



Why do People in the Netherlands Reject or Minimise the Idea that Racism is Structural, Despite Substantial Evidence that Structural Discrimination Exists?

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Abstract: This article examines an apparent paradox in contemporary Dutch society: the persistence of substantial empirical evidence of structural discrimination alongside continuing resistance to, or minimisation of, the concept of structural racism. Drawing on Dutch and international scholarship, governmental reports and social-psychological theory, the article distinguishes structural racism from individual prejudice and argues that discriminatory outcomes do not necessarily depend upon conscious racist intentions. Evidence from employment, housing, education, policing, government administration and other institutional domains indicates that unequal treatment cannot adequately be understood solely as a collection of isolated interpersonal incidents. The analysis situates contemporary inequalities within the broader historical context of Dutch colonialism, slavery, economic extraction and racial classification. It argues that colonial history remains relevant to understanding the development of racialised social categories, cultural representations and institutional relationships, while cautioning against assuming a simple causal relationship between historical colonialism and every contemporary inequality. Particular attention is given to the paradox whereby race is rejected as a legitimate biological category while racialisation continues to produce identifiable social consequences. The article subsequently examines several mechanisms that may contribute to resistance to structural interpretations of racism. These include a positive Dutch national self-image centred on tolerance, equality and liberalism; colour-blind and anti-racial ideologies; incomplete collective engagement with colonial history; preferences for individual rather than institutional explanations of inequality; system-justifying processes; competing definitions of racism; defensive responses to threats to personal and collective moral identity; and increasing political polarisation. These mechanisms help explain how individuals may sincerely endorse equality and oppose explicit racial prejudice while simultaneously underestimating institutional processes capable of reproducing unequal outcomes. At the same time, the analysis identifies increasing institutional recognition of structural discrimination in the Netherlands, reflected in governmental investigations, the childcare benefits scandal, greater attention to colonial history, the Dutch State's apology for its role in slavery, and expanding academic and public debate. The article therefore rejects both collective accusation and collective exoneration. Evidence of structural discrimination does not demonstrate that Dutch people are inherently or uniformly racist; conversely, the absence of conscious racist intent does not demonstrate the absence of structural racism. The article concludes that scientific and policy debate should move beyond the binary question of whether "the Dutch are racist" and focus instead on identifying the historical, institutional, cultural and psychological mechanisms through which unequal outcomes are produced and maintained, and on developing empirically supported interventions capable of reducing them.

Keywords: structural racism, structural discrimination, Netherlands, Dutch society, colonialism, racialization, colonial memory, colour-blindness, anti-racism, national

identity, system justification, institutional discrimination, social identity, political polarization, inequality

INTRODUCTION

Research suggests there is a gap between empirical evidence of structural discrimination and public recognition of structural racism in the Netherlands. It would not be accurate to say that *all* or *most* Dutch people deny it. Many academics, journalists, policymakers, civil servants and citizens openly acknowledge structural racism. At the same time, surveys and qualitative research indicate that denial or minimisation remains common in large parts of society.

“In the scholarly work 'Psychosis of Whiteness', Professor Kehinde Andrews¹ (2023) proposes a novel theoretical framework for understanding the concept of whiteness as a psychosis. This term is employed to denote a system of collective delusions that is impervious to evidence, as it serves to shield society from its own racist tendencies. In this particular context, the term 'whiteness' does not denote an ethnic or racial group, but rather refers to a social construct that has been shaped by centuries of slavery and colonialism. This social construct perpetuates a global system of exploitation, and the associated delusions that serve to shield this system are a key aspect of its functionality. This diagnosis is of particular pertinence in the Netherlands. The Dutch refute the notion of 'race' as a biological concept, yet their thoughts and actions continue to be influenced by its application.

With regard to their own history, the Dutch population is among the most ignorant in the world, a complacent ignorance that is cherished (Essed & Hoving, 2014). It is evident that nineteenth-century racial theory was, in part, influenced by Dutch ideology. Utilising the concept of facial angle (craniometry, the Dutch anatomist Petrus Camper (craniometry, 17912) developed a classification system that placed individuals on a spectrum ranging from apes to Apollo. The classification system he developed provided the foundation for subsequent racial science, which sought to justify the belief that white Europeans represented a higher stage of evolution compared to black individuals, who were often positioned at a lower evolutionary rank, even being considered more primitive and closer to apes in terms of biological development.

The aforementioned pseudoscience has never truly disappeared; rather, it has become deeply entrenched within the cultural consciousness. Mok (1999) demonstrates that, well into the 1990s, Dutch children were instructed in racial theory as objective curriculum content, whilst classmates of colour sat right next to them. It is estimated that approximately half of today's

¹ <https://ap.lc/tsvwD>

² **Craniometry** is the scientific measurement of the dimensions and proportions of the human skull. Utilizing precise landmarks (like the *nasion* or *bregma*) and instruments like spreading calipers, it allows physical anthropologists and forensic scientists to determine a skull's ancestry, sex, and age

adults were seated at school desks at that time. Wekker (2016) refers to this as the cultural archive, conceptualising it as a reservoir of knowledge, feelings and reflexes within which white Dutch people are raised and consequently come to experience racism as something natural.

This delusion is sustained by its own internal logic, which reinforces its validity through a process of self-confirmation. The utilisation of jungle noises in football stadiums, racist slurs and the blackface character Zwarte Piet constitute public rituals in which the hierarchy is initially enacted and subsequently denied (Hilhorst & Hermes, 2016). The phenomenon under discussion is characterised by the presence of systematic labour market discrimination (Andriessen et al., 2012) and a tax authority's labelling of individuals with a second nationality as fraudsters. Notwithstanding the official abolition of the concept of 'race', it remains a pervasive social construct (M'charek, 2013).

