Racism as episteme and the global condition

The editors of the journal *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, founded in 1978, Martin Bulmer and John Solomos, produced a special issue in 2018 looking back on 40 years of publishing about race and racism that provocatively asked: ‘Why do we still talk about race?’ (Bulmer and Solomos 2018). Emphasising the Anglophone, primarily US and UK context, in a few paragraphs they outlined the development of racism scholarship in the United States from the early twentieth century to the present before finally diagnosing a changed research landscape. Here they searched for a current, historically specific form of racism, of ‘the production and reproduction of an episteme’ (ibid., 7) which structures – and here I generalise their statement – ‘the ideological production of categories relating to oneself and the constitution and comprehension of the Other’ (ibid.). This ideological production, they claimed, must at the same time be continuously instituted and maintained in order to persist.

In my view, foregrounding the role of institutions and the maintenance of racism as episteme hints at a deeper insight into contemporary formations of racism. *Racism as episteme* refers to more than a set of knowledges, for an episteme must be understood as the very historical grounding of knowledge and the conditions of its possibility, or as Michel Foucault writes in *The Order of Things*, ‘expressed in a theory or silently invested in a practice’ (Foucault 2002 [1966], 183). He would later elaborate on the episteme in ‘Truth and Power’ as ‘the strategic apparatus which permits of separating out from among all the statements which are possible those that will be acceptable’ (Foucault 1980, 197). Bulmer and Solomos thus emphasise the necessity of a ‘historical reflexivity about the historical background to the emergence of modern racism’, reaching a rather drastic diagnosis of our times when speaking of our ‘failure to come to terms with the transformations of racial ideologies and practices over time and space’ (Bulmer and Solomos 2018, 8). To be clear: in my understanding, ‘over time and space’ refers to the global scale of racism(s). I would suggest that we also need to speak of a variegated global space in which racism operates and produces and reproduces at the same time, one we are still struggling to research and understand in its full scope and variety. In speaking of a variegated global space, I borrow from urban geographers Neil Brenner, Jamie Peck, and Nick Theodore (2010) to stress the relational dimension of racist diversity, maintaining the heterogeneity of racist articulations and practices as an uneven process across the world.
Alongside such geographies, racism as an episteme also refers to temporali-
ities of racisms, i.e. the periodisation of racist discourses that itself constitutes a con-
tested field of scholarly debate in terms of to what extent we can make plausible
generalising accounts of trending conjunctures of racism. Take, for example, the current
inflation of the concept when it comes to dif-
ferent manifestations of racisms in different parts of the world (anti-Muslim racism, anti-Roma,
anti-Semitism, xenophobia, hatred towards refugees or migrant labour, racism against indige-
nous people). Talking about xenophobia, for example, and continuing to use ethnicity, if not as
given empirical then as an analytical category, aims at understanding ethnicity as a
social construction, of why a belief in the existence of ethnicity persists and why people
organise their lives and relationships accordingly. But this also means that ethnicity continues
to function as a signifier, albeit in inverted form, leading to some discretion in the inter-
pretation of racism. During the era of biologically grounded racism (which as we know is not
over) it still appeared as if ethnicity could theoretically unify various racisms like anti-Semitism
and ‘colonial racism’ – as if they were subject to a hierarchical and spatially organised pattern
of different cultures, a linearly determined notion of progress, a preference for purity over
hybridity, etc. Such certainty has grown more complicated with the analysis of ‘differential’ or
‘neo-racism’ since the 1950s, and with the global variegated scale on which racisms operate.
The loss of analytical sharpness in understanding the essence of racism, I would argue, has to
do with the influence of the critique of racism and anti-racist practice.

We know that knowledge of racism (as can be found, for example, in anti-racist practices)
is trans-disciplinarily informed in that it is knowledge established across fields and struggles.
Moreover, it has developed different sets of problematisation, formulating questions which
are meaningful and therefore possible within a certain organisation of discourse, and, correla-
tively, identifying objects which are either visible or invisible for a certain ‘experience’
informing by this discourse. Perhaps more importantly, the episteme always has another side,
if you will, in which it is questioned as a set of theories and practices, signalling the conflict-
ual dimension of any given knowledge/episteme. This is to say that every episteme – even
racism – has its limits. This is where I think transgression lies, even if it means that racism
does not dissolve but rather becomes something else, something transformed in comparison
to what we ‘knew’ up to that point.

