

“Racism is still alive, despite science, education and rationality”: An interview with Munanga

Interviewee

Kabengele Munanga

PhD in Anthropology from the University of São Paulo (*Universidade de São Paulo - USP*).

Interviewer

Fabio Moraes

Master's student in Sociology by the Institute of Social Sciences (*Instituto de Ciências Sociais - ICS*) of the Federal University of Alagoas (*Universidade Federal de Alagoas - UFAL*)
fabiocienciasocias@gmail.com

Supervisor

Cristiano Bodart

PhD in Sociology from the University of São Paulo (*Universidade de São Paulo - USP*). Teacher at the Federal University of Alagoas (*Universidade Federal de Alagoas - UFAL*)
cristianobodart@gmail.com

Abstract

In mid-2023, at the suggestion of my master's supervisor, PhD Teacher Cristiano das Neves Bodart, I was looking for a personality from the academic-scientific world, whose productions and trajectory dialogued in some way with my research on the teaching of ethnic-racial relations in sociology classes in High School. In August, after attending PhD Teacher Kabengele Munanga's lecture on education at the 10th Maceió Book Biennial (*10^a Bienal do Livro de Maceió*), I left there impacted by his exhibition and decided to try to interview him. From then on, we made contact with Teacher Munanga, who responded to us in a very generous way, granting us the present interview. We then elaborated seven questions that promoted reflections on the notion of place of speech, structural racism, identitarianism and class struggle, the anti-racist struggle in Brazil and issues around Law No. 10.639/03.

Keywords: Racism, Education, Anti-Racist Struggle, Kabengele Munanga.

1. About Munanga¹

A Brazilian by naturalization since 1985, Kabengele Munanga was born in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where he graduated in Social and Cultural Anthropology from the Official University of Congo (1964-1969). It was at this University that he began his academic career as an Assistant Teacher (1969-1975). In 1969 he received a scholarship from the Belgian

¹Text extracted from Lattes of Teacher Munanga: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/7127393102182978>.

government (OCD) to begin his postgraduate studies at the Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium, where he remained from 1969 to 1971. During this time, he was a researcher at the Royal Museum of Central Africa in Tervuren (Brussels) where he specialized in the study of traditional African arts. However, due to issues related to the military dictatorship installed in his country, he had to return without finishing his doctorate. Between 1975 and 1977, with a scholarship granted by the University of São Paulo (*Universidade de São Paulo - USP*), he completed his doctorate at USP in Human Sciences (area of concentration in Social Anthropology). He was a visiting teacher at the School of Sociology and Politics of São Paulo (1977), at the Candido Mendes University (*Universidade Candido Mendes*) (1977), at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte (*Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Norte*), in Natal (1979-1980), at the Eduardo Mondlane University, in Maputo, Mozambique (1999), associate teacher at the University of Montreal, Canada (2005-2010), where he taught seminars, in addition to supervising master's projects and doctoral theses at the Faculty of Science of Religions. He spent most of his academic career as a tenured teacher at the University of São Paulo (*Universidade de São Paulo - USP*), from 1980-2012, from where he retired as a full teacher, working mainly in the areas of Anthropology of Africa and the Afro-Brazilian Population, focusing on the following topics: Racism, anti-racist policies and discourses, blackness, black identity *versus* national identity, multiculturalism and education of ethnic-racial relations. He organized the book “Overcoming Racism at School” (*Superando o Racismo na Escola*) (2005), which was the first to introduce the racial issue in the transversal themes of the National Curriculum Parameters, a work whose first and second editions were prefaced, respectively, by the Minister of National Education Paulo Renato and by the then President of the Republic, Fernando Henrique Cardoso. He held positions as Director of the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology of the University of São Paulo (*Universidade de São Paulo - USP*) (1983-1989), was Vice-Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art of the University of São Paulo (*Universidade de São Paulo - USP*) (2002-2006) and Director of the Center for African Studies of the University of São Paulo (*Universidade de São*