The deliberate instilling of racism is indicative of a societal structure that is partly built on dehumanisation, and consequently, on the exploitation of human beings for material gain. Consequently, the phenomenon of racism is often attributed to American, historical or far-right contexts, while its occurrence within the Dutch context is seldom acknowledged (Essed & Hoving, 2014; Çankaya & Mepschen, 2019). Weiner (2014) proposes the concept of large-scale denial, which perpetuates the ideological subjugation of the metropolis. The phenomenon of colour-blindness has been demonstrated to serve as a veil that obscures the underlying hierarchy, thereby enabling its perpetuation. Consequently, individuals frequently hold a concurrent belief in their own distinct 'race' while simultaneously perceiving themselves to have transcended racial boundaries.

A society that is reliant on the systematic negation of reality for the maintenance of its colonial wealth, traditions and self-image can be considered delusional, in the precise sense of the term as defined by Andrews. The contention of the aforementioned author is that the process of survival is contingent upon the ability to discern the aforementioned illusion, the protection of one's intellectual faculties, and the implementation of radical transformation. This is attributable to the fact that such a system is incapable of being reformed from within (Aküz, Roman, 2026³). ”

³ <https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:share:7485463855188598785/>



Figure 1: Psychosis of Whiteness (AI: <https://chatgpt.com/c/6a797ffa-6574-83eb-859f-4702ddb469fa>)

WHAT DO THE FACTS SHOW?

A substantial corpus of studies conducted by the Dutch government and independent entities has demonstrated that discrimination is not confined to isolated incidents.

Some examples include:

1. The **Dutch State Commission against Discrimination and Racism** concluded that discrimination and racism are **historically and structurally embedded** in Dutch society and recommended shifting attention from individual incidents to structural causes. The commission's research, chaired by Dr. Joyce Sylvester, highlighted several alarming trends in Dutch society, politics, and Caribbean Netherlands (2023; 2025; & 2026).
 - **Government Complicity:** The state itself is found to be responsible for constructing and maintaining historical hierarchies of worthiness and systemic racism through policies and public services.
 - **Political Discourse:** Research co-commissioned by the committee revealed that discriminatory remarks by politicians in the House of Representatives directly fuel and normalize online discrimination.
 - **Systemic Changes Required:** In its final report, the commission issued ten recommendations. These include implementing discrimination impact assessments, banning data-driven profiling in government enforcement, updating non-discrimination law, and involving affected citizens in policymaking
2. The **Dutch Social and Cultural Planning Office (SCP)** has repeatedly found that people with non-Western migration backgrounds, Muslims, Black Dutch citizens, Jewish people, LGBT people and people with disabilities report substantially higher levels of discrimination than the population average (Andriessen et al. 2020). "This study has revealed that just over a quarter (27 per cent) of Dutch residents have personally experienced discrimination. This figure is comparable to that of five years ago. A salient issue is the rise in reported instances of discrimination within educational settings. Furthermore, cases of this nature frequently involve egregious forms of discrimination, including violence, threats and sexual harassment. The consequences of experiencing discrimination are significant, and may include social withdrawal, loss of trust in institutions, and the cessation of educational and occupational pursuits. Consequently, the realisation of an inclusive society remains a considerable distance away (The Staatscommissie tegen Discriminatie en Racisme, 2026) indicated that approximately 42 per cent of their survey respondents reported feelings of discrimination on the basis of their surname or ethnicity, suggesting that Turkish and Moroccan Muslims are the demographic most affected by experiences of exclusion)." Key findings regarding these groups include:
 - **Migration Backgrounds & Black Dutch Citizens:** Studies show that individuals with a migration background, particularly those of Moroccan, Turkish, and African descent, disproportionately experience bias. This is notably evident in the labour market, with research finding that minority graduates have significantly lower chances of securing jobs, even when educational backgrounds are identical.
 - **Muslims:** Government-backed (Nationaal onderzoek moslimdiscriminatie) highlights high levels of discrimination directed at Muslims in the Netherlands, ranging from workplace prejudice to verbal and physical harassment based on ethnicity or religion.

- Jewish People: Antisemitism remains a persistent and frequently reported issue, with the Netherlands Institute for Human Rights (College voor de Rechten van de Mens⁴) noting that Jewish citizens report high levels of discrimination and safety concerns.
 - LGBT People: Despite the country's historic LGBTQ+ rights record, SCP reports that discrimination and intimidation—especially street harassment and workplace exclusion—remain substantially higher for sexual and gender minorities than the population average.
3. People with Disabilities: Discrimination in accessibility, employment, and social participation is a well-documented issue. In response to these persistent inequalities, the Netherlands amended Article 1 of its Constitution in 2023 to explicitly ban discrimination based on disability and sexual orientation (Article 1 Equality. All persons in the Netherlands shall be treated equally in equal circumstances. Discrimination on the grounds of religion, belief, political opinion, race or sex or on any other grounds whatsoever shall not be permitted⁵).
 4. Evidence of unequal treatment has been documented in employment, housing, education, policing, childcare benefits, internships and other institutional settings.
 5. The existence of these patterns does not mean every Dutch person is racist. Structural racism refers to persistent inequalities produced through institutions, historical legacies, policies or everyday practices, even when many individuals have no conscious racist intent.