When we try to understand such morphologies, I argue, it is precisely because practical
forms of resistance to racism have gained strength and work on different memories, on dif-
ferent histories of racism, and anti-racism has brought the differences between various politics
and experiences of racism to the fore. It is at this historical moment that the controversies
about whether one form of racism has alternated with another in the past and present or will
alternate in the future become acute, as Etienne Balibar appropriately remarked. The ques-
tion of racism’s essence and the unity of the term thus arises (see Balibar 2005, 22). Bulmer’s
and Solomos’s diagnosis of the ‘failure to come to terms with the transformations of racial
ideologies and practices over time and space’, which I share and believe is widely shared,
may then have to do with the fact that why we even call racism ‘racism’ in the first place
has been contested. Along these lines Balibar, in his article ‘Difference, Otherness, Exclusion’
(2005), rightly noted that it is precisely the numerous uses, denunciations, and critiques of
racism – the current transformations of social conditions in which racism develops into prac-
tices and discourses and changes into other formations – which have made the term so
ambiguous that its origin, its unity, its ability to summarise various phenomena and manifest-
atations is called into question. In theoretical terms such an approach presents us with an epis-
temological paradox: we do not presuppose racism, but we must state that it has existed for
a very long time. Therefore, if we focus our investigation on a specific understanding of the
constitution of racism, analysing the reasons why racism persists and appears so resistant to critique, then arguments often blur into an area where it is no longer clear whether we are theorising racism at all. That is why I take this diagnosis and predicament as an invitation to think of an epistemological way, a method, to come to terms with transformations of ‘ideologies and practices’.

In this contribution I attempt to delineate and critically assess the contributions made to anti-racism, yet it would be impossible to truly do so given the vast histories and stories of anti-racist practices across the world, or the theoretical knowledge that has organically developed from them. Rather, my turn to method is motivated by a desire to unravel the variety, renewal, and overall mixed profile of new and persisting forms and practices of racism. Therefore, while we can say that the foundations of anti-racism are being renewed through globalising processes, the struggle is waged on an extremely wide and varied front and scale, in microforms, and is yet to be further theorised. Confusion over method of inquiry is widespread in this context. The following question must then be posed: method of inquiry for what and for whom, and why is the question of method so urgent today? I would suggest that the answers can be found in the realities of the conflicts that racism constitutes and that emerge in anti-racist practices. The implications of such assumptions are deep, as they signify the need to bring historical and political experiences back into consideration in order to draw methodological conclusions for our times, when racism appears ever on the rise. The question of method may help to ask: how do we effectively encounter racism? How can our studies be guided towards that purpose? What experiences can we draw on today? Where are those deposits where experiences are contained in congealed form? How can we find them? How do we detect those insurgent ideas and experiences, the ‘minor knowledges’ (Foucault), so to speak, among the layers of social archives and memory? The overall aim of this contribution is to foreground the advantages of an analysis of global racism formations to investigate resistance, flight paths, and return to where anti-racism has effectively encountered racism.

By insisting on such an approach I am aware that these have already existed in the genealogy of racism scholarship, but suggest that we should return to them in times when it may no longer suffice to only add another crisis analysis, explaining to each other the secrets of this specific domination (Hage 2016, 126) – although I still consider this intellectual practice to be absolutely necessary. Rather, I argue that in times of transformation we must return to the archives of previous encounters of anti-racism. Anti-racism as method therefore suggests two simultaneous moves: drawing on such archives helps to learn from historical experiences of success and defeat, and moreover may open a perspective in which we develop our knowledge and analysis of racism from concrete conflicts constituted through racism.