Paulo - USP) (2006-2010). He is the author of more than 150 publications, including books, book chapters and scientific articles. He has received several awards and honorary titles, including: The Commendation of the Order of Cultural Merit, by the Presidency of the Federative Republic of Brazil (2002). Degree of Officer of the Order of Rio Branco of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Itamaraty Palace (2013). Benedito Galvão Award, from the São Paulo State Bar Association (2012). Black Race Trophy 2012, by Afro-Brás and Zumbi dos Palmares College (*Faculdade Zumbi dos Palmares*) (2011). Honored as Dean in Anthropological Studies, by the Department of Anthropology of USP (2008). Tribute from the Association of Professors of the University of São Paulo (*Universidade de São Paulo*), ADUSP, in 2012, among others. He was one of the protagonists of black intellectuals in the national debate in defense of quotas and affirmative action policies. In September 2016, he received the title of Bahian citizenship by the Legislative Assembly of the State of Bahia. He was a senior visiting teacher at the Federal University of Recôncavo da Bahia (*Universidade Federal do Recôncavo da Bahia - UFRB*), through a scholarship from CAPES. On June 29th, 2018, he received the USP/2017 Human Rights Award.

2. Interview

Fabio Moraes: First of all, I would like to thank you for your kindness in granting us this interview. You were present at the 10th Maceió Book Biennial (10^a Bienal do Livro de Maceió) (2023), when you spoke to a full auditorium, whose people were, for the most part, young people. I carry out this interview based on some notes made by you on the occasion.

The first question is linked to the notion of “place of speech”, a concept that generates much debate among intellectuals, especially from the work of the philosopher and activist of the black feminist movement, Djamila Ribeiro. On the occasion of the Biennial, you mentioned that you do not agree with some young people who defend the idea that only black people should talk about racism. I remember that you said (not exactly with these words) that you saw

with “good eyes” the interest of non-black people on the subject of racism, considering that there was a time when there was not the slightest interest of these people on the subject. How do you position yourself between the notion of place of speech and the practices of “cancellation” of non-black people?

Kabengele Munanga: First of all, many words, notions, concepts, and speeches have a spatial and temporal dimension. In other words, they were coined from some geographical spaces by individuals, groups or societies that gave them some meanings. These meanings carry worldviews, philosophies of life, and ideologies. According to contacts and the evolution of societies, they can in the night of time² acquire new meanings that they did not have at the beginning. In this sense, the same word, notion, or concept can carry several meanings. That is, they can say different things and when using them, people may not mean the same thing. Which can hinder communication and even create conflicts. What is a place of speech for people, white and black, who fight over this concept? What is a place of speech for the feminist intellectual Djamila Ribeiro, what is a place of speech for you and me? What is a place of speech for black and black militants and non-militants, who fight around this notion? The first thing to do would be to contextualize this notion in search of a certain consensual definition. The victims of racist practices, black men and women, have different life experiences from white women and men, in addition to not occupying positions of command in the social, political and economic structures of Brazilian society. In this sense, they occupy inferior positions, which are their spaces or places of speech. Collectively, their speeches, from these places of submission, are different from the speeches of whites, who socially occupy positions of power and command with all the advantages that whiteness offers them, compared to people with blackness in a racist universe. In the fight against racism and the transformation of societies, the voices of the victims must be heard as a priority and they must be at the forefront of the struggles, counting on the solidarity of conscious whites, who understand that racism is not the problem of the black victim of racism, but a problem of the

² Expression equivalent to: “they can in the night of time”.

society that created racismo based on the hierarchy of superiors and inferiors, based on the differences in the geographies of our bodies. I believe that these white women and men who are aware that racism is not a problem of black people, but of their society, and that if we want to defeat it we must fight together, they also have their opinions and their words, despite collectively occupying the spaces of power and command. In this sense, they should not be disqualified and expelled from the debate. Of course, their place of speech is collectively different from the place of speech of black and indigenous people. What happened in the debates about quotas in public universities, despite being a demand of the black population from their place of speech? We counted on the participation of many whites who were in charge of these universities, that is, in the spaces of academic and intellectual power. While I fully understand the reactions of young black generations and the meaning of the place of speech, I believe in the solidarity and awareness of white people who fight against racism, politically and intellectually. However, black speech has to be prioritized and not minimized, as has been tried to be done. In the same way that men are not able to talk about the pains of childbirth that they have never felt and experienced, whites are no more qualified than blacks to talk about the pains of racism. Therefore, we cannot reject their solidarity, even though we know that our places of speech are different.

Fabio Moraes: The second question concerns another provocation made by you, when you commented on structural racism, a concept that became famous through the work “Structural Racism”, written by Professor Silvio Almeida, current Minister of Citizenship and Human Rights, in the Lula government. You raised the following question: “Racism is structural, but what is this structure? Mental, economic, social...”. Could you explain what led you to make this provocation about structural racism?