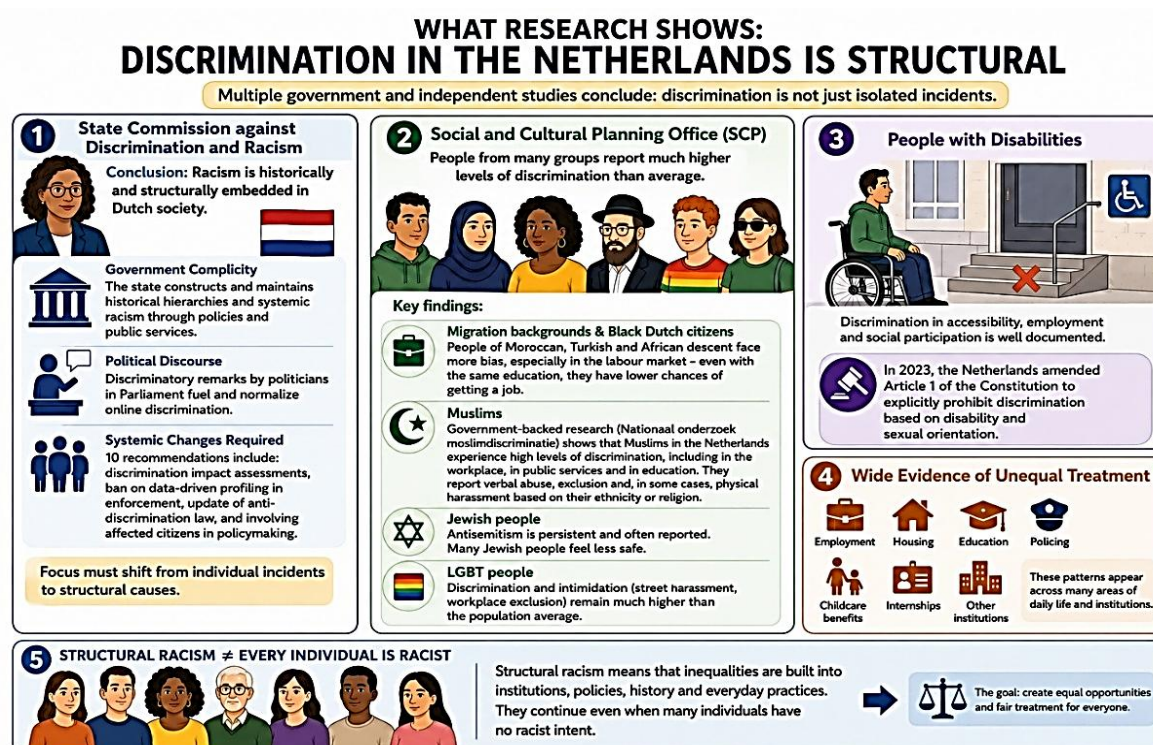


Figure 2: Discrimination in the Netherlands is structural (made with AI:
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⁴ <https://www.mensenrechten.nl/>

⁵ <http://www.dutchcivillaw.com/constitution.htm>

Facts and Colonies

The present article focuses primarily on the Netherlands itself and its residents. It would be remiss to ignore the international damage caused by the Dutch and Netherlands through its colonisation of 53 countries. The process of colonisation can be defined as the interference with, and at times the destruction of, the societal, economic, social and environmental living conditions of the peoples inhabiting colonised countries.

This phenomenon manifested over a period spanning multiple centuries. The contemporary scientific discipline of epigenetics posits that this damage is applicable to humans, animals and plants (definition of epigenetics: “Epigenetics⁶ is the study of how behaviours and environment can cause changes that affect the way genes work. Unlike genetic mutations, which change the actual DNA sequence, epigenetic modifications act as chemical “switches” that turn genes on or off”). The subsequent section proffers a synopsis of the duration of colonisation in numerous countries that were colonised by the Netherlands and its predecessors.

The Dutch colonial empire (robber state) was established in the late sixteenth century and endured until the twentieth century. The aforementioned entity comprised dozens of territories worldwide, ranging from colonies to trading posts and plantation economies. The scale and nature of the Dutch presence exhibited significant variations across different regions. The following section provides a synopsis of the Dutch colonial presence by continent in 2026, categorised according to the primary regions and the duration of each.

The Period under Consideration is Approximately four Centuries Long and is Located in Asia

The primary focus in Asia is the Republic Indonesia with 287.9 million inhabitants in 2026, previously known as the Dutch East Indies. The period under discussion extends over a time span of 3.5 centuries, commencing from the establishment of the VOC in 1602 and concluding with the attainment of independence in 1945/1949. Dutch colonization of the Republic of Indonesia lasted over three centuries, initially driven by the Dutch East India Company (VOC) to monopolize the spice trade. The era resulted in the massive extraction of wealth to the Netherlands, the geopolitical unification of the archipelago, and deep societal trauma from violent suppression and exploitation. The Dutch colonial era fundamentally drained Indonesia's wealth, forced a violent path to freedom, and permanently shifted the demographics of both nations through mass migration⁷.

⁶ <https://www.cdc.gov/genomics-and-health/epigenetics/index.html>

⁷ <https://ap.lc/JSlyx>

Historical Event	Primary Result for Indonesia	Primary Result for the Netherlands
Cultivation System	Severe poverty, Javanese famines, and loss of food security.	Funded national infrastructure and saved the Dutch treasury.
War of Independence	High casualties, national trauma, and hard-fought sovereignty.	Global diplomatic condemnation and loss of colonial empire status.
Repatriation Wave	Loss of skilled administrative workforce and diverse demographics.	Birth of a large Indo-Dutch and Moluccan diaspora community.

Figure 3: Summary of Colonial impacts

The island of **Sri Lanka**, formerly known as **Ceylon** was a Dutch colony for nearly 140 years. The Dutch East India Company (VOC) controlled the island's coastal regions from **1658** to **1796**. **Galle Fort** is the crown jewel of Dutch colonial architecture in Sri Lanka. Originally built by the Portuguese in 1588, it was heavily expanded by the Dutch East India Company (VOC) starting in 1649. Designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the fort features thick ramparts and intact colonial streets.

India (Cordomandoche and Bengal): The establishment of trading posts in the 17th and 18th centuries was followed by their transfer to the United Kingdom in 1825.

The period under discussion in this study is that of Taiwan (Formosa) from 1624 to 1662. The Dutch colonial presence in India, managed by the VOC (Dutch East India Company), primarily focused on commerce rather than territorial conquest. They operated fortified trading posts and factories to dominate the lucrative spice, indigo, and textile trade, particularly along the Coromandel Coast and in Bengal.