Racism as social relation

Relational approaches to understanding racism (Fanon 1952, 1965 [1959], 1961, 1969; Balibar 1988; Goldberg 2009; Hall 2016; Hage 2016, 2017) have been helpful in understanding racist conditioning in its complexity and as it travels across the globe, and not only because they state that racism is not a question of individual racist subjects (Balibar 1988). Theo Goldberg more fully elaborates on the topologies and linkages, ‘causally or symbolically, ideationally or semantically’, of a relational understanding of racism when he points out, firstly, that the way we know and institutionalise racism, how it is expressed and conceptualised, is not only local, and therefore cannot be understood in comparative perspective, but rather relational, as racism ‘circulates in wider circles of meaning and practice’ (Goldberg 2009, 174). He also reminds us of the historical and material process underlying the
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constitutive connections in-built into racism when he writes: ‘The globalization of the racial is predicated on the understanding that racial thinking and its resonances [...] racial ordering, racist institutional arrangement and racial control were key instruments of colonial governmentality and control’ (Goldberg 2009, 1275). He aims for a ‘cartography of reiterative impacts, of their transformations and redirections’ (ibid., 1279). Secondly, he claims we must understand the globalisation of the racial in terms of its inter-local pervasion, i.e. when ‘racial thinking and racism “here” gets (support) from “there”’. Drawing on this line of argument allows for a conception of how historical conditions led to the emergence of our global racialised world in the first place, and reminds us of the desire to understand the unfinished decolonisation process that intensified in many parts of Europe and the US through anti-racist conflicts.

Three aspects strike me as central to understanding the globalisation of the racial: firstly, racism must be seen as a mutually dependent process in tandem with the expansion of the capitalist world market through colonialism, marked until today by deep inequalities, uneven development, and incessant economic extraction as well as cultural hybridisation that continually produces new cultural differentiations. Secondly, this history is as much an integral part of world history and the present as it is of Europe. It is an ambivalent story in which the conceivable unity of the world was always linked to intellectual projects seeking to integrate the tendencies of world-ing and localising practices, while at the same time linked inseparably to the constellations of a post-colonial situation. Finally, as Goldberg points out when he speaks of the constitutional conditions of colonialism, this development was and is always characterised by a material practice, to which I would like to add both the forced and the more or less voluntary mobility of people who have been described by quite a few commentators – among them Aimé Césaire – in relation to migration to Europe after the Second World War as a ‘retorsion effect’ of colonialism, and finally and decisively by the very processes of decolonisation that created the one world in which we live today.

Building on this, conjunctures of racism as determined in relation to social struggles thus, and most importantly, require an understanding based on struggles against racism rather than on subjects constituted by racism (Bojadžijev 2008). For a relational theory of racism I believe that three more aspects must be combined. Firstly, we need to do more than just emphasise the strategic effect of the relationship inherent in racism, i.e. its functionality in the relations of power. Secondly, it will not suffice to understand the reorganisation of racism, i.e. the effects of struggles against racism on each historically specific formation of racism. Thirdly, it is in fact always a matter of also working out the institutional and maintaining modes of regulating these struggles, which in turn have an effect on the determination, i.e. the subjectivation, of those subjected to racism. In short, racism does not exist outside the history of its constitution and reproduction, and like all ideological formations is based, to borrow a phrase from Louis Althusser, on an interplay of a double constitution, constituting and constituted at the same time (Althusser 1971).

An analysis of racism therefore cannot fail to consider the historical process of how, when, and why racism transforms. Analysing this has been the task of historiographies of social struggles framed by racism. Such historiographies provide accounts of the forms of racist subjectification. They do so, I would say, in a double sense of reconstructing the perseverance and tenacity of those resisting racism who constitute themselves as subjects in the social conflicts, but also offering a sense of the history of their subjugation. The deep insight such accounts provide is that racialised subjects exist as a group for as long as they exist under conditions that make them one. This invites a reverse assumption: that as long as they exist, there will be conflict. Such a relational theory of racism would prove that struggles
repeatedly force racism to reorganise itself, sometimes with the aim of ultimately removing the basis of its reinstitution and maintenance.

History has always been an important resource and terrain of anti-racist imagination and action for relational accounts, which is why I now turn to historiographies of labour, migration, and racism. Such accounts usually provide the grounds for a conversation across time and space, reading racialised politics in different parts of the world through the history of a whole variety of social struggles such as anti-colonial struggle, labour politics, or struggles of migration. They help constitute a way of thinking about politics and its subjects that is radically different from essentialising conceptions of these issues, for they strictly limit the scope of strategic essentialism to historical instances.

