

A Controversial, But Welcome New Perspective on Structural Racism in Dutch Society

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Abstract:

In *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (2016), Gloria Wekker studies the white Dutch sense of self, which to her revolves around a self-proclaimed innocence: i.e. the claim that The Netherlands is free of racism. Whenever this identity is questioned, Wekker sees a tendency in society to aggressively defend this sense of innocence. Such protective mechanisms, paradoxically, often come in the shape of racism. Throughout five chapters, she discusses such paradoxical racism, as it appears in different layers of society: the national media, bureaucratic organizations, academia, political rhetoric, and national culture. Rather than to take a stance in the discussions she analyzes, she works on a meta-level, studying the recurring factors of such discussions that in turn lead to structural racism. Her eclectic method of combining theoretical discussions with personal anecdotes, with hypothetical 'what if...' scenarios, and with practical proposals for societal change, sometimes runs the risk of obscuring her argumentation. Nevertheless, her approach is much needed in a debate landscape that nowadays so easily tends to escalate and polarize.

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Wekker, Gloria: *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race*. Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2016. 226 pages, 23,99 EUR. ISBN: 9780822360759.

Abstract:

In *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (2016), Gloria Wekker studies the white Dutch sense of self, which to her revolves around a self-proclaimed innocence: i.e. the claim that The Netherlands is free of racism. Whenever this identity is questioned, Wekker sees a tendency in society to aggressively defend this sense of innocence. Such protective mechanisms, paradoxically, often come in the shape of racism. Throughout five chapters, she discusses such paradoxical racism, as it appears in different layers of society: the national media, bureaucratic organizations, academia, political rhetoric, and national culture. Rather than to take a stance in the discussions she analyzes, she works on a meta-level, studying the recurring factors of such discussions that in turn lead to structural racism. Her eclectic method of combining theoretical discussions with personal anecdotes, with hypothetical 'what if...' scenarios, and with practical proposals for societal change, sometimes runs the risk of obscuring her argumentation. Nevertheless, her approach is much needed in a debate landscape that nowadays so easily tends to escalate and polarize.

Gloria Wekker's *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (2016) is a study of Dutch self-representation, and presents a series of critical analyses of everyday and institutional racism common in Dutch society. Her book, she explains in the introduction, is focused on "a dominant discourse, [which] stubbornly maintains that the Netherlands is and always has been colorblind and antiracist, a place of extraordinary hospitality and tolerance toward the racialized/ethnicized other, whether this quintessential other is perceived as black in some eras or as Muslim in others" (p. 1). This tendency to self-identify as anti-racist is in fact so strong, that questioning this identity, ironically, "can call up racist violence, and often results in the continued cover-up of structural racism" (p. 18). The paradox, therefore, which Wekker centralizes in her book, is that white Dutch people are willing to use racism

as a weapon to defend their self-proclaimed non-racism. This perhaps unlikely phenomenon is not so difficult to confirm when keeping in mind that The Netherlands has an annual blackface festival that is not only celebrated nationally, but that is also supported by the leading political parties as something that is of quintessential value for national identity.

The festival, Wekker's main case study in her last chapter, involves the symbolism of a saint, who, each year on 5 December, rewards all Dutch children's good behavior with presents, and practices this display of philanthropic excess through his Black Petes, who are the saint's black-faced servants (usually played by white actors). Critical voices that seek awareness for the racist overtones of this festival, are often met with hate-speech on social media, which usually takes the shape of racist *ad hominem* attacks. The suggestion that this children's festival could be based in a history of racism and slavery triggers surprising amounts of people, from anonymous internet users to well-known public figures, including journalists and politicians, to a wide array of racist self-defense mechanisms, many of which Wekker analyzes in her study of the "feverish, shrill pitch of the debate, which in no small part is due to the looming question whether the Netherlands is or is not a country where racism is a fact of life [...]" (p. 142).

Such reactions are the basis for Wekker's concept of "white innocence", which according to her is "a dominant way in which the Dutch think of themselves, as being a small, but just, ethical nation; color-blind, thus free of racism; as being inherently on the moral and ethical high ground, thus a guiding light to other folks and nations" (p. 2). Discussions about structural racism carry the risk of losing this innocence, which can lead to smug ignorance, i.e. "aggressively rejecting the possibility to know" (Essed and Hoving, in: Wekker, p. 18). This heavily protected and sustained claim of innocence, according to Wekker, is a defining characteristic of "the white Dutch sense of self, which takes center stage in this book" (p. 1).