Key Regions & Settlements

Dutch India⁸ was administratively divided into directorates and governorates, with the Coromandel Coast and Bengal acting as major economic hubs:

- **Dutch Coromandel (Cordomandoche):** Established in 1610 with headquarters at **Pulicat**, and later **Nagapattinam**. This region served as the headquarters for Dutch India and was crucial for exporting fine Indian textiles to Southeast Asia in exchange for spices.
- **Dutch Bengal:** Established in 1656, with its primary headquarters and mint at **Chinsurah** (established in 1653). The Dutch traded heavily in raw silk, opium, saltpetre, and cotton from Bengal.
- **Other Centers:** While Coromandel and Bengal were the hubs, they also held settlements in **Surat** (Gujarat) and **Cochin** (Malabar)

Trade Dynamics. Unlike the British, the Dutch were less interested in political rule and viewed India primarily as a mercantile bridge connecting their global operations.

⁸ Colonisation by the Dutch of India (Cordomandoche and Bengal)

- **The Textile-Spice Loop:** Textiles were manufactured on the Coromandel Coast and in Bengal and traded in the Indonesian archipelago for spices, which were then shipped back to Europe.
- **The Slave-Labour Trade (1):** A darker dimension of their operations involved the export of enslaved people from the Coromandel Coast to the Dutch West Indies during famines and wars. Although the majority of Surinamese Hindustani people have their roots in northern India, a minority of approximately 8 per cent to 10 per cent originate from the Coromandel Coast (southern India), with Madras as their main port of departure.
- **The Slave-Labour Trade (2):** The majority of individuals who immigrated to Suriname from India did so between the years 1873 and 1916, primarily as indentured labourers. The majority of these individuals hailed from northern India, specifically the states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Bengal. The majority of indentured labourers were sourced from Uttar Pradesh (formerly the United Provinces) and Bihar. Port of departure: The embarkation process was primarily conducted in the port city of Kolkata (formerly Calcutta), utilising the Suriname Ghat located on the Hooghly River. Villagers: The recruitment process was predominantly conducted in the surrounding rural areas, resulting in a demographic composition primarily consisting of farmers and agricultural labourers.

Japan (Dejima): From 1641 to 1853, the site functioned as a commercial trading post, devoid of any formal colonisation (Cullen, 2018).

“Dejima functioned as a highly restricted commercial trading post and the sole gateway for Western knowledge into Japan. Maintained by the Tokugawa shogunate to enforce its isolationist policy, the Dutch lived under strict surveillance and were completely segregated from the broader Japanese populace, rather than acting as a formal colonising force⁹.”

The Period Under Discussion Encompasses Two to Three Centuries in the Case of America and the Caribbean, and extends from 1667 (Treaty of Breda) until independence in 1975 in the case of Suriname. This encompasses a period of over three centuries.

The Netherlands Antilles (comprising the islands of Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao, Saba, Sint Eustatius and Sint Maarten): The temporal scope of the present study encompasses the period from the early 17th century (circa 1630) to the present day. Curaçao and the other islands are still part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands as autonomous countries and special municipalities.

The period under discussion pertains to the **Dutch Brazil region**, which was established in 1630 and lasted until 1654. The location in question was Mauritsstad, which is now known as Recife.

The **North American** context under discussion here is that of New Netherland, which lasted from 1609 to 1664. The focus of this study is the period centred on New Amsterdam, which is now known as New York.

⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1858089164845026>

The African Continent (Approximately Two Centuries)

South Africa (Cape of Good Hope): The period under discussion lasted for just over 1.5 centuries (1652-1795 and 1803-1806).

Ghana (Dutch Gold Coast): 1637-1872 (forts and trading posts for the slave trade).

The Dutch Empire was a vast network of trading posts, plantations, and colonies across the globe. While historians categorize these into roughly **50 to 53 distinct territories, outposts, and colonies**, their tangible legacies remain clearly visible in 2026 through architecture, language, and cultural institutions.

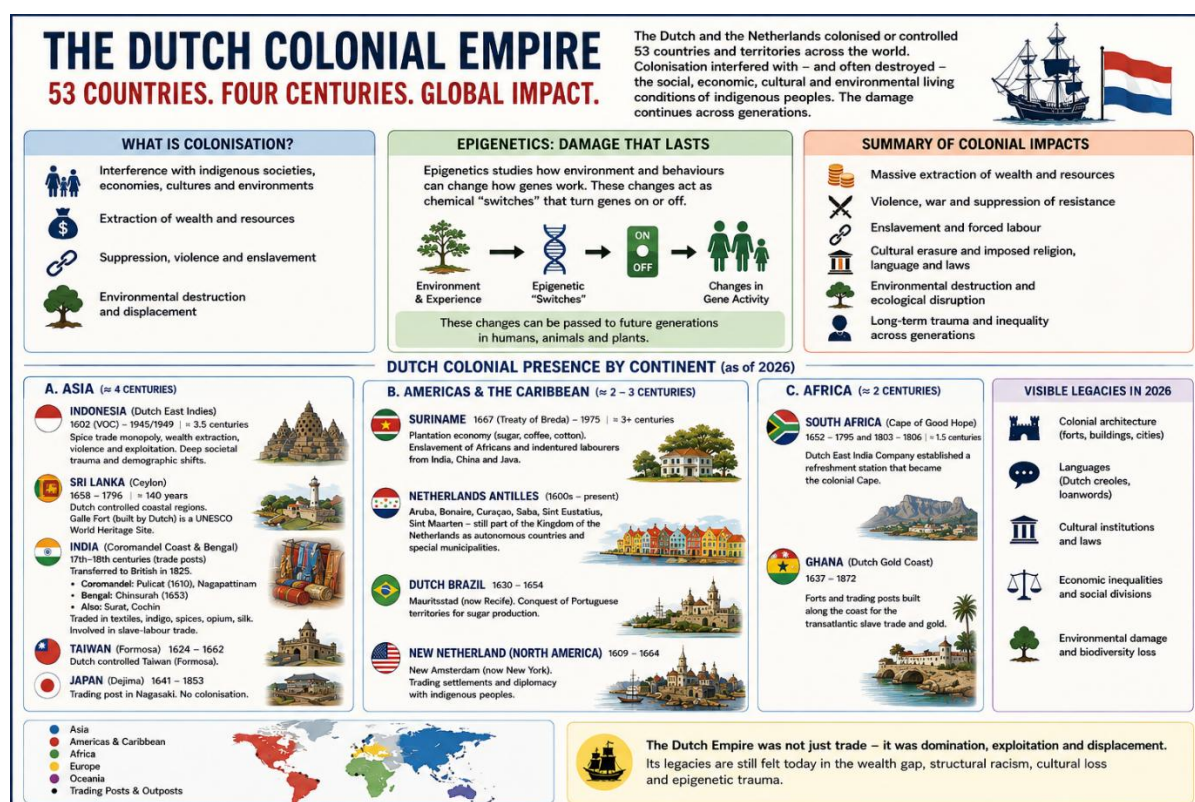


Figure 4: The Dutch Colonial Empire (AI: <https://chatgpt.com/c/6a797ffa-6574-83eb-859f-4702ddb469fa>)