‘Singular histories’ of anti-racism

First, I discuss three international histor(iograph)y cases. The first is part of the US labour history tradition and deals with the slavery era. The second is the seminal work of Frantz Fanon, whose understanding of anti-racism in the colonial context was decisive for many who followed. The last case turns to post-war European history, specifically France, the UK, and Germany. Combining these approaches enables me to gain an overview of social struggles against racism in different social formations, all of which were influential in developing relational concepts of racism, provided insights into historical conjunctures of racism, and were influential in understanding racism from the perspective of struggles against it.

Labour history, racism, and class

The social labour history field in both the US and Europe exhibits a number of studies focused on racism and class (cf. among others Tabili 1994; Ignatiev 1995; Mills 1997; Jacobson 1998; Roediger 1999, 1994, 2005, 2017; Bojadžijev 2008; Virdee 2014). At least historically, it makes sense to link the theme of racism with the question of struggles against exploitation. David R. Roediger’s contribution to this field is particularly noteworthy. In the introduction to his most recent book, Class, Race, and Marxism (2017), Roediger takes up the current debate’s fundamental problem when discussing the political intersections between anti-capitalist movements such as Occupy Wall Street and struggles against racism, as currently manifested in the protests against police violence within the framework of the Black Lives Matter movement. Roediger’s political positions reject the ongoing polarisation between arguments for or against the political primacy of anti-capitalist struggles over ‘identity-related’ ones. Even if they do not directly formulate anti-capitalist goals, identity-related struggles must, according to Roediger, be understood as part of the class struggle because they both attack the fundamental logic of social inequality in capitalist societies and offer the possibility of innovatively combining different forms of political struggle. This argumentation is not new, but has in fact been repeated remarkably often. We need only think of Stuart Hall’s (1980) earlier work in line with investigations that studied race and class in articulation. In ‘Race, articulation and societies structured in dominance’ he elaborated a concept seeking to develop an integrated analysis of the structuring and manufacturing of racialised social divisions with economic, political, ideological, and cultural dimensions. Hall developed a materialist approach to understanding racism with a historically concrete analysis of distinctive racial aspects (Hall 1980, 336).

Building upon this vast literature, I would like to highlight one particular contribution that stands out for its analysis of the relationship between class and racism, dealing with it
in the context of the transformation of capitalism and its inherent history of forced migration: the transatlantic history of slavery. It offers me the opportunity to discuss a methodological and analytical framework for anti-racism as method. The work in question is Theodore W. Allen’s two-volume study *The Invention of the White Race* (1997), in which he conducts a historical comparison between the colonisation of Catholic Ireland from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries and the enslavement of black workers on Virginia’s tobacco plantations.

A number of works in the line of Allen attempt to determine the functioning of racism for the conditions of exploitation they examine in the struggles of slaves and indentured labour in Atlantic colonial history. This was a time when industrialisation asserted itself, and historically coincided with the effective restitution of the plantation economy in the transition to cotton cultivation. Allen’s work is chosen for typological reasons and as an example of a historiography that successfully puts struggles of labour, everyday life, racism, and forced migration into context and describes significant historical moments. In reflecting on these contributions, I focus not so much on reconstructions of the struggles themselves as on the methodology, foregrounding how the constellation of racism, migration, and class struggle is conceptualised in the work.