Kabengele Munanga: Undoubtedly, racism is structural and always has been. To say structural means that racism is lodged in the structure of society, that is, in the social fabric, in the same way as sexism, and classism. However,

racism is a phenomenon of great complexity and when we talk about it we cannot reduce it in terms of negative effects, simply because it is in the structure. It's like saying that if we transform the capitalist structure of Brazilian society today, tomorrow racism will end. After all, what is structure? We can see the structure of a house or a building. But the structure we're talking about is something we don't see and that many of us don't know how to define. Talking about structural racism has become a fad, something that everyone talks about without knowing the meaning. What structure are we talking about? Structure of a capitalist, socialist society, political, economic, social structure, mental structure, religious structure? What is interesting is the fact that many people today adjectivate racism in Brazil (structural racism), as if the word structural added something new to the effects of racism in Brazilian society. It has to be said structural racism, as if racism had no effect when we simply talk about Brazilian racism. It's as if culture and education don't carry racism. It is as if people's unconscious and their mental structures, products of education that define prejudiced behaviors and discrimination between individuals, have no effect on the lives of black people and communities. It is not enough to say that racism is structural, institutional, or systemic, as some prefer. The complex and difficult question to answer is how to change the structure, institution or system that produces racism. South Africa ended the Apartheid regime but continues with the capitalist power structure. Cuba has a socialist power structure, but it seems that racism has not entirely died. Science itself has already shown that races do not exist scientifically, putting an end to scientific racism. Rationality has made its contribution, but racism in fact continues to claim victims, despite the progress of science and technology. This shows the complexity of the phenomenon of racism and the difficulties of finding definitive recipes for the struggle to eradicate it definitively from human lives. I often say that we are still in the time warp of struggles for future human generations.

Fabio Moraes: The third question is related to a question I asked you at the Biennial, when I was in the audience. I would like to reformulate it and put it on record in this interview. Not infrequently, we are faced with a debate involving, on the one hand, groups generally linked to Marxism, who defend the idea that identity agendas weaken the class struggle; and on the other hand, groups, generally engaged with the black movement, that defend a less universalist and more identitarian approach. When we look at the works of classic authors of Brazilian sociology, who deal with the theme of racism or black issues, such as Florestan Fernandes and Octávio Ianni, we do not find this separation between capitalism and racism. In this sense, inspired by Malcolm X's famous phrase, "There is no capitalism without racismo", I ask two questions: Is it possible to fight racism (in capitalist countries) without fighting capitalism? How do you see this clash between identitarianism and class struggle?

Kabengele Munanga: In all struggles to transform societies, the people who fight must first know who their enemies are and what weapons to fight with. They have to know who they are, where they come from and where they are going. These two questions refer to the question of identity. In effect, both questions call into question two types of identity: Assigned identity or heteroidentity, and self-attributed identity or self-classification. Without awareness of this collective identity (who we are), there is no way to mobilize collectively to defend the freedom and human dignity of the victims. Individual conscience and individual struggle are not enough, for unity is strength. If blacks and women don't collectively assume their identities, I don't see how they can unite and mobilize politically to free themselves from the racism and sexism that deny their full humanity. But this does not prevent that in a capitalist society, poor blacks and whites can unite against a common enemy, the ruling class and the bourgeoisie that exploit them. But we must not fail to see that in a capitalist society, blacks are exploited doubly, because they are the poorest and because they are black, because of racism. Black women are exploited doubly, because they are poor and black women.