The Following Examples are Provided to Illustrate the Phenomenon of Dutch Colonisation, as Well as the Remnants there of that are Present in 2026

A few hyper-specific and prominent examples of Dutch colonization visible today span several key regions:

1. The Americas & Caribbean

- United States:** The legacy of the *Nieuw Nederland* (New Netherland) colony is deeply woven into the Northeastern US. Visible remnants include the street layout and neighbourhood names of Lower Manhattan (originally *New Amsterdam*), historic Dutch colonial homes in New York's Hudson Valley (such as the Bronck House), and the preservation of Dutch-origin place names (e.g., *Staten Island*, *Brooklyn*, *Yonkers*).

- Suriname: As a former plantation economy, the capital city of Paramaribo retains its authentic 17th- and 18th-century inner city, a UNESCO World Heritage site showcasing classic Dutch-style wooden and brick architecture.
- Curaçao & Aruba: These Caribbean islands are still constituent countries within the Kingdom of the Netherlands today. You can easily spot the Dutch architectural influence in Willemstad's brightly coloured, gabled Handelskade waterfront buildings.

2. Africa

- South Africa: The Cape Dutch architectural style, characterized by distinctive curvilinear gables and thatched roofs, remains a prominent fixture across the Western Cape (especially in the wine regions like Stellenbosch and Franschhoek). Additionally, Afrikaans—a language that evolved directly from 17th-century Dutch—remains widely spoken.
- Ghana: The former Dutch Gold Coast left behind formidable coastal fortresses. The Elmina Castle and Fort Saint Jago still stand as UNESCO World Heritage landmarks, reflecting the extensive history of the Dutch West India Company.

3. Asia

- Indonesia: The former Dutch East Indies is where the Dutch held power the longest. Visible history is abundant, particularly in Jakarta (formerly *Batavia*), where the Kota Tua (Old Town) district features restored VOC (Dutch East India Company) warehouses and the Wayang Museum. Outside the capital, Dutch administrative buildings still serve as local governance centres and museums in cities like Bandung and Surabaya.
- Sri Lanka: The Dutch left an indelible mark on Sri Lankan law (Roman-Dutch law is still partially active) and infrastructure. The Galle Fort, built in the 17th century, is fully intact and remains a vibrant, inhabited cultural hub.
- Japan: Though not a full colony, the Dutch were the only Western nation allowed to trade with Japan during its isolation period via the artificial island of Dejima in Nagasaki. Today, Dejima has been meticulously restored and operates as an open-air historical museum.

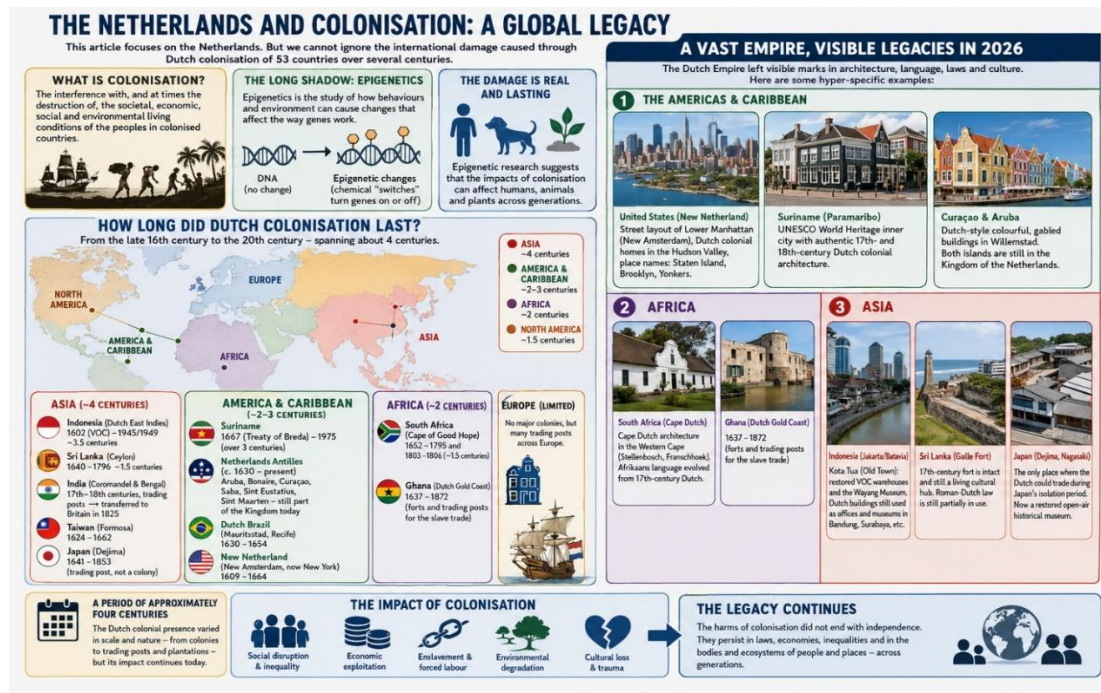


Figure 5: The Netherlands and Colonisation: a Global Legacy (made with AI:
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WHY IS STRUCTURAL RACISM REJECTED IN THE NETHERLANDS?

