated and vulnerable? Do citizens of the country feel united, or do they feel divided by race, ethnicity, religion, or national origin?" (Bleich, 2007:161). Racial profiling must be heavily assessed through the lens of CRT and the interlinking dynamics between racism and its recurrences, EU societies apparently standing against it, and direct accounts of experiences of racism through diverse channels of recognition and equality.

## Conclusion

The discussion on crime legislation of racial discrimination has advantages and disadvantages regarding how crimes of prejudice are dealt with, whether it is clearly rejected or ambiguously

overlooked. This would positively increase awareness on racial discrimination for national actors, such as politicians, teachers and legal professionals and thus improved responses. In Portugal, from 2017 to December 2022, over 2,300 complaints had been received, which doubled from the preceding 12 years, possibly explained by increasing awareness on discrimination (CERD, 2023), and may also reflect growing racial discrimination. Increased visibility would also enhance research and statistics in national and regional records. In addition to impacting people from other ethnic, religious and racial minorities and people seeming to be from such minorities in different non-linear ways, a crucial point to consider in intersectionality is the relationship between racial and gender discrimination. Implications of future research should encompass a wider theoretical spectrum in frameworks "related to race and the widening of the lens to take into account other perspectives besides the Black-White paradigm" (Parker & Lynn 2002: 17). This also includes other aspects of sociocultural identity such as class, nationality, EU or non-EU member immigrant, appearance and its connotations in the EU, etc. towards more multi-layered discussions in research to mirror diverse communities and intersectionality in the Portuguese context and in Europe.

The occurrences, reportage, legislation and repercussions of racism in national apparatus, civil society, educational and media realms may systematically counter racism by asking how it may be learned and unlearned at school, in the streets and in the home and seek to decolonise the curricula of these apparatus. By the end of nineteenth century and first three decades of 1900s, given the specific imperial situation in Portugal at the time, race was seen through the conceptual lenses of evolution, the role of the environment in social and biological transformation, and discourses of civilisation (Cleminson & Duarte, 2023:129). Civilising 'missions' impose discrimination and inequalities, and abuse people and societies while blaming them for their abuse, typical of narcissistic empires which can only be defined through their oppression of selected 'others'. The politics of recognition must be considered crucial in shaping how

discourses of racial discrimination and violence are understood, and correspondingly resisted or validated, when reproducing cultural superiority and disregarding African agency (Ibid.).

The different sources identifying racist hate therefore largely depend on how race and racism are understood in Portuguese society and the EU, and transparent recognition of the existence of racism in Portugal. This implies that the history of Portugal, for the purposes of this concept, cannot be overlooked. The structural languages which may invisibilise and silence victims' accounts are mostly based on the denial of racism in Portugal and the lack of a true understanding of the origins and mechanisms perpetuating racist discrimination and bias. Investigating how identity markers intersect, in affirmations about any discourse about identity, must ask and acknowledge how our identities are constructed through the intersection of multiple dimensions? (Crenshaw, 2013:1299) Similarly in racist and anti-racist discourse, to decolonise hegemonic gazes and treatments, diversity in EU identity must be embraced across societal, political, legal and educational spheres in Portugal and the EU.

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