Race, racism, discourse

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Introduction

This chapter will examine race and racism, and the relations between social ideas (e.g. the existence of races; the association of qualities/characteristics with particular racial/ethnic/religious groups), social stratification based on these ideas, and discourse. After introductory and contextualising sections, where we introduce the historic and conceptual bases of the subject, the empirical and analytic sections of the chapter will be structured in such a way that we gradually examine levels and details that the reader may not have initially considered. We start with the most obviously prejudicial texts, produced and circulated by European extreme-right political parties. Next, we will examine a case that appears to have a racial dimension without race being explicitly articulated: a televised interview with the actor Samuel L Jackson, in which the interviewer mistook him for Laurence Fishburne. Finally, we will consider British conservative broadsheet newspapers’ reporting of a conflagration of the Israel/Palestine conflict (‘Operation Cast Lead’), and the ways they related this act of reporting to acts of antisemitism. The chapter will thus progressively move to less conspicuous and more dilemmatic waters, and in so doing demonstrate the value of close analysis when examining discourse on this topic.

Race and racism

Conventional, lay understandings of racism – as revealed, for example, in dictionary definitions – continue to consider racism to be a system of beliefs, or a (false) mode of thinking. Such interpretations underlie classroom discussions with our students too, wherein racism tends (initially at least) to be approached as simplified and misrepresentative ideas about others (typically ‘others with differently coloured skin’); a racist, consequently, is one who agrees with and vocalises such beliefs. Systems of white privilege are especially absent from such conventional understandings of racism, given the ways they inevitably highlight the ways that white liberals and even white anti-racists benefit from racism. This conventional tendency, ‘to define racism as a mental phenomenon, has continually led to an under-theorisation of the relationship between the mental classification involved and the practices
in which they are inserted’ (Hage 1998, p. 29). Donald and Rattansi (1992) have made a similar point, arguing that racism ought to be approached from a position that assumes it is ‘rooted in broader economic structures and material interests’ (p. 3). From such a position:

Meanings and beliefs do not become irrelevant, but the coherence and falsity of racist ideas [are] now ascribed to the function they serve in legitimating social practices that reinforce an unequal distribution of power between groups differentiated in racial and/or ethnic terms.

(Donald & Rattansi 1992)

Explicit in this critique of racism is not just an acknowledgement of the differentiation and stratification of ‘racialised’ individuals and groups, but also the very practical functions of racism in maintaining inequitable systems of social power and behavioural manifestations of racism. The forms that racism takes are not fixed – to the degree that it may be more appropriate to talk of racisms.

However, Anthias (1995, p. 288) argues that it is important to acknowledge that all racisms are ‘underpinned by a notion of a natural relation between an essence attributed to a human population, whether biological or cultural, and social outcomes that do, will or should flow from this’. A key dimension of this ‘essence attribution’ is differentiation: the processes through which social groups are made ‘other’. Differentiation simultaneously constructs and applies the (biological or cultural) qualities considered important enough to distinguish social groups. It should go without saying that such criteria are – somatically, genetically and culturally – arbitrary. (Thus, shoe size is not a criterion, but nose size can be; equally, whether someone wears a scarf is not a criterion, but whether someone wears a headscarf can be; and so on.) However, such criteria are socially, politically and historically highly relevant since they present the specific – but, equally, the highly adaptable and mutable – features that define social groups and, consequently, are used to constitute an in-group ‘us’ through rejecting the out-group ‘them’.

Accordingly, racism is ‘a discourse and a practice whereby ethnic groups are inferiorised’ (Anthias 1995, p. 294); such groups can be differentiated in and through their perceived ‘racial’ (that is somatic), religious or cultural characteristics (invoking, inter alia, language, clothing, values and practices); and the practices of inferiorisation and discrimination may be more or less severe (see Allport 1954 for further discussion). To illustrate this point, during the High Middle Ages, while skin colour was an important criterion for Venetians in differentiating and inferiorising Byzantine troops, it had less significance elsewhere in Europe (Bethencourt 2013, p. 53): ‘The illuminated manuscripts commissioned by the Castilian king Alfonso the Wise (1221–84) [...] represented visible differences between Christians and Muslims based more on clothing than physical appearances’ (ibidem). That said, although skin colour was considered unimportant (to some, in some contexts), familiar patterns and relations of racist structuration were already crystallising. Thus, by this period, black Africans were being associated with extensive negative characteristics, particularly with various barbarous and animalistic qualities. For example, in his Muqaddimah, Ibn Khaldûn argued that black people ‘are submissive to slavery, because [they] have little that is essentially human and possess attributes that are quite similar to those of dumb animals’ (cited in Bethencourt 2013, p. 53).

