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“Structural Racism, Racial Profiling, and Prison Abolitionism”: Federico Pita's Class in Batán

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Antiracist activist and political scientist Federico Pita gave a two-hour class at Unit 15 in Batán on how skin color decides who ends up in prison, who decides, and who gets heard. Lawyer César Sivo closed the session. The full class, in writing.

On Friday, August 21, in the Punto de Paz hall of Prison Unit No. 15 in Batán and simultaneously over Zoom, **Federico Pita** gave a two-hour class on structural racism, racial profiling, and prison abolitionism. Pita is a political scientist from the University of Buenos Aires, founder and president of **DIAFAR** — the Afro-Argentine organization Diáspora Africana de la Argentina — and edits the Negrx section of *Página/12*. There were 107 connections from across the country and the region; the chat logged 137 messages. Lawyer **César Sivo** closed the session. This is the full class.

Two Checkpoints and One Word: “The Program”

Pita began with what had happened to him twenty minutes earlier, on his way in. At the first checkpoint, they asked him where he was going. He said Universidad Liberté. He got a strange look back and a correction: “ah, the program.” At the second checkpoint, already inside the unit, the same thing happened, with more emphasis.

> *“When it comes to the spaces we Black people build, they always count for less.”*
>
> — **Federico Pita**

He told it as an anecdote and used it as a thesis. The person who stopped him at the checkpoint, he said, was just as brown-skinned as he was. From there he drew a distinction that would run through the whole class, one he credited to a friend of his: Black people are “a state of consciousness, not simply a skin color.”

George Jackson, and Why the Date Was No Coincidence

August 21 marked the anniversary of the killing of **George Jackson** at San

Quentin prison. Pita introduced him as one of the great Black thinkers of the twentieth century and told his story: imprisoned at eighteen for a minor theft, more than a decade inside, over eighty percent of his sentence in isolation, twenty-three hours locked up a day.

He went in not knowing much of anything, Pita said, and it was in prison that he became an intellectual. He found in reading “something the system couldn't steal from him: the freedom of what he was going to think.” He asked the room if anyone knew who Jackson was. No one raised a hand.

That silence, to him, was part of the problem: it makes us believe that to be an intellectual you have to have gone through a formal university.

Race Doesn't Exist as Biology, But It Exists as Power

Pita dismantled biological racism in two minutes — the advance of science has already put it to rest, he said, we're all human beings with lighter or darker skin — in order to focus on what does keep operating.

> *“Race doesn't exist as biology, but it exists as a political phenomenon, of power, of control. It's what draws a line between those of us who are human and those who aren't. And those who aren't human can be treated the way you'd treat a dog.”*
>
> — **Federico Pita**

He traced the origin to colonial caste society: Black people, soulless according to the ecclesiastical power of the time, beasts that work until they die; Indigenous people, inferior humans who had to be “tutored”; white people as the measure of the human. And he asked whether the term “tutelage” sounded familiar. The State still uses it.

His summary of how that carries through to today came in one line: in colonial times it was “Black people enslaved, Indigenous people in servitude, white people from small landholders to great landowners.” And now: “we Black people are the poor, white people are the owners.” He was quick to clarify that this wasn't an opinion: “I'm not making a value judgment, I'm describing something that is.”

He brought it to his own family. He's the first university graduate in his Black family's two hundred years of family history. In his mother's white family, who arrived in the country three generations back, the very first generation already had lawyers, architects, designers. “What does that mean? That my white family was smarter than my Black family? False.” What doesn't exist, he said, is equality of opportunity: “in the system, some efforts pay off more and some pay off less.”

Racial Profiling: The ID Card as a Pass

To explain racial profiling, Pita went to South African apartheid, where for forty years being Black meant legal inferiority and you needed a pass to move around. He asked if that sounded familiar to anyone. Someone mentioned Mandela.

In Argentina there are no passes, he said, but there's the ID card. And a police force that asks for it selectively.

> *“That's the complicated way of saying something very simple: when a cop stops you because you're brown-skinned. And the suspects are always us, the brown-skinned ones. I mean, if we're wearing a suit, it's not that we're on our way to an office, it's that we're selling shampoo.”*
>
> — **Federico Pita**

He summed it up by flipping an old saying: “dress a Black man in silk, and he's still Black.” It doesn't matter the neighborhood or the clothes. It is, he said, being profiled for your face.