Allen’s work is indicative here in that it provides a historical analysis of struggles in the context of racist oppression and exploitation, implying a critical theory of racism. In particular, Allen’s investigation and analysis of historical documents is influenced and informed by the civil rights movements of the twentieth century (cf. Allen 1997). As Allen demonstrates in his analogy of Irish and American history, racism cannot simply be traced back to the workings of phenotypic characteristics or an analysis thereof. Rather, he emphasises that a deconstructivist analysis or a historical view alone is not enough to prove this. What is so fascinating in his investigation is that he links back to moments when the institutional differentiation and definition of ‘white’ and ‘black’ begins in US history. Allen’s concept of social control is based on a socio-theoretical consideration that analyses racist oppression in the context of class struggle and the struggles of slaves and indentured labour. In this way, it becomes clear how the relationship that generated this system of oppression is built, instituted, and maintained. Furthermore, Allen’s analysis supports a relational theory of racism according to which racism organises and intermittently reorganises itself in relation to struggles against racist oppression. He shows how state measures and institutions constitute racism in everyday life by issuing various decrees that themselves can be read as a response to rebellions. His work’s strength is that he abandons simplistic comparisons and blurs contradictions when tracing the existence of class solidarity where barriers of ‘white’ and ‘black’ were transgressed before they were legally codified in response to such collective action. This turn to investigating historical solidarity *avant la lettre* does not, as a common line of doubt claims, give priority to the class struggle or a presupposed unity of the working class. The opposite is rather the case, for Allen’s intention is specifically to understand how racist oppression takes on an intrinsic form that cannot be eliminated by reflecting on the class struggle, but requires solidarity. It is only in the precise historical description of this development that it becomes possible to show how the forces of power shift historically and makes drastically clear that from the moment of legal distinction between ‘black’ and ‘white’ struggles can no longer side-step making structural and institutional (in this case racist) lines of division their starting point if they are to succeed at all.

Moreover, what becomes clear in these historical accounts is that there can be no general theory of racism. Rather, according to Allen it can only be understood as a fundamental system of rule whose economic and political constitutional conditions must be precisely
specified. He thus chooses a form of analysis that could be described as the ‘singular history’ of racism (cf. Balibar 1988, 40) in order to determine the conjuncture.

**Temporalities of anti-racism in the context of colonialism**

The notion that racism has assumed new historical configurations since roughly the mid-twentieth century has been emphasised many times. Frantz Fanon was one of the first to identify this shift in his lecture ‘Racism and Culture’ at the First Congress of Black Writers and Artists in Paris in 1956:

> Racism has not managed to harden. It has had to renew itself, to adapt itself, to change its appearance. It has had to undergo the fate of the cultural whole that informed it. [...] These old-fashioned positions tend in any case to disappear. This racism that aspires to be rational, individual, genotypically and phenotypically determined, becomes transformed into cultural racism. (Fanon 1967, 32)

In addition to his theoretical reflections on racism as a sociogeny, influenced by his psychiatric practice and participation in anti-colonial struggles as a member of the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) and editor of its journal, Fanon also provided historical-theoretical considerations in the context of the Algerian anti-colonial liberation movement conceptualising the relationship between racism and anti-racist practices. Proceeding from French colonialism, Fanon distinguished between three phases particularly with regard to the practices of colonised intellectuals and in terms of racist subjectification, which he idealtypically identified in *The Wretched of the Earth* (originally published in French in 1961 as *Les damnés de la terre*) and elaborated in other writings.

In *Aspects of the Algerian Revolution*, first published in 1966 as *Sociologie d’une révolution*, Fanon makes changes in everyday conditions the starting point of his analysis and gives an idea of how quotidian practices can be conceived of in the context of racism and decolonisation. Fanon depicts the ‘self-consciousness of the people’ transcending the colonial situation, their subjectivity as changing and changed social practice which at the same time questions power relations among the colonised themselves. The possibility of this arises between the layers of time from which colonialism is composed. Fanon shows what liberation could look like under colonisation and in this sense demands that ‘people’ have to change at the same moment ‘in which they change the world’, because their liberation struggle ultimately aims at ‘a fundamental reorganization of the relations between people’ (Fanon 1969, 14). Liberation, we can conclude, lies in liberation from subjectification. Towards the end of *Black Skin, White Masks* he reminds us that ‘the real leap consists in introducing invention into existence. [...] I am a part of Being to the degree that I go beyond it’ (Fanon 2008 [1952], 179).

Thus, Fanon’s work combines many relevant aspects for anti-racism as method: firstly, his insistence on what today would be called a trans-disciplinary approach by operating historically, socially, culturally, and psychologically at the same time. Secondly, the question of the possibilities and limits of a reference to history permeated by racism for those who want to free themselves from it. Thirdly, the problem of not thinking of history as mere progress, thus, the non-timelessness of his or anyone’s writings. And finally, the question of how change is possible under such conditions of colonial violence, without creating an abstract statement but analysing the material practices of de-subjectification in history.