And since we don't know how long this capitalist structure will last, blacks will not sit idly by waiting for the revolution of the proletariat to change their living conditions. They are not dividing the class struggle, because in the meantime whites of Marxist thought have some mobility in capitalist society, better living conditions, health and education, which the black majority does not have. But when that revolution comes, conscious blacks and whites will mobilize to fight together in the same way they are fighting together in the capitalist structure. Affirmative action policies (quotas for blacks and indigenous peoples and poor whites), Laws No. 10,639/03 and No. 11,645/08 are promoted in the struggle within capitalist society for the inclusion of non-whites. Inclusion does not mean separating blacks and whites, on the contrary. Undoubtedly, racist theories were developed in the Western capitalist world and served to legitimize the colonization and exploitation of the countries of Africa, America and Asia, and to justify the holocaust of the Jews in Nazi Germany. But as long as capitalism exists, and I don't see the end of it tomorrow, the victims have to find other forms of struggle for their survival. South Africa ended the Apartheid regime within the capitalism implanted by the West. They succeeded with other forms of struggle without waiting for the end of capitalism, which continues to this day in that country. The quota policies have brought some results that we would not have had if we had been waiting for the revolution of the proletariat. I would like to see this revolution, and if it comes today, I will enter into it, despite my advanced age. In the meantime, we have three possible paths: Anti-racist laws that work, anti-racist and multicultural civic education, and the policies of focused affirmative action and abstract non-universalism, while we await the revolution that will come from all the oppressed united and not just the blacks. The great white Brazilian intellectuals, such as Florestan Fernandes, Octávio Ianni, Oracy Nogueira and many others, produced their works denouncing Brazilian-style racism and the myth of Brazilian racial democracy in the Brazilian capitalist context in the 1960s, when Americans were already discussing affirmative action policies. Rather, they needed to show that there was racism in Brazil that was denied by the myth and explain

how this racism worked compared to the United States, among others. This is what they have done to pave the way for the inclusion laws that are being worked on today, especially after the Durban Conference.

Fabio Moraes: At the 10th Maceió Biennial (10^a Bienal de Maceió), you commented that racism is the result of a racist education and that it should not be individualized, because it is a social construction, and you stated that “only through an anti-racist education is it possible to eliminate the monster of racism, created by traditional and Eurocentric education”. You said that “anti-racism is not enough, but it is necessary”. In this sense, why, although necessary, is anti-racism not enough and what, from this perspective, would be the pillars or bases of an effective anti-racist education?

Kabengele Munanga: Condemning racism through discourse and rationality is necessary to sensitize, raise awareness, politicize and show that it is a denial of the human rights of “others” different from “us”, because of the difference in skin color. But the anti-racist discourse is not enough, as it is necessary to move from the discourse to the transformative action of society. This action refers to the laws that work; a multicultural education that values human diversity and its differences, which constitute our collective wealth and our survival as a single human species; to focused public policies that contemplate our similarities and differences. These policies imply human and financial resources, they imply massive and quality investments, they imply political will and commitment in earnest. A simple anti-racist discourse to please the intelligence and political conscience of the victims is not enough.

Fabio Moraes: You often say (and we can easily see this in your writings) that in your works you prefer not to use the term “black race” to refer to black people. You commonly use the term “black population”, based on the notion of population proposed by biologist Jean Hiernaux. In this sense, what are your concerns with the use of the term “race” and how do you conceive the

frequent use of the term “ethnic-racial”, especially when it comes to anti-racist education and teaching?

Kabengele Munanga: Science itself, based on the progress made in Molecular Biology and Biochemistry, has demonstrated, since the second half of the twentieth century, that biologically race does not exist, without denying human variability. But race as a concept is still a sociological and political construction, which has marked and left great traces in the history of humanity. There are racists who continue to believe that races exist. There are also victims of racism who continue to believe that they are a different race from the white race. Rationality cannot destroy beliefs and passions, unfortunately. In our struggles against racism and to transform societies, we deal with human beings, concrete men and women, whom we can touch, see, smell, hear and not with race, which is a concept and not a tangible reality. That is why, although I understand the meaning of the people who speak of the black race, I prefer to use the concepts of black population, white population, indigenous, which together constitute human populations different from animal populations. The black movement understood this difference, because in the Report of the Durban Conference (2001), it speaks of quotas for black, indigenous and other minority populations and not of racial quotas. In fact, the notion of racial quotas was introduced into the national debate by intellectuals who were against quotas for non-whites. They said that the quotas would introduce the race that, scientifically, does not exist and would also introduce the racial conflicts that do not exist in Brazil, thanks to the ideal of racial democracy. Since then, the concept of racial quota, which is not “ours”, has entered our vocabulary. Aware of this, I do not use the concept of racial quota in my texts. I prefer to use the concept of quotas for blacks or for the black population. Others, most of us, use the composite concept “ethnic-racial” in the sense of race as a sociological construct and ethnic in the cultural sense. Even so, I've rarely used this compound and wonder if it hasn't become a fad. Some have even gone so far as to create a false opposition between “racial quotas” and “social quotas”, as if the problems

of blacks in Brazil were not problems of society and, therefore, social problems. However, the social is complex and its problems must be tackled in their peculiarities through specific focused policies and not through the so-called universalist policies. That's my point of view.