From there he moved to the number that structured much of the class: according to the studies he cited, in Argentina security forces kill a person roughly every twenty-one hours.

> *“There's no such thing as a stray bullet. Imagine if a posh, blond, blue-eyed kid were killed every 21 hours in Argentina. Everything would grind to a halt. They'd be talking about a white genocide, wouldn't they?”*
>
> — **Federico Pita**

And he pointed to the common denominator: the first to lose their jobs, the first to go hungry, those who never make it to university, those who live in the villa, those who end up in prison, and those who die at the hands of the police are always the same people. “If we don't talk about it that way, you're not likely to solve it.”

The Haitian Revolution, the One We Were Never Told About

Pita asked who had heard of the May Revolution. Everyone had. Then he asked about the **Haitian Revolution**. Almost no one.

For him, that's the whole trap right there. It was, he said, the only truly revolutionary episode in Latin America: the one that abolished slavery and enacted a constitution. He explained that Article 15 of that 1805 constitution established that all citizens would be considered Black — and that there, “Black” wasn't a skin color, because it included the Poles and Germans who had arrived as mercenaries in the French army and ended up fighting for the freedom of

Black people on the island.

> *“From now on, we're all Black. They didn't leave anyone out. They didn't say: from now on white people are inferior. That didn't happen. That's not how we think.”*
>
> — **Federico Pita**

He contrasted it with the French Revolution, which spoke of liberty, equality, and fraternity among white men in Europe. The island's white landowners — who, through sugar, sustained one of France's main sources of income — fought among themselves rather than accept equality while surrounded by enslaved people. It was through that crack, he said, that the revolution slipped in.

He also told how it began: a clandestine ceremony of enslaved people from several plantations, with a priestess and a Vodou spiritual leader, which on the surface was a ritual and in fact was the conspiracy to burn the plantations down the next day.

And how it ended: Haiti won its independence, and was then made to pay reparations. “They ended up demanding that Haitians pay for their own freedom.” Today, he added, the only thing people know about Haiti is that it's one of the poorest countries in Latin America — not that it was the most successful revolutionary process.

> *“Black people heard about the French Revolution but not the Haitian one. Do you see the trap?”*
>
> — **Federico Pita**

He closed the block with the line that gave meaning to the date and the place: “I am free because we are all free.”

The Comment on Haiti and the Dominican Republic

Miguel Ángel M., a Liberté member and a person in prison, added a reading from the room about the unity between Haiti and the Dominican Republic in the fight against the Spanish and the French, drawn from a book he had read. He said he had often wondered who would ever think of reading about those independence movements in the middle of the night — and that afternoon, that's exactly what he was talking about.

The book's author, a Dominican, argued that Black people weren't very intelligent but were strong, and that this was why they were called on by mixed-race Dominicans, who had “a high degree of intelligence.” Miguel Ángel's conclusion was that racism split apart again right there: “because they were less Black, they

considered themselves more intelligent.”

Pita picked up on the contribution and added a practical note: there's a specialist on the Haitian Revolution, **Juan Francisco Martínez Peria**, who teaches every Monday in Mar del Plata. He proposed bringing him in for a talk dedicated to the topic.

Bernardo de Monteagudo and the Banknotes

Pita asked about **Bernardo de Monteagudo**. No one placed him. He introduced him as Argentina's greatest Black intellectual: born in Tucumán, educated in Chuquisaca, a partner of Mariano Moreno and director of the country's first newspaper, minister of War and of Foreign Relations, drafter of independence texts in Chile and Peru, promoter of a pan-American congress to create the United States of the South. He was stabbed to death by hired killers, and it was never known who ordered it.

For a long time, he said, portraits painted him white.

From there he moved to the banknotes. He pointed out that the only two bills with brown-skinned people on them — **Ramón Carrillo** and **María Remedios del Valle** — are also the only two shared bills: on one, in front, there's a white doctor; on the other, in front, there's Belgrano.

> *“Because Black people go in the back. That's the message. And you know what they tell us? Be grateful you're on the bills at all. I'm not grateful.”*
>
> — **Federico Pita**

His demand wasn't about exclusion but about leadership: “What I want are Black protagonists. Black people at the wheel. I want to share the wheel.”

The Response from the Room: Up Front, But to Die

A comment from the room qualified the idea that Black people always go in the back. In the crossing of the Andes, someone said, the first to go to the front were Black soldiers, wearing a red uniform different from everyone else's, under San Martín's order to always advance. But that meant, they added, being cannon fodder: they all ended up dead.