A further logic of racism – in addition to differentiation and inferiorisation – is that of transmission, across time and between members of the vilified human population. It is not sufficient that a human population is marked out, deemed inferior and discriminated against;
the inferior (and, concomitant superior) qualities imputed to reside in populations are additionally presumed and argued to be transferred across time – they exist as a birthright, passed from one generation to the next. In biological racisms, this transmission occurs genetically; in cultural/neo-racisms this occurs through socialisation or enculturation. From the vantage point of Anthias’ inclusive definition of racism, ‘Undesirable groups need not be conceptualised in explicit racial terms, but as Others more generally. […] This population is endowed with fixed, unchanging and negative characteristics, and subjected to relations of inferiorisation and exclusion’ (1995, p. 294).

The strength of this particular account of racism is that it is not restricted to ‘biological’ racism – in other words, it challenges the belief that racism only relates to prejudice and discrimination suffered by populations who share specific genotypic or phenotypic characteristics, transmitted as biological hereditary. (And, in extremis, that ‘to be racist’ is to discriminate on the basis of skin colour.) The assumption that racism is based on physical or ‘biological’ characteristics has often been a sticking point in past discussion of prejudice and discrimination suffered by populations marked as religiously different. Yet, as early as the end of the Middle Ages (in the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries), ethnicity and religion – and not simply genes, skin colour, and so on – had been built into racial theories. In Europe, both Jews and Muslims were subject to ongoing discrimination, based on ‘the idea of ethnic descent; it was expected that they would continue to show the “qualities of character” of their ancestors, and would inevitably revert to their former faith. Permanent war on various fronts between Christians and Muslims also created a prejudice based on religious allegiance that deepened the idea of ethnic descent’ (emphasis added, Bethencourt 2013, p. 60). The Spanish Inquisition institutionalised such racist practice, against both Jews and Muslims. Such insights are especially important to take into account in relation to contemporary discourse, wherein ‘an absolute fixing of the difference between cultures’ (Meyer 2001, p. 33) has, essentially, ensured that ‘culture acquires an immutable character, and hence becomes a homologue for race’ (Malik 1996, p. 150).

This can be illustrated by considering the re-emergence of the extreme right as a political force in Western Europe since the 1990s and particularly after 2001. The European extreme right includes many parties, such as the British National Party, the Republikaner in Germany, the Lega Nord in Italy, the Sweden Democrats, the French Front National, the Belgian Vlaams Blok, the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), Jobbik Magyarországért Mozgálat (Movement for a Better Hungary) and the Danish People’s party. These parties share a fundamental core of ethno-nationalist xenophobia (based on ‘ethno-pluralist’ doctrine) and anti-political-establishment populism (Rydgren 2007). At all levels of discourse, their ‘new’ racism is not always expressed in overtly (biologically) racist terms, or in the terms of neofascist discourse. This form of racism, which Taguieff (1988) calls ‘racisme différencialiste’ and Wieviorka (1995) calls ‘racisme culturelle’, stresses the incompatible difference between ethnic or religious groups that are described in cultural terms without specifically mentioning race or overtly racial criteria.

Crucially, however, this does not mean that racialised minorities are not the targets of this ‘new’ racism, merely that the grounds of their alleged incompatibility with ‘us’ are expressed using ‘cultural’ and religious, rather than biological, criteria. Indeed, the historic examples described briefly above reveal that there is little ‘new’ about ‘new racism’: cultural, religious, ethnic and ‘racial’ characteristics have been used interchangeably to differentiate and exclude for centuries. For this reason, we maintain that (biological) racism, antisemitism, anti-Muslimism and other forms of ethnicised discrimination (e.g. against Roma/Sinti) are variations of the same racist logic:
differentiation, inferiorisation and presumed transmission of negative characteristics across time and between members of the vilified population.

**Race, racism and discourse**

This chapter assumes that racism, like all aspects of social life, is in part discursive: it is simultaneously a product of, and a factor contributing to, the continuation of hierarchical and unjust social relations. Put another way, racism simultaneously constructs social relations between individuals and groups in society – predominantly hierarchies of the sort already mentioned – and, at the same time, is constructed by these social relations. This is not to suggest that racisms are wholly constructed phenomena – that racist practices are assembled and reassembled ‘as social actors interact with each other and exchange interpretative meanings’ (Manning 2001, p. 21) – or that racism can be collapsed into, and conceptualised wholly in relation to discourse. Rather, it is to suggest that racism, like all social phenomena, should be approached in relation to questions of structure and agency typical of critical social analysis. Such a position focuses upon, and aims at illuminating, the subtle interplay between the economic, the political, the social and the symbolic (see Golding & Murdock 2000), and so reveals that racism and racialisation are ‘criss-crossed by ethnic, national, gender, class and other social constructions and divisions’ (Wodak & Reisigl 2015, p. 578). The cultural studies and critical race analysis of theorists such as Robert Miles, Stuart Hall, Étienne Balibar and Colette Guillaumin ‘conceptually integrate[s] the structural and discursive aspects of racism’, theorising:

> how stereotypes, racist images and metaphors – the totality of racism as an ideology in the strongest sense – are socially reproduced and institutionalized as part of the superstructure of a social formation […] how this superstructure is retroactive related to exclusionary practices and understand how racism, understood not as a tool but a social relation, produces racialized identities.

(Opratko & Müller-Uri 2014, p. 7)

The grammatical processes described in Anthias’ account of racism above – ‘conceptualised’, ‘characterised’, ‘endowed’ – point to the significant role that discourse plays in racialisation, in terms of both the enactment and the reproduction of racism. As van Dijk et al (1997, p. 165) have argued, ‘racist talk and text themselves are discriminatory practices, which at the same time influence the acquisition and confirmation of racist prejudices and ideologies’. Similarly, Wodak and Reisigl (2015, p. 576) point out:

> Racism, as both social practice and ideology, manifests itself discursively. On the one hand, racist attitudes and beliefs are produced and promoted by means of discourse, and discriminatory practices are prepared, promulgated, and legitimated through discourse. On the other hand, discourse serves to criticize and argue against racist opinions and practices, that is, to pursue anti-racist strategies.

(Wodak & Reisigl 2015, pp. 576)

Van Dijk (2004, pp. 352–353) identifies three main topical clusters in racist discourse: the differences of ‘others’, and so their dissimilarity to ‘us’; the ways that the behaviour of ‘others’ breaches ‘our’ norms and values; and topics constructing ‘them’ in terms of threat. There is a rich tradition of studies describing the structure and function of xenophobic

Extensive research in the critical discourse-analytic tradition has focused on the crucial role exerted by the elites in the production, the diffusion and legitimation of both overt and covert forms of xenophobia and racist discourse over time (Wodak & Van Dijk 2000). This chapter now turns towards the discourse of such elites, examining: first, two leaflets produced by European extreme-right political parties; second, an interview broadcast on the US television network CNN; and third, the opinions of conservative broadsheet newspapers on Israeli ‘Operation Cast Lead’ (the war in Gaza, 2008–2009), as represented in their editorials.

Case study 1: extremist political discourse

The core exoteric message of the extreme right amounts to a base opposition to immigration and, frequently, settled minority ethnic communities. Here, we present a leaflet (also produced as a poster), which had an impact on both an anti-Muslim referendum in Switzerland and on propaganda produced by other European extreme-right parties (see also Wodak 2015). In the past two decades, the Swiss People’s Party has established itself as one of the most powerful far-right parties in Western Europe. The Swiss People’s Party advertising is distinctive in the way that it uses graphic illustrations rather than more widespread and traditional photos. Their posters/leaflets generally contain very few words; the core of the message is communicated visually, typically accompanied by a brief slogan.

On these images, silhouettes of minarets are pictured, superimposed over the national flags of Switzerland and Britain. As with other nationalist political discourse (extremist and otherwise), the flags clearly act as metonyms for their respective nations (see Billig 1995); the meaning potential of the minarets, however, is a little more complex. Viewed in conjunction with the veiled woman, they function, first, to represent Islam in a metonymic replacement of a building by the faith of the people using the building. However, they also act to represent a more specific process – a process through which, in the view of these parties, their respective national spaces are gradually being taken over by Muslims. Combined with the linguistic element of the leaflets (either the imperative ‘Stopp’, or the ‘Facts’ in the British National Party leaflet), it is clear that these respective parties view the presence of Islam in the(ir) national space as objectionable. Oskar Freysinger, the SVP member of parliament, has confirmed as much – that their campaign is directed not at Muslim buildings of worship in themselves, but against minarets as a ‘symbol of a political and aggressive Islam’ (quoted in Betz 2013, p. 73). Political discourse, in both the news media and public policy, has constructed Islam and Muslims as a threat (Poole 2002; Richardson 2004). The leaflets therefore recall the widespread questioning – by both politicians and mainstream news media – of whether Muslims can, or should, be integrated into European society.
The placement of these fantasy minarets over the flags suggests they are either piercing through the flags or have been imposed, or built on top of them. The suggested violence of this process is heightened by the ways the minarets evoke spear-tips, or perhaps the cones of missiles. Given the wide variety of minaret designs, they did not have to be this ‘sharp ended’, suggesting that this choice and its meaning potential – weaponry – is deliberate. Indeed, minarets, in the view of the SVP’s Freysinger, have an ‘imperialist connotation’ (Betz 2013, p. 73). This meaning is picked up explicitly in the linguistic material included on the BNP leaflet, where an overtly militaristic lexicon of war (bayonets, helmets, barracks and army) is invoked as part of a discourse of conquest – ‘Islamification’ being the putative goal of Turkey and, pars pro toto, of Muslims in general. (Otherwise this process would have been named ‘Turkification’, rather than the more general ‘Islamification’.) The rhetoric of conquest and colonisation, and the negative prosody of the terms employed to substantiate the standpoint and, thereby, the threat that ‘they’ pose to ‘us’, work to substantiate and ‘naturalise’ the stance of these parties as defensive rather than aggressive and driven by base antipathy towards (all) Muslims.