Her book, therefore, adds an unfamiliar approach to the usually polarized character of public discussions about Dutch identity, postcolonial society, and racism. Instead of taking a stance, Wekker works on a meta-level, focusing her analyses not on matters of right and wrong, but instead on questions that concern the character of societal debates: why do certain debates immediately escalate? Why do other debates keep recurring and yet never seem to work towards any kind of reconciliation? While these questions are relevant, they are not always clearly formulated and, with an eye on the complexity of her approach, sometimes lack the structural precision that would be necessary to make a convincing argument. She develops her analyses throughout five chapters, each of which focuses on different forms of structural racism.

Chapter 1 focuses on everyday racism, as normalized through national media. Chapter 2 is based on her experience as a policymaker for the national government, working on issues of migration. The chapter concerns the racism that is sustained by people, who with their insistence on fighting the good fight, refuse to critically assess their own position. A similar tendency is traced in chapter 3, but in regard to the production of academic knowledge. Chapter 4 looks specifically at ‘homonationalism’, as a form of political rhetoric in which an expressed tolerance towards homosexuality is often employed in order to support an agenda that opposes Muslim immigration. The final chapter is the aforementioned case study analysis of the annually recurring Black Pete debate.

These five concise, yet somewhat eclectic chapters, frequently merge personal anecdotes with theoretical discussions, with hypothetical ‘what if...’-scenarios, and with practical proposals for societal change. While the book therefore carries a relevant message, and offers a helpful approach, its strength is somewhat obstructed by a perceived lack of focus, which has negatively impacted the reception of her work, especially since it was translated to Dutch in 2017. Her writing style often does not shy away from being polemical, criticizing not only the angry white male, but also the, to her, manipulative Dutch tolerance-oriented rhetoric towards homosexuality (chapter 4), as well as the, to her, hypocritical lack of self-criticism as to racism in the Dutch feminist community (chapter 2). As such, her book is often misunderstood as a general attack on all Dutch white people, which as an interpretation, however, ignores the fact that the book is aimed not at choosing sides, but at studying existing debates in Dutch society that were already polarized before her engagement with them. The purpose of her analyses, in my interpretation, is to explore why such polarization occurs, and not to contribute to furthering it.

Significantly, since the publication of her book, she herself has become an object of blatant hate-speech in the response sections of major Dutch online news platforms. This vitriolic national attention, which is not exactly common for an academic writer, is in the end perhaps the most prominent proof that her question is urgent: why do the Dutch so aggressively hang on to a self-identification of innocence, and how is that even sustainable, seeing that so many attempts to criticize this self-identification lead to violent denial and unpunished hate speech?

German Abstract:

Eine kontroverse, doch fruchtbare neue Perspektive auf strukturellen Rassismus in der niederländischen Gesellschaft

In *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (2016) untersucht Gloria Wekker das weiße niederländische Selbstempfinden, das sich um eine selbsternannte Unschuld dreht: die Behauptung, die Niederlande seien frei von Rassismus. Wann immer diese Identität in Frage gestellt wird, sieht Wekker eine gesellschaftliche Tendenz, dieses Gefühl der Unschuld aggressiv zu verteidigen. Solche Schutzmechanismen treten paradoxerweise häufig in der Form von Rassismus auf. In fünf Kapiteln diskutiert sie diesen paradoxen Rassismus, der in verschiedenen Schichten der Gesellschaft auftritt: in den nationalen Medien, bürokratischen Organisationen, der Wissenschaft, der politischen Rhetorik und nationalen Kultur. Anstatt zu den Diskussionen, die sie analysiert, Stellung zu beziehen, arbeitet sie auf einem Meta-Level und untersucht die wiederkehrenden Faktoren der Debatten, die ihrerseits zu strukturellem Rassismus führen. Ihre eklektische Methode, theoretische Diskussionen mit persönlichen Anekdoten, mit hypothetischen Was-wäre-wenn-Szenarien und mit praktischen Vorschlägen für gesellschaftliche Veränderungen zu kombinieren, läuft manchmal Gefahr, ihre Argumentation zu verschleiern. Dennoch ist ihre Herangehensweise umso aktueller in einer Debattenlandschaft, die heutzutage so leicht zu eskalieren und zu polarisieren scheint.

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