Pita accepted the correction and folded it in: “I guess we Black people only go up front when they're about to kill us.”

Angela Davis, Abolitionism, and Intersectionality

The second name of the class was **Angela Davis**, whom the room did recognize. Pita introduced her as a friend of George Jackson's and one of the great global

voices of prison abolitionism, and described her critique of the U.S. prison system as an industrial complex: a privatized economic system where people in prison work for large companies.

He used the moment to take apart an idea of what it means to read. If you're told that to be smart you have to read Plato and wear glasses, he said, you read Plato and often it tells you nothing. He wasn't proposing to cancel Plato — he was proposing to start somewhere else.

> *“Black men and women write too. […] It's not some prisoner writing letters to tell his story. It's Black people producing political thought, philosophy. What happens is that sometimes we simply don't let ourselves, because we were taught that Black people don't think.”*
>
> — **Federico Pita**

From Davis he also took **intersectionality**, and explained it with two examples he built together with the room. First: who cleans other people's houses. Women, the room answered — in a ratio of ninety to ten. Poor women. Brown-skinned women. “You don't need a doctorate to clean. Anyone could clean. And yet it's poor, brown-skinned women.”

Second: Congress. He pointed out that until a law forced gender parity, the majority were men — and not because men were smarter. Then he asked about the social class of deputies and senators, and about their skin color. “Who are they supposed to look like? The people.”

César Sivo: Self-Deferral, the Colored Pencils, and the Hallway

Dr. César Sivo, of the law firm Sivo Reutemann. He brought three scenes.

The first, about a French writer, a Nobel laureate in Literature, of working-class origin, who ended up married to an upper-middle-class man: every time her mother came to visit, she would get up and start clearing and washing the dishes. She couldn't picture herself sitting there as an equal. Sivo named it: besides the deferral that comes from outside, there's self-deferral.

The second, public school: colored pencils. The tin box of twenty-four, spotless, with a sharpener, against five stubby little pencils. And the shame of hiding your own.

The third, the bar association's free legal clinic. The entrance was a hallway so narrow that people had to wait outside, in the rain, after walking fifty or sixty blocks, to be seen two hours later by a newly graduated lawyer. Sivo proposed

taking the clinic out to the neighborhoods. He didn't get it: the bar association's answer was that if people wanted to come, they could come.

But what struck him most was what the people he interviewed told him themselves. Waiting didn't bother them: they were used to "contempt, being ignored." What made them uncomfortable was something else.

> *"They felt uncomfortable because they didn't have the right clothes to be in that place. It's tremendous. In other words: I want to turn to the justice system for help, but I feel like they look down on me."*
>
> — **César Sivo**, lawyer

He closed with a scene from his years in the justice system: officials who, as they came to feel important, stopped shaking hands with people in prison. "I would hug them," he said. The line he never understood, one he heard from judges, was: "how can you shake a prisoner's hand?"

The Question About Afro-Descendant Judges

A question came from the room, backed by data. In Brazil, 56% of the population is Afro-descendant, and only 13% of state and federal judges are. In Argentina, according to the class slides, the Afro-descendant population is around 5%. Are there Afro-descendant judges in the country?

The person asking added a reading of the place where they were: that one of the things that bothers people most about Liberté is that "right where they want to set Black people apart, they've opened a university." That, they said, is why it gets minimized by calling it a program.

The Biography That Wasn't Read

Before **Dr. César Sivo** spoke, the announcer read out Pita's biography, which he had skipped over while introducing the other speakers. Pita closed by returning to that episode, which he had let sit for two hours: in the opening introductions, the credentials of every guest were read out — except his.

> *"I noticed that our fellow announcer introduced all the white people with their titles, and not me. […] It undoubtedly was an unintentional mistake — I know that, because I'm here, in this space."*
>
> — **Federico Pita**

He was explicit that he wasn't saying it to pick a fight. The announcer apologized and corrected it by reading the full biography, and Pita took that correction as part of the argument: we all carry internalized racism — he included himself, and

also Sivo, who is his friend. “I'm the main speaker, but I'm still Black. And his brain played a trick on him.”

On how he processed it, he was precise: “If I weren't a proud Black man, it would break me. If I weren't an educated Black man, I'd get angry and offended. But since I'm a proud, educated Black man, I waited for my moment to say so.”