However, the leaflets do not simply suggest that ‘Islamification’ is a threat that will affect ‘us’ all in the same way. The presence of the second key pictorial element of these leaflets works to implicitly suggest a more specific battleground: the bodies of women. ‘The veiled/concealed Muslim woman’ has become part of a visual iconography of anti-immigrant discourse in general, and anti-Muslim discourse in particular, that has been developed by European parties of the right (Durham 2015). The leaflets position women – and the bodies of women specifically – as sites where this conflict between Islam and ‘us’ is played out. The BNP has pushed this argument to the forefront of its propaganda campaigns, to the extent that it argues, more or less explicitly, that ‘we need to defend our women, otherwise they will end up looking like this’ (Jiwani & Richardson 2011; Richardson 2011; Richardson & Wodak 2009b). That is, women’s bodies are invoked, in a pars pro toto synecdoche, as the site for this putative process of colonisation (or Islamification) and reconquest. This battle for control over (‘our’) women and (‘our’) women’s bodies utilises and subverts a liberal discourse of gender equality, apportions women’s rights as the purview of nationalist men and objectifies the very women that it claims to honour. ‘Nationalist’ (that is, extreme-right-wing) men are positioned as protectors of ‘our’ women – the passivised, embodied nation space – and ethnic managers with the power and responsibility to reject Islam.

Case study 2: implicit racism

As Case study 1 demonstrated, ‘thinly veiled’ racism remains part and parcel of European and Western politics. Indeed, at the time of writing this chapter, Donald Trump, then the frontrunner for the Republican nomination for the president of the United States, was considering a full-scale ban on Muslim people entering the country (Guardian 2015a), and the Danish parliament adopted a law approving the seizure of asylum seekers’ assets worth more than $1,453 (Guardian 2016). Meanwhile, young black men in 2015 were five times more likely to be killed by US police officers than white men of the same age; despite making up 2% of the entire population, African American males between the ages of 15 and 34 comprised more than 15% of all deaths (Guardian 2015b).

Having said that, the fact that even political parties that publish or propagate blatantly racist rhetoric are unlikely to describe themselves or their messages as racist, demonstrates that racism has also become taboo in modern Western discourse. One outcome of this, of
course, was demonstrated in the previous section, as we examined how racist intentions and aims now have to be expressed through linguistic and visual codes. In what follows, Case study 2 now engages with a second outcome: implicit or inadvertent racism.

In a live interview on 10 February 2014, US actor, Samuel L. Jackson (SLJ), should have been interviewed by CNN host, entertainment reporter Sam Rubin (SR), about his recent movie RoboCop. The interview turned out to be about something else. As we see, the interview starts with what is consensually established by both participants as Rubin confusing Jackson with fellow actor, Laurence Fishburne. Something therefore has happened.

Yet what, exactly, is this ‘something’? What has happened? Has Rubin confused two human beings, two actors or two black actors? Rubin immediately offers an apology and does this in terms of having made a ‘mistake’. This remains his position throughout the interview, repeatedly apologising, yet repeatedly apologising for making a ‘mistake’ (l. 40) and being ‘dumb’ (l. 33). As such, he implicitly categorises the event of confusion as a matter of accident and, at worst, a matter of unprofessional conduct – no offence, so to speak.