Recognition of structural racism does not imply that every individual belonging to a majority population is personally racist. This distinction is fundamental to the scientific study of racism. Individual racism refers primarily to prejudicial beliefs, attitudes or discriminatory behaviour at the interpersonal level, whereas structural racism concerns social arrangements, institutional practices and historically developed mechanisms that systematically generate or reproduce unequal opportunities and outcomes between social groups (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Feagin, 2006; Reskin, 2012). Consequently, it is possible for structural discrimination to persist without every individual participating in the relevant institutions consciously intending to discriminate.

This distinction is particularly relevant to the Netherlands. A substantial body of Dutch and international scholarship documents racial and ethnic inequalities while simultaneously identifying resistance to conceptualising these inequalities in terms of racism (Essed & Hoving, 2014; Weiner, 2014; Wekker, 2016). Weiner (2014), for example, describes a Dutch paradox in which the social relevance of race is frequently denied despite empirical evidence of racialised inequalities across institutions. The rejection of structural racism should therefore not automatically be interpreted as evidence of personal racism. Instead, it can be examined as the product of interacting historical, psychological, ideological and political processes.

National Self-image and Identity Protection

One explanation concerns Dutch national identity. The Netherlands has long cultivated a positive national self-image associated with tolerance, equality, openness, liberalism and pragmatism. Such representations are not merely descriptions of political institutions; they

can become components of collective identity. Evidence of persistent racial discrimination can consequently create tension between the belief that Dutch society is fundamentally tolerant and egalitarian and evidence suggesting that certain institutions produce unequal outcomes.

Wekker (2016) analyses this tension through the concept of *white innocence*. She argues that Dutch national consciousness contains a paradox between a strong identification with tolerance and ethical progressiveness, on the one hand, and difficulty recognising the continuing significance of colonialism and racialisation, on the other. Her concept of the Dutch “cultural archive” refers to historically accumulated ideas, emotions, representations and practices shaped partly by approximately four centuries of imperial and colonial relations. This argument can also be understood through social identity theory. Individuals derive part of their self-concept from membership in valued social groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Information that threatens the moral standing of one's group may therefore elicit defensive responses. Research on collective guilt similarly demonstrates that people can respond defensively when their ingroup is associated with historical or contemporary injustice (Branscombe et al., 1999; Wohl et al., 2006). Thus, allegations of structural racism may sometimes be experienced not merely as empirical claims about institutions but as moral accusations against the Netherlands, Dutch culture or Dutch people.

Colour-blindness and Dutch Anti-racism

A second mechanism concerns colour-blind ideology. The proposition that people should be treated without regard to ethnicity or skin colour is often motivated by egalitarian intentions. Statements such as “I don't see colour” can therefore express a sincere aspiration towards equal treatment rather than hostility towards minority groups. However, psychological research indicates that racial colour-blindness can have unintended consequences. Apfelbaum, Norton, and Sommers (2012) define racial colour-blindness as an approach in which racial group membership should ideally neither be noticed nor taken into consideration. Their review demonstrates that, although colour-blindness can be motivated by a desire to avoid prejudice, suppressing discussion of racial categories can make existing inequalities more difficult to recognise and address.

This issue assumes a distinctive form in the Netherlands. Weiner (2014) describes Dutch *anti-racism* as the rejection of race as a legitimate biological or social category. The biological rejection of race is scientifically understandable; however, rejecting biological race does not necessarily eliminate racialisation as a social process. Weiner argues that race can simultaneously be officially repudiated while racialised patterns continue to operate within social institutions. She therefore identifies a disconnect between the denial of race and the persistence of inequalities associated with racial and ethnic categorisation. This distinction is crucial: race need not constitute a valid biological taxonomy in order for racial categorisation to produce real social consequences.

Colonial Memory and Historical Knowledge

A third explanation concerns the relationship between colonial history and collective memory. Dutch colonialism encompassed Indonesia, Suriname, the Caribbean, southern Africa and numerous commercial and colonial settlements elsewhere. Nevertheless, the

incorporation of colonial violence, slavery and their long-term consequences into Dutch collective memory and education has historically been uneven.

Recent evidence illustrates the extent of this knowledge gap. A chapter in the 2025 scholarly volume *Slavery and the Dutch State* reports a 2021 survey of approximately 30,000 Dutch respondents in which only 4% stated that they knew “a lot” about the history of slavery and 23% “quite a bit”; 42% reported having learned only a little about it at school, while 31% reported having learned almost nothing or nothing. Sixty-eight per cent supported more education on the subject. The authors further observe that Dutch school curricula have addressed slavery but have often done so in limited and Eurocentric ways.

Historical education is important because interpretations of contemporary inequality depend partly on understandings of the processes that produced present institutions and social categories. Recent research comparing Dutch and Indonesian history education between 1950 and 2025 similarly emphasises the importance of textbooks and history education in shaping collective memory and national identity (Van der Vlies & Utami, 2026).

What might be described as *colonial amnesia* should therefore be treated carefully. It does not mean that Dutch citizens literally know nothing about colonialism. Rather, it refers to selective or incomplete collective remembrance through which the connections between colonial history and contemporary racialised structures may become difficult to recognise (Essed & Hoving, 2014; Weiner, 2014; Wekker, 2016).

Individual versus Structural Explanations of Inequality

A fourth mechanism concerns causal attribution. Inequality can be explained at several levels. Individual explanations emphasise characteristics such as educational achievement, language proficiency, cultural practices, socioeconomic resources, motivation and personal effort. Structural explanations focus instead on institutional procedures, opportunity structures, historical inequalities, organisational practices and cumulative disadvantage.

These explanations are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Educational attainment, socioeconomic circumstances and language competence can genuinely influence social outcomes. The analytical problem arises when individual explanations are assumed to provide a complete account and institutional mechanisms are consequently excluded from consideration.

