

An Examination of the Irreconcilability of Liberalism and Anti-Black Racism in Canada

Undoubtedly, liberalism has a vast anthology, yet there remains limited research on how this ideology interacts with anti-Black racism on a macro-scale, and particularly how a Western liberal democratic capitalist society like Canada has dealt with anti-Black racism. Although Canada is a country that prides itself on multiculturalism, diversity, and tolerance, evidence reveals that anti-Black racism is endemic and woven into the fabric of its institutions and policies. In this article, the author exposes the vestiges of discrimination and examines the irreconcilability between anti-Black racism and liberalism. By questioning the prevailing ideology in Canada, the author concludes that liberalism maintains anti-Black racism and the systemic subjugation of Black people. Addressing anti-Black racism cannot be achieved solely through perfunctory policy change, but by dismantling the inherent power dynamics between Black and white people. On this basis alone, anti-Black racism and any discourse around discrimination would provoke the pillars of liberalism and disrupt the order of things.

Keywords: Liberalism, discrimination, anti-Black racism, anti-Blackness, racism

INTRODUCTION

Although work to redress racism has been ongoing, the year 2020 was a critical juncture for grappling with the brutal legacy of historic racism. In 2020, a racial reckoning was initiated in North America, with media outlets, several major corporations, and many other industries expressing vocal support for the Black Lives Matter (BLM)¹ social movement. And yet, months after the deaths of several unarmed

¹ Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, Inc., is a global organization in the U.S., U.K., and Canada, whose mission is to eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes (*Black Lives Matter*, n.d.).



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Black people, public outcry,² performative allyship, and the tremendous moral theatre for equality,³ there has been little to no change. Instead, there continues to be political stagnation, greater cultural polarization, and very few tangible policy changes. Why hasn't change been realized? I answer this question by critically examining the political doctrine of liberalism. I aim to interrogate and destabilize this prevailing—and seemingly neutral—narrative in Canada, which I argue rationalizes and maintains anti-Black racism. This article contributes to political science, public administration, and policy scholarship.

Liberalism, a dynamic but dominant ideology, embraces individualism and equality and is profoundly embedded in Canada's consciousness. Liberalism views anti-Black racism or *Negrophobia*⁴ as a deviant act, one to be denied or denounced. It contends that racism can best be resolved through society's existing institutions. However, I refute this notion. Anti-Black racism is endemic to the Western liberal capitalist democratic society (behaviour and consciousness). It can only be combatted through a complete overhaul of the social institutions⁵ which define the society.

Undoubtedly, liberalism has a vast anthology, yet there remains limited research on how this ideology interacts with anti-Black racism on a macro-scale, and particularly how a Western liberal, democratic, capitalist society like Canada has dealt with anti-Black racism. The research that does exist on the relationship between liberalism and anti-Black racism focuses on the institution of education in the context of the United States (Baldrige, 2019; Dumas, 2016); an analysis of liberalism as the canvas and basis for anti-Black racism in Canada remains unexplored. A focus on Canada, a country that prides itself on multiculturalism, diversity, and tolerance, reveals a particular example of how anti-Black racism is profoundly woven into the fabric of Canadian social institutions and policies.

To demonstrate that anti-Black racism is endemic in Canada, I will first contextualize and define the principles of liberalism and anti-Black racism from both historical and contemporary perspectives. Next, I will describe how Canada masks anti-Black racism through ideology, which, in turn, frustrates the change process. The final goal is to establish that Western society's institutional structures and social processes have been historically and systemically designed to subjugate Black people and perpetuate anti-Black racism.

² Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd were unarmed Black individuals whose murders in 2020 drew public attention and widespread outcry (*Black Lives Taken: George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery* | *DoSomething.org*, n.d.)

³ This paper defines moral theatre as pretensive actions of public institutions and the corporate world to create inclusive and diverse laws and policies.

⁴ The fear of Black people.

⁵ For this paper, social institutions refer to Western culture, liberalism, capitalism, democracy, and bureaucracy.