Fabio Moraes: Taking advantage of the fact that this year (2023) Law No. 10,639/03 completed 20 years, how do you evaluate its implementation, including with regard to teacher training focused on ethnic-racial relations?

Kabengele Munanga: It is necessary to recognize that this Law is a great achievement in the struggle of the Black Social Movement by introducing in the fundamental education where citizenship is formed, the obligation to teach African history and culture, the culture and history of black people in Brazil to replace a Eurocentric education, which denied the full humanity of black people and their contributions to the history of humanity that denied the contributions of African descendants in Brazil and reinforced prejudices and practices of racial discrimination, the consequences of which we know. The question is whether this Law works fully in all the states of the Union and in all the municipalities of the states. We know of the efforts of educators of conscience teachers, white and black, and of those in charge of some public schools. We know the importance of monitoring for the full functioning of a Law of this magnitude, we know the need for the permanent training of educators, and the production of quality books and teaching materials for the functioning of this Law. Scholars in the fields of education and in the fields of humanities and history have produced many books, some of great quality and others of mediocre quality. The question I ask myself is about the dissemination of these books and materials and their discernment by uninformed or ill-informed educators. I may be wrong, but the impression I have is that of a certain chaotic climate in the application of Laws No. 10,639/03 and No. 11,645/08. A critical inventory at the level of each state and each municipality seems to me to be necessary.

Fabio Moraes: Finally, I ask a broader and more contextual question. If, on the one hand, racism seems to be far from ceasing to exist in Brazil, on the other hand, the theme has, in recent years, gained greater relevance, even beyond the walls of universities. It is also noted that many books on the subject, written by black intellectuals, have been achieving a certain sales success among academics and non-academics. How do you evaluate this moment and this reception?

Kebengele Munanga: The fight against racism in Brazil began very late, compared to other countries that live with this phenomenon, such as the United States and South Africa during Apartheid. This delay has to do with the inertia of the myth of Brazilian racial demography and the perverse effects of the peculiarities of the Brazilian racist model. Anti-racist laws did not exist until 1951, with the Afonso Arinos Law which, for the first time, considered racial discrimination practices as a criminal misdemeanor. We wait until 1988, when the new constitution considered racist practice as an unspeakable, non-bailable crime subject to imprisonment. A Law that also did not work as expected. Now with the new Law, which considers racial insults as a crime³, we expect some positive changes in terms of punishment. Laws such as No. 10,639/03 and No. 11,645/08, the Statute of Racial Equality and Affirmative Action policies are assorting some effects in terms of inclusion, but they do not mean the end of racism in Brazil, in the United States, in Western countries, such as the emerging racism called xenophobia in relation to African, Arab and Latin immigrants. The United States already has a significant black middle class and petty bourgeoisie, the result of struggles, but racism lives on, despite science, education, and rationality. Which shows how much racism is a phenomenon of great complexity, whose final recipe conscious humanity does not yet have. In Brazil, awareness is growing both among some whites and

³This is Law No. 14,532, enacted in the then Lula government, on January 11th, 2023. This Law amends Law No. 7,716, of January 5th, 1989 (Racial Crime Law), and Decree-Law No. 2,848, of December 7th, 1940 (Penal Code), to classify racial insult as a crime of racism, provide for a penalty of suspension of rights in case of racism practiced in the context of sports or artistic activity and provide for a penalty for religious and recreational racism and for that practiced by a public official.

among the victims of racism themselves, and some achievements, such as the admission of black men and women into universities is undeniable, although they are still underrepresented in all areas of society, poorer among all poor, more victims of lethal police violence, etc. We are in a process that will take a few generations, because it will not be resolved in 20 years of quotas or the validity of Law No. 10,639/03, an accumulated abyss of about four centuries of inequalities between whites and non-whites in the structure of a racist society. That does not mean that we should minimize the results of the conquests of the struggles of past, present and future generations. The fight continues.

Recebido em: agosto de 2023

Aceito em: dezembro de 2023

COMO REFERENCIAR

MUNANGA, Kebengele. ““Racism is still alive, despite science, education and rationality”: An interview with Munanga. Entrevista concedida a Fabio Monteiro de Moraes. *Latitude*, Maceió, v. 17, n. 2, p. 1-13, 2023