On one level, this is in line with Jackson’s reference to Rubin being ‘as crazy as the people on Twitter’ (ll. 9–10). This formulation conveys no additional understanding and therefore does not identify the source of his outrage. His next interruption, however, clearly does:
Clearly, then, what happened, in Jackson’s understanding, is more than a mere accidental confusion around the identity of two celebrities; he is not hurt as a famous actor and is not (just) angry on his own behalf. As he makes relevant the race he has in common with Laurence Fishburne, he also makes it clear that the case is not simply that two actors have just been confused, but that two black actors have just been confused. Indeed, by emphatically repeating the scalar quantifier ‘all’ twice, he immediately expands the perceived mistake as a perceived insult to the whole black community. This way, his anger too gets transformed from what could possibly be perceived as an egoistic rant to righteous outrage over past and present mistreatment of black people.

Significantly, however, this important – if implicit – change in Jackson’s rhetoric is left unattended to by Rubin. He repeatedly continues to own up to his ‘mistake’ – without specifying what he considers his ‘mistake’/‘fault’ to be and what exactly he is ‘guilty’ of. As such, though explicitly agreeing with Jackson that he (i.e. Rubin) did something wrong, Rubin may be seen as trying to implicitly accomplish two acts: first, disagreeing with Jackson by reflectively characterising his own action as an accidental mistake and, therefore, the non-specific confusion of any two faces; and second, turning the tables by reflectively presenting the enraged Jackson as the bully.

What we see during the interview is the constant repetition of precisely this dynamic of discourse: there is explicit agreement between Jackson and Rubin that something happened, but there is implicit disagreement as to what exactly happened.

Jackson keeps implying that what happened connotes or even enacts a hurtful racial stereotype while Rubin keeps implicitly denying it, both by referring to a non-specific ‘mistake’ and by pushing the interview to the new and supposedly more important topic of Jackson’s film, RoboCop. Rubin’s clear message here is that RoboCop is more important than a ‘mistake’ he made or him being just ‘dumb’. Similarly, even a ‘big mistake’ is no
warrant for Jackson’s aggressively interrupting Rubin countless times, let alone abusing him as happens in lines 43–44. A possible act of racism, however, is. But Jackson does not offer an explicit alternative to Rubin’s non-specific ‘mistake’, and as such starts turning from a victim of a ‘mistake’ to a perpetrator of more-or-less unwarranted aggression.

Arguably, there is one exception to this dynamic during the interview. In a sarcastic move to prove his point, Jackson starts to list the TV commercials in which black actors other than him feature, repeatedly adding that ‘I am not that guy. (...) I am not that guy either.’ Towards the end of this sequence, something interesting happens:

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86 SLJ [There’s a heavier=
87 =weight black guy that’s like putting ca:sh down in the seats in a, in a baseball
88 ↓stadium but he’s ↑a:so the black guy that turns off (.) ↓the ((silence for 0.3s, as if
90 recording was stopped)) house, the water and the li:ghts .hh when his kid tells him
91 the ho:use is cool.
92 SR Righ(h)=
93 SLJ =↑I’m not that guy either.
94 (0.5)
95 SR .HHa? (0.6) Do we wanna do a list of all the people that you’re not?=  
96 SLJ =And I’ve actually never done a MacDonald’s o:r a Kentucky Fri:ed Chicken=
97 =[commercial.
98 SR {Uh(h)
99 Fa:ir enough.
100 SLJ I know that’s su:’prising.
101 SR ↓Right. (1.2) Fair enough, fair enough.
102 (0.8)
103 SR Uh: (0.4) to the ori[ g i nal u h : :
104 SLJ [And I’m the o:nly=
105 =black gu:::y (0.6) in RoboCop that’s not a cri:minal. 
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(\textit{Ibidem})

For once, Rubin’s rhetorical strategy changes in line 95. From an apologetic yet non-specific and non-committal ‘that’s right’, ‘my mistake’, ‘you are right’, he changes to a more active way of re-categorising the ‘mistake’ he made, as he teasingly asks Jackson the question: ‘Do we wanna do a list of all the people that you’re not?’ In other words, he ignores Jackson’s act of enlisting exclusively black people for a minute or so. Interestingly, it is precisely at this point that Jackson too becomes more overt about the exact source of his anger. Namely, his rant concludes at the point where he asserts who he actually is: ‘And I’m the o:nly black gu:::y (0.6) in RoboCop that’s not a cri:minal.’ (ll. 104–105) By this, he broadens the context of his utterances beyond the studio. His problem becomes not just the incident that has just happened in the studio, but an America which still readily countenances representing/consuming black people mostly as criminals. This, incidentally, is where the detour finishes before the participants start to discuss the actual topic the interview was assigned to cover.