CONTEXTUALIZING LIBERALISM AND ANTI-BLACK RACISM

Historical Grounding

Liberalism emerged when society was dominated by institutions such as the monarchy, church, and state (Bell, 2014). The ideological notion of liberalism is said to have evolved to provide "... a societal view that prioritized the rights of individuals over the expansive powers of societal and state institutions" (Drougge, 2019, p. 1). Liberalism, in its conception, is a political doctrine that is generally concerned with the value of individual freedom and equality. Drougge (2019) posits that it takes the individual's problem as the central challenge of politics. Essentially, liberals seek to maximize individual equality and individual freedoms and to balance existing tensions between these values. Characteristics of individual freedom include common rights and privileges that are protected by the state, such as: the right to due process and fair trial, the right to political participation, the right to free expression, the right to privacy and personal space, the right to appropriate separation of powers, and the fundamental right to life (Bailey & Gayle, 2003; Bell, 2014; Drougge, 2019; Ishay, 2007). Aside from protecting the individual, liberalism seeks to protect individuals from the state.

Notably, liberalism—the belief in freedom, democracy, equality, and human rights—originated with well-known theorists such as Montesquieu and John Locke (Drougge, 2019). In this early thinking, these principles of liberalism were not designed for the Indigenous people or the enslaved, denying non-whites common rights and privileges. Thus, the idea of liberalism was always entrenched in inequity. For example, according to John Locke, Native Americans did not qualify for private property and privacy because there was a fundamental belief that Europeans (white people) were superior to any other people (Ishay, 2007). This notion of traditional construction, where Indigenous and Afro-descended people were sub-European, drives the discourse on non-universal human rights, which creates the premise of anti-Blackness.

Moreover, society's underlying liberalism, which encouraged ownership, became the driving force for colonialism, slavery, and modern-day anti-Black racism. As such, liberalism justified the actions of the white colonialists as they sought new land, new resources, and cheap labour. Ishay (2007) suggests that applying liberalism's freedom forms the foundation of Western society, where every man sees "in other men not the realization of his own freedom, but the barrier to it" (p. 268). Within this very barrier, white colonialists saw the enslaved (Black people) and Indigenous people as obstacles in their pursuit of conquest and expansion of wealth. However, for McGary (2009), the act of slavery and the process of colonialization is in direct opposition to the principle of freedom. By denying Black people's freedom through slavery, liberalism reveals itself to be an ideology dependent on the idea of negative freedom and maintenance of anti-Black racism (Mills, 2008).

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Today, the significant divergence between the claims of liberalism's universalism and the reality of differential human rights and privileges remains up for debate. As time passes and wrongdoings become more flagrant and public, the impact of John Locke's assertion that white people were superior to any other people is coming to the fore. The many exclusions and denials of human rights infringements that occurred in both the colonial and slavery eras have galvanized into newer versions of de facto non-universality, as we see in present-day anti-Black racist acts (Andersen, 2014; Blackstock, 2007; Glenn, 2015; Maynard, 2017). Although slavery has ostensibly been abolished, it is undeniable that anti-Black racism has been maintained by liberalism through institutional structures and social processes.

Contemporary Grounding

While the definitions and literature of liberalism are vast, there is still limited academic research on how the term interacts with anti-Black racism. For this article, the use of the term liberalism generally refers to the normative commitment to "securing individual liberty and human dignity..." (Achiume, 2021, para. 4). Achiume suggests that this idea is best achieved through political theatre (elections), which usually entails representative and democratic institutions, commitments to freedom of expression, and the guarantee of individual property rights. Taken together, these proposed strategies for achieving liberalism seek to limit the legitimate use of the state's authority.

As explained previously, many scholars would argue that liberalism, at its core, is innately good and that liberal democracies are explicitly and implicitly the means through which this good is achieved (Achiume, 2021; Bailey & Gayle, 2003; Baldrige, 2020). Liberalism employs individualism, tolerant attitudes, and reasoned arguments to minimize discriminatory attitudes and prejudiced behaviour against individuals or groups on the grounds of race, both in self and others (of any race) (Lindsay, 2020). It contends that everyone can choose not to hold racist views and be expected to do so. While this may be so, it would be remiss not to note that liberalism was fundamentally built on white European rhetoric (Henry & Tator, 2009; Robertson, 2015).