He explained where that pride comes from through his grandfather Justo, the superintendent of a union building, the first in the family with a fixed salary. On Saturdays he'd sit them down in the living room and give them an instruction that, as a kid, he didn't understand: when you go eat at a restaurant, sit in the middle.

> *“Sit in the middle and be proud of who you are, because they're going to look at you anyway.”*
>
> — Federico Pita's grandfather, as quoted by him

And from that he drew the definition he saved for the end: “Antiracism is what teaches us to see. It's not the shame we feel. It's the shitty system that forces us to feel ashamed.”

He returned to the Angela Davis line he had opened that section with — in a racist society, it's not enough not to be racist, you have to be actively antiracist — and carried it to the conclusion that gives this class its title. A quota isn't enough, he warned, “because you can be brown-skinned and still think white.”

> *“The system doesn't mean filling the bench with Black judges. Because, you know what happens? When the system has a majority of Black judges, that's the day the system will stop working. Because it works when most judges aren't Black.”*
>
> — **Federico Pita**

On what to do with the anger, he had earlier given an answer to a teenager from a juvenile detention facility who told him what he was planning to do once he got out: “You don't have to burn through that energy — what you have to do is organize it, because it's not wrong to be angry if the system is garbage.” And his conclusion on the punitive way out: “it doesn't work with more prisons, and it doesn't work with more police.”

The Chat Was Also the Classroom

The chat's 137 messages became a second conversation. There were direct testimonies. **Marén V.** wrote: “When I'm walking down the street, people cross to the other side. Or when I end up behind them without meaning to, they grab their

bags or phones and move them somewhere else. That's why I think I have the face of an addict.”

From Brazil, **Yago V.** offered the flip side of the figure Pita had given about the Brazilian judiciary: “in Brazil we Black people are the majority, but with a lot of difficulty having our rights secured. We always have to do twice as much as a white person.”

Mizangas, an Afro-feminist movement with twenty years of antiracist activism and an abolitionist stance, also introduced itself. And from Uruguay, **Ana G.** said that when she was a law student, they used to go advise the neighborhoods, with lawyers guiding them: neighborhood legal clinics, exactly what Sivo hadn't managed to achieve.

Toward the end, the chat debated the biography episode. **Rafael M. B.** wrote that he didn't share the analysis, that it had been “an unintentional mistake, nothing more,” and that trying to guess what's in people's heads is a mistake. The reply came from Mizangas:

> *“It's valid that you don't share that, and it's also very predictable. In the end, your analysis is that of a white person. And whiteness has a hard time understanding the social effects of racism, from its own perspective of privilege (not just economic). It probably was an unintentional ‘mistake,' I believe that too, but that unintentional mistake is an effect of the racism that shaped each of us as a society.”*
>
> — **Hellen**, from Mizangas, in the chat

The discussion Pita had opened in the room kept going on its own, among people who didn't know each other, while he wrapped up.

How It Ended

Pita left a copy of his book at the Universidad Liberté library. The tour that brought him to Mar del Plata had started in the City of Buenos Aires, and this was his first activity outside of it.

Before leaving, he said something about the place. That he knew he was coming to speak to a mostly Black space like himself, and that later that afternoon, in a different setting, it was going to be different: there was going to be more resistance, more discomfort. “Because it touches privilege. That's what it's about.”

The session closed with an open mic and the announcement of the next day's activity: a diploma program session, at ten in the morning.

WHO JOINED

The session was also joined by **Dr. Diana Márquez**, secretary of the Board of Directors of Cooperativa Liberté and head of the Asociación Civil Víctimas por la Paz; **Dr. César Sivo**, of the law firm Sivo Reutemann and president of the Asociación de Abogados, Abogadas, Jueces y Fiscales de Derechos Humanos de América Latina y el Caribe; **Dr. Jorge Bilbao** and other members of the same firm; and, over Zoom, **Ricardo Augman**, treasurer of the cooperative, along with **Analía Acevedo** and **Silvana Greco**, co-founders of Universidad Liberté. Federico Pita was accompanied by **Sol** and **Franco**, from the DIAFAR team. The event took place in the Punto de Paz hall of Cooperativa Liberté, with the support of Universidad Liberté and the Asociación Víctimas por la Paz, and had 107 connections from across the country, as well as from Brazil and Uruguay.

CÓMO CITAR

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