From the perspective of this chapter, the tragedy of this encounter is not simply that it is still possible to be racist on mainstream television. Rather, the tragedy is that while everything in this interview happened in front of our eyes, it still somehow happened in darkness. That is, while a hurtful racist stereotype, with the connotation that the skin colour of black people matters more than their individuality, was \textit{objectively} enacted, and while
both participants immediately recognised this transgression of morality, they could not incorporate this objective state of affairs in their discourse. Racism was there – but still somehow not there. Not there for Jackson to explicitly spell out, and not there for Rubin to explicitly own up to or deny. As such, rather than the fact of racism that occurred, it was the discourse around it that created a **taboo**. A topic, that is, which is there to be seen, but not there to be touched, to be discussed, to be engaged with, and ultimately to be genuinely changed.

**Case study 3: racism as threat**

So far, we have encountered a case where racism was clearly intended *as such*, and one where, arguably, it was less about acting out a conscious intention and more about (racialised) misrecognition. This combination of the power of racism and its occasionally unintentional nature has led to some distinct developments in the contemporary discourse of racism, which can be categorised as ‘racism as dilemmatic’. In what follows, an example of this will be presented, drawing on some extracts from British conservative broadsheets’ editorial engagement with the first Gaza War between Israel and Hamas (cf., Kaposi 2014, 2016).

Before doing so, however, some preliminary remarks are in place regarding the coming case study. The previous cases dealt with issues of racism; the present one concerns antisemitism. While antisemitism may be considered simply to be a specific instance of racism, arguments abound that it is, in fact, *sui generis*, as the unique nature of its ultimate manifestation, the Holocaust, attests (cf., Wodak 2015, pp. 97–124; Bauer 2002, pp. 1–68). In addition, as the coming examples will bear out, the existence of an officially Jewish state (the State of Israel) leads to further ambiguities. While criticism is a legitimate and necessary element of politics, it is easy to see how such acts with regard to the State of Israel may possibly stem from antisemitic intentions, or even lead to antisemitic effects (cf. Kaposi 2014, pp. 15–19).

It is with these dilemmas in mind that we ask readers to read the following paragraph:

> The first reaction of most commentators was that the air attacks on Gaza were unnecessarily savage. The deaths of nearly 300 Palestinians, including civilians, seems disproportionate to the small number of Israelis killed by rocket attacks. Hamas was not expecting retribution on this scale, but we can be sure that it will extract the maximum possible propaganda advantage from the slaughter. Israel’s enemies in the liberal West are already pinning the blame squarely on ‘Zionists’. So are most Muslims.  
> *(Daily Telegraph, 29 December 2008)*

Interestingly, the *Daily Telegraph*’s first paragraph on the war starts not with the presentation of the conservative newspaper’s stance on the morality of the war, but with the exposition of an alternative political-moral position to what will be revealed as the newspaper’s own. Why is this alternative position relevant? Why is it important to cite those ‘commentators’ who see the war as ‘disproportionate’ and ‘unnecessarily savage’?

As their opinions are discounted as mere ‘first reactions’, it appears that it is not so much their intellectual worth that makes them important. Rather, they seem relevant because these gut-reactions might be taken as embodiments of political-moral *dispositions*. Who are these people (‘most commentators’)? Why are they jumping to condemn Israel’s conduct as ‘savage’ and ‘disproportionate’? The paragraph concludes by naming them as ‘Israel’s enemies in the liberal West’ as well as ‘most Muslims’. More importantly, though, we also learn that these groups’ ultimate account is to put the blame ‘squarely on “Zionists”’. It is
not for nothing that the *Telegraph* uses ‘scare’ quotes to refer to Zionists. First, given that arguing for the Jewish people’s collective right to a homeland/state certainly does not equal arguing for the Jewish state’s army sustaining an offensive on Gaza, Zionists may or may not have supported the war. Second, the war was launched by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), instructed by an Israeli government carrying the democratic mandate of the Israeli people. Political-moral responsibility may belong to them. The designation *Zionist*, however, implicates many millions of people living outside Israel, certainly with no direct political responsibility for the events.

What is more, quite apart from the question of whether Zionism would warrant an accusation of this sort, it is not an *idea* but a group of people that is designated. And if so, we might infer that at the core of putting the ‘blame squarely on “Zionists”’ is a motive to blacken not an idea at all, but an *ethnic-religious community*. And by the same token, what the *Telegraph*’s ‘scare’ quotes around the word ‘Zionist’ appear to alert us to is that by blaming ‘Zionists’, they actually mean to blame *the Jewish community*. The shadow of the imagined ‘other’, in the presence of which the *Daily Telegraph*’s account of the war starts, is, therefore, the shadow of antisemitism.