Within the context of liberalism, individualism creates a value and desire for a pluralistic society that offers many ways of life and opportunities for lived experiences (Kymlicka, 1991). Yet anti-Black racism festers in this type of society. Anti-Black racism refers to the specific type of racial discrimination directed at Black people. According to Marlysa D. Gamblin, Negrophobia, or the overt devaluation of Blackness, includes cases of police or civil brutality against Black bodies (cited in Lindsay, 2020). Dumas (2016) theorizes that anti-Blackness is not just a "...racial conflict that might be resolved through organized political struggle and appeals to the state..." but is also "...an irreconcilability between the Black and any sense of

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social or cultural regard” (p. 12). Though these interpretations elude a focus on the institutions, it should also be noted that anti-Black racism incorporates Black people’s systematic marginalization within the public and social institutions designed to support them (Baldrige, 2020; Cole, 2020). By these definitions alone, the terms liberalism and anti-Black racism appear opposed, and it would seem highly improbable for both to co-exist in the same space. Yet they do.

LIBERALISM MASKS ANTI-BLACK RACISM

Liberalism is the hegemonic system of ideas that guides and justifies the conduct of a class of people, particularly the one that is wholly adopted and maintained (Bailey & Gayle, 2003). People’s conceptual frameworks are generally guided by the dominant and become deeply ingrained into their consciousness. In other words, the ideology becomes so embedded in people’s everyday lived experiences that it is challenging to identify. This ordinariness allows the liberal and white supremacy ideologies to be retained and reconciled in people’s perceptions, inevitably orchestrating power relations (Bailey & Gayle, 2003; Fawcett, 2018). As a result, the lived realities and racial inequalities are often denied. In turn, this brings about the denouncement of the notion of anti-Black racism or its reform. Essentially, if something does not exist, there is nothing to resolve. With liberalism dictating Canada’s value system, anti-Black racism is viewed as deviant—going against the social norm.

Liberalism creates a power imbalance and an overall conundrum for racialized groups, disproportionately distributing power and, by extension, social recognition and access to institutions and public services (Fawcett, 2018). This ideological frame is intentionally designed to inform how Canada’s political system operates. This does not mean that people are not aware of the racial inequities that exist. For example, the Computer Riot in Montreal (1969),⁶ the Yonge Street Protest in Toronto (1991),⁷ and the Black Lives Matter protest during the Toronto Pride Parade (2016)⁸ demonstrate that Canada is *not* exempt from anti-Black racism. Nevertheless, this

⁶ The Computer Riot was a 14-day sit-in over racism at Sir George Williams University in Montreal (now part of Concordia University) that caused \$2 million in damages for the school. Accusations of a university lecturer for unfair and racially motivated grading was levied in the spring of 1968 by six West Indian students (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation & Lindeman, 2014).

⁷ The original motivation of the Yonge Street Protest was the acquittal of Rodney King’s assailants. However, it escalated to the killing of Raymond Lawrence by two Toronto police officers (Black, 2017).

⁸ The Toronto BLM group briefly halted the Pride Parade for 30 minutes until Pride Toronto Executive Director Mathieu Chantelois signed a document agreeing to the group’s demands of inclusion within the Pride committee for Black voices and Black space. Another crucial element that was brought to the fold was the perpetuation of “anti-Blackness” against Black queer youth, Black trans youth, and Black trans people (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2016).

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widespread denial of anti-Black racism is protected and contained through representative government or political leaders (some form of democracy)—all of which maintain Canada’s national image as multicultural and diverse. Andrea A. Davis⁹ posits that political leaders such as Ontario Premier Doug Ford have downplayed the magnitude of systemic racism through media and other publications by suggesting that Canada is not like America (Global News, 2020) and, again, masking Black people’s lived realities.