System Justification Theory provides one possible psychological explanation for this tendency. Jost, Banaji, and Nosek (2004) argue that people can be motivated to perceive existing social arrangements as legitimate, stable and relatively fair. Their review of a decade of research found substantial evidence for psychological processes that justify the social status quo, including circumstances in which existing arrangements disadvantage particular groups.

This theoretical perspective does not imply that people consciously decide to defend inequality. Rather, perceptions of fairness and legitimacy can influence how ambiguous evidence is interpreted. An unequal outcome may consequently be attributed more readily to differences between individuals than to characteristics of the institutions within which those individuals operate.

Competing Definitions of Racism

A fifth and particularly important source of disagreement is conceptual. In everyday language, *racism* is frequently understood as intentional racial hatred, explicit prejudice, insults or deliberately discriminatory conduct. Under this definition, demonstrating racism requires identifying a racist actor and establishing hostile or discriminatory intent.

Structural theories employ a broader level of analysis. Bonilla-Silva (1997), for example, argues that racism should not be reduced to individual prejudice but analysed in relation to social systems through which resources, opportunities and social positions are unequally distributed. Reskin (2012) similarly conceptualises discrimination as a system in which processes operating at different institutional and interpersonal levels can interact and cumulatively reproduce racial inequality.

These definitions produce fundamentally different questions. An individual-level analysis may ask:

“Did this person intend to discriminate?”

A structural analysis instead asks:

“Does this institution, policy or recurring practice systematically produce unequal opportunities or outcomes, and through what mechanisms?”

The two questions are related but not equivalent. People can therefore examine the same evidence and disagree about whether it constitutes “racism” because they are applying different definitions and levels of analysis.

Defensive Psychological Responses

Discussions of racism can also activate psychological defence mechanisms. When people understand racism as a serious moral failing, being told that their group benefits from or participates in a racially unequal system can threaten both personal and collective moral identity.

Social-psychological research on identity threat, collective responsibility and collective guilt demonstrates that reminders of ingroup wrongdoing can produce multiple reactions. These include acknowledgement and willingness to repair injustice, but also distancing, justification, minimisation and rejection of collective responsibility (Branscombe et al., 1999; Wohl et al., 2006). This provides a more nuanced interpretation of defensive reactions to discussions of structural racism. Denial or minimisation should not automatically be regarded as proof of racist motivation. In some circumstances, these responses may reflect attempts to preserve a positive personal or collective identity. Importantly, such defensive processes are not specifically Dutch phenomena; they have been documented across national and intergroup contexts.

Political Polarisation and the Transformation of an Empirical Question

Finally, perceptions of structural racism are embedded within a wider political environment. Immigration, multiculturalism, Islam, national identity, colonial history and integration have become politically contested issues in the Netherlands. Consequently, the concept of

structural racism can acquire political meanings extending beyond the empirical evidence being discussed.

This creates the possibility of *identity sorting*: acknowledging structural racism can become associated with a progressive political identity, while scepticism towards the concept can become associated with defending national identity or conservative political positions. Once an empirical proposition becomes a marker of political identity, disagreement can become more resistant to evidence because accepting or rejecting evidence may simultaneously communicate group membership.

This is particularly important for scientific and public debate. Whether discrimination occurs within employment, education, housing or government should ideally be determined through empirical investigation rather than political identification. Similarly, evidence of discrimination in a particular institution should not automatically be generalised to every Dutch institution or every Dutch citizen.

Increasing Institutional Recognition in the Netherlands

The picture is therefore not simply one of national denial. During the past decade, Dutch institutions have increasingly recognised the existence and historical roots of structural discrimination.

One particularly important turning point was the childcare benefits scandal (*toeslagenaffaire*), which exposed severe failures in governmental treatment of families and raised fundamental questions concerning discriminatory risk selection, nationality and institutional practices. More broadly, the Dutch government has increasingly acknowledged racism and discrimination as institutional and structural policy concerns.

Historical recognition has also changed. On 19 December 2022, Prime Minister Mark Rutte formally apologised on behalf of the Dutch government for the role of the Dutch State in slavery. Significantly, the apology was addressed not only to people who had been enslaved but also to their descendants, explicitly connecting historical injustice with subsequent generations.

These developments have occurred alongside expanding scholarship on Dutch colonialism, racism and discrimination, including work by Essed and Hoving (2014), Weiner (2014), and Wekker (2016). Collectively, these changes suggest that Dutch understandings of racism and colonialism are neither static nor homogeneous.

Conclusion

The available scholarship supports a distinction between the existence of structural discrimination and the attribution of racism to an entire national population. Evidence that discriminatory processes operate within Dutch institutions does not demonstrate that Dutch people are inherently, collectively or uniformly racist. Such a conclusion would itself replace institutional analysis with an overly broad categorisation of individuals.

Instead, resistance to the concept of structural racism can be understood through several interacting mechanisms: differing definitions of racism; a positive national self-image centred on tolerance and equality; colour-blind or anti-racial ideologies; incomplete

engagement with colonial history; preference for individual rather than institutional explanations of inequality; system-justifying processes; defensive responses to threats to collective moral identity; and contemporary political polarisation (Apfelbaum et al., 2012; Essed & Hoving, 2014; Jost et al., 2004; Weiner, 2014; Wekker, 2016).

The resulting paradox is important. A person may genuinely endorse equality, reject biological notions of race and oppose deliberate racial prejudice while simultaneously underestimating structural mechanisms that generate unequal outcomes. Conversely, recognising structural racism does not require assuming malicious intent on the part of every person participating in a social system. This distinction provides a more scientifically productive basis for analysing Dutch society: the central question becomes not “*Are Dutch people racist?*” but rather which institutional, historical, cultural and psychological processes generate or maintain unequal outcomes, how strong is the evidence for those processes, and what interventions are capable of changing them?