Interestingly enough, the role of the ‘other’ equally emerged in the argumentation of the other conservative British broadsheet, *The Times*. To examine this, let us look at a remarkable paragraph where the newspaper appears to formulate firm criticism of Israeli action.

> White phosphorus is illegal under international law when used in built-up areas, but a legitimate weapon of war when used to provide cover for troops in open country. There is scant evidence of the IDF using it deliberately against civilians, but northern Gaza, where the fighting is concentrated, is one of the most densely populated places in the world. Civilian casualties were inevitable, and the deep burns that white phosphorus can cause are virtually untreatable. The longer that the IDF equivocate about its use, the more ammunition they hand to those who would accuse them of war crimes. (*The Times*, 16 January 2009)

This is the concluding paragraph of *The Times*’ editorial criticism of Israel’s use of white phosphorous.7 It is also an odd paragraph. It features two premises and a conclusion that seem to be in a gross mismatch. The newspaper argues that white phosphorous is illegal when used in built-up areas, and that Israel appears to be using it in ‘one of the most densely populated areas in the world’, but instead of concluding that IDF’s conduct of war needs to be independently investigated, it merely calls for less equivocation on its part.

Puzzling as that is, what is of importance for the purposes of this chapter is that where we would expect a call for independent investigation into Israel’s apparently illegal use of a weapon (and hence, by definition, a possible war crime), we encounter yet another figure of the *other*. Namely, not only does *The Times* refrain from substantial criticism of Israeli conduct, but it raises the spectre of Israeli equivocation providing ‘ammunition (…) to those who would accuse them of war crimes.’

Thus, just as in the case of the *Telegraph*, the presence of an ‘other’, an alternative political-moral position, is therefore relevant to *The Times*’ political-moral perspective.8 What is more, and again in line with the *Telegraph*, that ‘other’ appears to be a rather suspect character; where we might have expected the activity of an independent and impartial investigation of a factual nature, we find the act of ‘accusation’. *Those* people are not interested in finding out facts about Israel, but in accusing it. And, as a corollary, they are not interested in the description of the world, but attempt some act for which the
information they get is ‘ammunition’. That is, metaphorically, they attempt a military activity against Israel.

Who exactly are these people? And why do they do what they are doing? It is difficult to obtain more information from the passage. For a more precise description, we might have to turn to an earlier editorial from The Times. The following passage concludes the conservative newspaper’s first critical exposition of Israel’s use of white phosphorous:

(...) Israel has a powerful ally in the United States.

Its critics are wont to condemn this alliance as a Jewish axis blind to heart-rending realities in Gaza and to the sacrifices necessary for peace.

No one can be unmoved by the suffering witnessed by the Norwegian surgeon who texted friends to tell them ‘we’re wading in death, blood [and] amputees’. But the way to end it is not to abandon Israel. It is to defeat Hamas. As Washington contemplates an opening to Iran, its reluctance to condemn Israel is not ideological but rational. The alternative would be to open talks with Tehran while its proxy in Gaza still threatened much of Israel with Iranian-built rockets.

(The Times, 10 January 2009)

The explicit referent of the ‘other’ here is Israel’s ‘critics’. This is a category that, despite strong words about Israel’s use of phosphorous, The Times clearly does not belong to. What we learn about these critics is that their preferred way of ending the suffering in Gaza would be to ‘abandon Israel’, and that they condemn the US–Israel alliance as a cold-hearted ‘Jewish axis’. The first attribute could perhaps in itself, and in a different context, come under the umbrella of anti-Zionism; the second though, is a clear instance of antisemitism as it invokes the anti-Jewish trope of a worldwide and malicious Jewish conspiracy responsible for the suffering of the world. In this remarkable paragraph concluding The Times’ position on Israeli use of white phosphorous, then, Israel’s ‘critics’ turn out to be plain and simple anti-Semites. No wonder, perhaps, that the conservative newspaper would go out its way not to be counted among them.

To summarise, when putting forward editorial arguments on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, both British conservative broadsheets found it relevant to refer to an alternative political-moral perspective to their own – and that alternative appeared to be a complete non-alternative since, in both cases, it turned out to be antisemitic. This meant that the newspapers could not, and did not have to, engage with the argumentative position of the ‘other’ that was critical towards the conduct of Israel.