Conversely (and ironically), there have been several attempts (what I call the *moral theatre of equality*) to curb anti-Black racism in the province of Ontario through policy and regulatory reforms such as the passing of the Anti-Racism Act (2017),¹⁰ the creation of the Anti-Racism Directorate (ARD),¹¹ and the launch of the Ontario Black Youth Action Plan (*Ontario’s 3-Year Anti-Racism Strategic Plan: Targets and Indicators*, 2019).¹² Nevertheless, anti-Black racism and its impact remain pervasive. As Farah Nasser reports, several lawyers attached to the Civil Law Division (Ontario’s Ministry of the Attorney General) were vocal about their encounters with anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism at work (Global News, 2020). Despite being located in the liberal state of Canada, Black people are denied desire, freedom, and human agency. This denial is expressively exposed in Cole’s (2020) account of the hierarchical nature of Canada’s public institutions. Cole further postulates that anti-Black racism is compounded by bureaucracy—a rigid, emotionless, rules-based structure designed to benefit one racialized group (white people). Existing legislation and policy changes have been ineffective since they brought no conclusive change to Black people’s narratives or lived experiences in the workplace.

Western ideology dictates that individuals are rewarded if they work hard and that economic failure results from a lack of effort or character flaws (Bailey & Gayle, 2003). As such, liberalism claims that all opportunities, freedoms, and rights are equally available to everyone, irrespective of their identity, so racialized groups are not disproportionately affected but rather are unwilling to work hard and be rewarded (Crenshaw, 1991). However, this is a theoretical assertion ignoring the lived realities and racial inequalities that have been structurally produced and

⁹ Chair of York University’s Department of Humanities and Coordinator of the University’s Black Canadian Studies Certificate.

¹⁰ The Anti-Racism Act, 2017 (ARA) is legislation for the Ontario government to identify and eliminate systemic racism and advance racial equity in the province (*Ontario’s 3-Year Anti-Racism Strategic Plan: Targets and Indicators*, 2019).

¹¹ The Anti-Racism Directorate (ARD) leads the government’s anti-racism initiatives to build a more inclusive society, and works to identify, address, and prevent systemic racism in government policy, legislation, programs, and services (*Ontario’s 3-Year Anti-Racism Strategic Plan: Targets and Indicators*, 2019).

¹² The Black Youth Action Plan (BYAP) works toward eliminating systemic, race-based disparities by increasing opportunities for Black children, youth, and families across the province (*Ontario’s 3-Year Anti-Racism Strategic Plan: Targets and Indicators*, 2019).

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maintained. For example, in 2012, racialized Canadians earned an average of seven thousand dollars less per year than other Canadians, causing them to be three times more likely to live in poverty (Christus-Ranjan, 2018). Importantly, the income and employment disparities persisted, regardless of experience or education level (Block & Galabuzi, 2018). Research also shows that race plays a significant role in hiring and accepting Black people in the workforce (Christus-Ranjan, 2018). By creating an ideological illusion that Black people's economic failures are based on individual merit, liberalism bolsters anti-Black racism, masking the existing systemic barriers in Canada's social institutions and policies.

In Canada, liberalism fuels anti-Black racism through covert spaces and conduits such as mainstream media and social media (Cole, 2020). Under the guise of freedom of speech, the media's agenda-setting masks social and economic determinants, where public opinion is intentionally shaped to appease the dominant group in society—in this case, white people (Bailey & Gayle, 2003). Events such as social movements or race issues are often rated for omission or inclusion for dissemination by media outlets. This skewing of public opinion is an ideological practice of tracing the dialectic relationship that exists between public and private space (law enforcement and the citizen). Cole (2020) references several instances in Canada where the media shaped the narrative of police brutality against Black people. However, the media generally presents the filtered information as being unproblematic, and so reinforces liberalism's intentional anti-Black racism.