Figure 6: Why Some Dutch People Reject Structural Racism (AI: <https://chatgpt.com/c/6a797ffa-6574-83eb-859f-4702ddb469fa>)

CONCLUSION

The central question addressed in this article is why structural racism and discrimination in the Netherlands may be rejected or minimised despite a substantial body of empirical evidence demonstrating persistent inequalities. The analysis suggests that this apparent contradiction cannot adequately be explained by assuming either that Dutch society is uniformly racist or, conversely, that discrimination consists merely of isolated acts committed by prejudiced individuals. Rather, the evidence points towards an interaction between historical legacies, institutional processes, cultural narratives, psychological mechanisms and contemporary political dynamics.

A fundamental distinction must therefore be maintained between **individual racism** and **structural racism**. Structural racism does not require every person participating in an institution to possess racist beliefs or discriminatory intentions. It refers instead to historically developed arrangements, institutional routines, policies and social practices that can systematically produce or reproduce unequal opportunities and outcomes (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Feagin, 2006; Reskin, 2012). This distinction is essential because an exclusive focus on individual intentions risks making structural discrimination conceptually invisible. The relevant question is not only whether an individual intended to discriminate, but also whether particular institutional arrangements repeatedly disadvantage particular groups.

The evidence reviewed in this article indicates that discrimination in the Netherlands cannot be reduced to occasional interpersonal incidents. Unequal treatment has been documented across employment, housing, education, policing, internships and government administration, while Dutch governmental and independent institutions have increasingly acknowledged the structural dimensions of discrimination. At the same time, experiences of discrimination are unevenly distributed across the population, with particular ethnic, religious and other minority groups reporting substantially greater exposure. This combination of institutional evidence and individual experiences makes it necessary to analyse discrimination at multiple levels simultaneously.

The historical dimension is equally important. Dutch colonialism extended across Asia, Africa, the Americas and the Caribbean and involved highly diverse forms of commercial domination, territorial control, plantation economies, forced labour, slavery, violence and resource extraction. Its contemporary relevance cannot be established simply by assuming a direct causal relationship between every colonial practice and every present inequality. Nevertheless, colonial history provides an indispensable context for understanding the development of social classifications, economic relationships, cultural representations and racialised hierarchies that did not automatically disappear when colonial rule formally ended.

This historical perspective also helps explain the paradox identified by scholars such as Essed and Hoving (2014), Weiner (2014) and Wekker (2016): race may be rejected as a legitimate biological category while racialisation continues to have social consequences. Wekker's concept of the *cultural archive* is particularly relevant because it draws attention to the ways in which colonial histories may persist through accumulated representations, assumptions, emotions and practices rather than solely through explicitly racist ideology. Weiner's analysis of Dutch anti-racism similarly demonstrates that rejecting the biological reality of race does not necessarily entail recognising the continuing social effects of racial categorisation.

The rejection or minimisation of structural racism must consequently also be understood psychologically and culturally. A Dutch national self-image associated with tolerance, equality, liberalism and openness can come into tension with evidence of persistent discrimination. Social identity processes suggest that criticism of one's nation or social group can be experienced as a threat to collective moral identity, potentially generating defensiveness, distancing or minimisation (Branscombe et al., 1999; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Wohl et al., 2006). Colour-blindness may similarly originate in an egalitarian intention—*everyone should be treated equally*—while simultaneously making group-based inequalities more difficult to identify and discuss (Apfelbaum et al., 2012).

System Justification Theory provides an additional explanatory mechanism. Individuals may be psychologically motivated to regard existing institutions and social arrangements as broadly legitimate and fair (Jost et al., 2004). Inequalities may consequently be attributed primarily to individual characteristics such as education, language proficiency, socioeconomic circumstances, motivation or effort rather than to institutional structures. Individual and structural explanations are not inherently incompatible; both can contribute to social outcomes. The problem arises when individual explanations are treated as exhaustive and thereby prevent investigation of institutional mechanisms.

Political polarisation further complicates this process. Immigration, multiculturalism, Islam, colonial history, national identity and racism have become politically contested subjects. As a consequence, acceptance or rejection of structural racism may function partly as a marker of political identity. When empirical propositions become closely associated with political camps, evidence can be evaluated according to what accepting that evidence appears to imply about one's group membership rather than exclusively according to its methodological quality. This risks transforming a scientific question concerning the existence and mechanisms of discrimination into an ideological contest concerning Dutch identity.

Nevertheless, the trajectory described in this article should not be interpreted solely as one of denial. There are significant indications of institutional change. The childcare benefits scandal brought discriminatory governmental practices into public debate; Dutch institutions have increasingly recognised structural discrimination as a policy problem; and the Dutch government's formal apology for the State's role in slavery represents an important change in the official treatment of colonial history. Together with expanding scientific research and public debate, these developments indicate that Dutch understandings of racism, discrimination and colonialism are dynamic rather than fixed.

The analysis therefore leads to a more nuanced conclusion than either collective accusation or collective exoneration. **Recognising structural racism does not mean declaring Dutch people collectively racist. Equally, the absence of conscious racist intentions does not demonstrate the absence of structural racism.** These propositions can coexist. Individuals may sincerely support equality while participating in institutions whose accumulated rules, routines or historical structures produce unequal outcomes.

For future research and policy, the most productive approach is consequently to move beyond the binary question of whether *“the Dutch are racist.”* Such a formulation risks essentialising an entire national population and obscures precisely the institutional mechanisms that structural analysis is intended to reveal. The more scientifically relevant questions concern **where inequalities occur, which groups are affected, through which mechanisms they are produced, how historical and contemporary processes interact, and which interventions demonstrably reduce those inequalities.**

Ultimately, recognition of structural discrimination should be understood not as an accusation directed at an entire population, but as a prerequisite for institutional learning. A democratic society committed to equality must be capable of examining discrepancies between its normative ideals and its empirical outcomes. In this sense, confronting structural racism does not require abandoning the Dutch ideals of equality, openness and tolerance. It requires applying those ideals critically and consistently—including to the

institutions, historical narratives and practices through which Dutch society understands itself. The transition from denial to recognition can therefore be conceptualised not as the repudiation of Dutch society, but as an opportunity to bring its institutions more closely into accordance with the egalitarian principles that the Netherlands professes to uphold.

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