Indeed, as pointed out earlier, it may be the case that the prima facie political nature of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict can be useful to serve as cover for the airing of antisemitic (or anti-Muslim) perspectives otherwise undesirable in public discourse (cf., Harrison 2006; Rosenfeld 2006). At the same time, the facts that, first, when British conservative broadsheets introduced a perspective critical of Israel’s conduct it inevitably proved to be antisemitic; and, second, that The Times itself explicitly dubbed ‘Israel’s critics’ as antisemitic, might make us feel uneasy when antisemitism (or anti-Muslimism) is rhetorically invoked in political debates. Namely, as argued by a number of authors (Bunzl 2007; Butler 2004), through calculation or genuine fear, it clearly closes down political-moral imaginaries by branding them as antisemitic/anti-Muslim. As such, not only does it hinder the solution of a political conflict like that between Israel–Palestine, but will contribute to the taboo where racism does not disappear, only becomes impossible to be touched, discussed, engaged with and transformed.
Conclusion

In three case studies, this chapter has examined what we think are three prominent ways in which racism features in contemporary Western public discourse. The point that we tried to make was that while in the West the idea of racism (as opposed to its practice) has by and large become taboo, racist discourse nonetheless operates on three levels.

With our first case study, we demonstrated how racism can still be invoked in an essentially explicit form in extreme-right discourse. Of course, since racism is variously proscribed in contemporary politics, racist discourse might have to be coded to a greater or lesser extent, and/or package its hateful message in appealing contemporary forms (see Wodak & Forchtner 2014, for analysis of comics produced by the FPÖ, for example). But nevertheless, such discourses constitute a ‘thinly veiled’ and by-and-large explicit version of political racism.

Second, the idea of racism having become taboo has led to developments where racism is not only coded and implicit, but arguably unintentional. This means that racists do not simply seek to deceive the mainstream public and communicate to audiences with coded messages, but rather that racism manages to deceive the very self that emits it. We offered Case study 2 as an example of this, showing not only how racism can be implicitly invoked in public discourse, but also how it becomes virtually impossible to discuss: it can be seen by everyone but cannot be touched.

Our third example further developed this line of thinking. In Case study 3, the issue at stake was the threat of racism and the awareness of the ways it is perceived to contaminate political discourse. The conservative broadsheets analysed were extraordinarily wary of not becoming (or being perceived as, or accused of being) racist – to the extent that it stopped them from fully developing critical lines of political thinking. As such, they demonstrated another way that racism, banished as taboo, comes back to haunt modern Western societies: from a system of ideas and practices legitimating the stratification of society, it becomes a fear of thinking and criticism that, once again, petrifies the political status quo and immunises it from change.

Notes

1 It behoves us to point out that Islamophobia does, indeed, ‘pose a challenge to traditional understandings of race and racism’ (Opratko & Müller-Uri 2014, p. 1), and one that is being answered differently in different countries. In Germany, for example, the 2011 ‘Deutsche Islam Konferenz’, a state agency initiated by the Federal Ministry of the Interior, rejected the term ‘Islamophobia’ in favour of the neologism ‘Muslimfeindlichkeit’ (hostility towards Muslims) (Opratko & Müller-Uri 2014, p. 3).
2 Though see Richardson (2011, 2013, 2015) and Richardson & Wodak (2009a, 2009b) for analysis of fascist esoteric arguments.
3 For an extended analysis of these and other leaflets, see Richardson & Colombo (2014).
4 Given copyright restrictions, we cannot include images of these leaflets in this chapter. We therefore point the reader to the following links: http://imgur.com/2UL5xV5; http://imgur.com/gsuY7c9.
5 See the silhouettes of missiles in this article, for example: www.scienceclarified.com/Ro-Sp/Rockets-and-Missiles.html.
6 The video of the interview is available from: www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/ktla-anchor-apologizes-mistaking-samuel-679048. It is worth watching it before reading our analysis of the case. Transcripts follow the conventions for CA transcription (see Jefferson 2004).
7 White phosphorous is a self-igniting, and therefore highly incendiary chemical substance, which the Israeli Army claim to use as an obscurant. However, due to the fact that it used it within densely
populated urban areas and that white phosphorous can by definition be used with little precision, it arguably led to many avoidable civilian casualties (Human Rights Watch 2009; also see Kaposi 2014, 2016).

8 Incidentally, the paragraph is preceded by the following thoughts: ‘Israelis grieve as all humans do for the children cut down in Gaza’s maelstrom, and their leaders know full well the damage that this conflict is doing to the country’s reputation, especially where images of Palestinian suffering are broadcast more as propaganda than news’. (The Times 16 January 2009 – emphasis ours.) Again, we witness the emergence of suspicious figures who are defined not by any positive motive (i.e. by their genuine interest in Palestinian suffering), but by their clear and inexplicable animosity towards the State of Israel.

References

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Dávid Kaposi and John E. Richardson


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