ANTI-BLACKNESS IS ENDEMIC

With a clear picture of how ideology works, one can understand that any tangible change in a society must be addressed at its roots. The historical complexities of anti-Black racism must be identified, acknowledged, and repaired. Although liberal ideals and discourses of equality result in tokenism¹³—a moral theatre of equality—a deeper analysis of anti-Blackness and white supremacy is lacking. By making a symbolic effort to show racial equality, white people perpetuate the inherent power relations between both groups. For instance, the practice of recruiting Black people in order to give the appearance of racial equity and progress—without reflecting on the deep-seated vestiges of discrimination to make meaningful change—remains ineffective (Dumas, 2016; Lindsay, 2020). Such a practice inhibits individual participation in decision-making and maintains the powerless mindset of Black people (Du Bois, 2007).

Liberalism ostensibly “supports undoing legacies of discrimination” and allows incremental changes (tokenism and veiled inclusivity) but, in practice, this ideology lacks the commitment to redistribute real power and resources (Baldrige, 2020, p. 4). For example, in response to George Floyd's murder, public institutions and the

¹³ Tokenism is an empty movement or perfunctory act with no real impact (Dumas, 2016).

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corporate world acted with a slew of well-drafted diversity statements demonstrating the moral theatre of equality (Boynton, 2021; MacAllister, 2021). Though well-intentioned, these token statements often do not redress racial inequities (Boynton, 2021). Therefore, the liberal principle of inclusivity inevitably masks anti-Black racism while ignoring historical complexities and power dynamics.

Canada's inability to commit to the redistribution of power and its overt denial of anti-Black racism perpetuates the cultural disregard for and disgust with Blackness (Negrophobia); anti-Black racism is endemic in Western society. The disdain for Black people is constantly maintained through public institutions (Cole, 2020; Maynard, 2017). The endemic nature of anti-Blackness challenges Canada's image and contradicts the core tenets of liberalism, such as equality, further highlighting the irreconcilability between anti-Blackness and liberalism. As such, it is difficult to grapple with, identify, and respond to the systemic nature of anti-Black racism.

As liberalism in societies becomes increasingly dedicated to the concept of individual rights, freedom, and equality, Black people are systematically deprived of access to resources and institutions. For Cole (2020), Black people are still culturally and socially positioned as the enslaved or chattel placed on earth for the benefit of white people. This idea demonstrates that society continues to benefit European colonists or, in this instance, white people. To address racism through policy change is a perfunctory effort, a means by which white people continue to assert and dictate the right to freedom and right to the consumption, destruction, and simple dismissal of Black people (Dumas, 2016). On this basis alone, anti-Black racism and discourse around discrimination provokes the pillars of liberalism and disrupts the order of things.

CONCLUSION

A Western liberal capitalist democratic society is defined by the ethos and principles of equality, individualism, liberty, rights, and freedom. The mere fact that anti-Black racism is not acknowledged or addressed in Canada's consciousness speaks to the fundamental challenge of systemic racism. Liberal ideology has created a veil, blotting out Black people's reality in Western society. It is in this very society that anti-Black racism reigns supreme. In this article, I have demonstrated that anti-Black racism is inherent to liberalism. Liberal ideology has denied, denounced, and masked marginalized people's realities, which deviate from the value system embedded in Canada's consciousness. Liberal ideology—a value system deeply embedded in Canada's consciousness—has denied, denounced, and masked marginalized people's realities. Under the guise of liberalism, anti-Black racism is prevalent in all public institutions and influences all levels of decision-making. In turn, liberalism establishes the systematic and systemic discrimination of policies and

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legislation, explaining why little to no tangible policy changes have been achieved. So how do we realize meaningful change?

To realize meaningful change, anti-Black racism can no longer be glossed over without changing Canada's major institutions. Essentially, an issue cannot be resolved using the same philosophy that created it. Any attempt to eradicate anti-Black racism must include revamping institutional structures and social processes while addressing the inherent power imbalances between Black and white people and the historical complexities of discrimination. I hope that the racial reckoning of 2020 creates tangible cultural change—a change in the central institutions of society—not just perfunctory tokenism or a moral theatre of equality.

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