The reception of Fanon’s work is quite ambivalent in the sense that he was a theoretical role model for highly diverse projects over the course of history. Although Fanon’s influence
on Cultural Studies and Post-Colonial Studies has been enormous, here it is precisely his theoretical ambivalence, the rejection of clear-cut attributions and pure categories that are deployed – or, as Paul Gilroy put it, his ‘reparative humanity’ (2011, 14). Interestingly, Gilroy (2010) recently returned to the writings of Fanon (and Améry), attacking their domestication ‘by timid, often parochial fields like “critical race theory” and “postcolonial theory”’ (ibid., 17). He reminded readers of the changed political situation as a result of the ‘war on terror’ in tandem with the ‘uneven effects’ of the financial and debt crisis post-2008, as well as the impact of technological innovations in warfare, suggesting: ‘It may be greater if his [Fanon’s, MB] ideas can be reapplied carefully to managing challenges that are tied up in the lives of the often traumatized incomers (migrants) who are expected to bring the global insurgency alive on the fertile soil of their racialized exclusion from the dreamscapes of indentured consumerism’ (2010, 21).

Migration struggles

I will pick up on this reference to the ‘incomers’ and go to a very different example that takes us to Europe and the crisis of Fordism to examine traditions and efforts in the self-organisation of migrants across Europe. This section is dedicated to the analyses of Mogniss Abdallah and Abdelmalek Sayad in France, Satnam Virdee’s analysis of ‘racialised outsiders’ in the UK (2014), and some reference to my own work (2008) and Serhat Karakayali’s work in Germany. All of these works investigate conditions and struggles of migration. They deal with important stages in conflicts arising through migration and serve as exemplary points of orientation both methodologically and in terms of substance. The history of mobile populations receives a different rhythm and nuanced understanding if read as the history of its struggles and not focused solely on changes to immigration legislation and regulations. All contributions tell this story from the perspective of migrants and their political and everyday struggles, which is particularly important given how common the erasure of those conflicts from labour history narratives is. They deserve special attention in that they address migrant forms of self-organisation, i.e. those that were formed autonomously rather than within existing trade unions, organisations, or parties.

For France, Abdallah’s book J’y suis, j’y reste! Les luttes de l’immigration en France depuis les années soixante (‘I’m here, I’ll stay! The struggles of immigration in France since the 1960s’, 2001) provides a good understanding of the different currents, themes, and debates of migrant politics in France. Abdallah sums up historical developments in terms of political engagement and emphasises the collective force that emerges from self-organisation that is capable of social transformation. Like in Germany, many associations were initially founded on the basis of national origins (Bojadžijev 2008) to meet the social and cultural needs of ‘immigrant workers’ and offered legal, material, and moral support. They concentrated their activities on their countries of origin, whose regimes they often opposed. In their public self-representation they often committed themselves to political neutrality and entrenched themselves behind cultural activities. However, it should not be underestimated – and this must be objected to a culturalist historiography of migration – that cultural orientation was sometimes used (especially since the cultural awakening marked by the revolts in May 1968) to circumvent the prohibition of migrant politics as regulated by law. Around the same time in both France and Germany, the late 1960s and early 1970s, new migrant activities came to the fore which in France were very much about politics, the question of citizenship, and the right to vote in particular. Working closely with Pierre Bourdieu, Sayad’s posthumously published volume The Suffering of the Immigrant (2004) emphasises the conditions of migration
mainly under this aspect, the provisional and legal status of migrants and their children, as was also the aim of Karakayali’s study (2008) on the historical genealogy of illegal immigration to Germany. While Sayad focused on the permanent deprivation of rights in migration and used the term ‘immigrants of the interior’ for the generation born in France, Karakayali’s work renders the autonomy of migration historically visible without the claim to control inherent in the governance of migration (ibid., 258).

Abdallah’s perspective on self-organisation also captures the conflicts of quotidian life. From 1974 to 1980 the residents of the apartment buildings managed by the Société nationale de construction de logements pour les travailleurs (Sonacotra) went on one of the longest national tenant strikes in France. As in many European countries at the time, in 1972 the Marcellin-Fontanet decrees subjected immigration to strict controls aimed at stopping official labour migration and at the same time called for integration of those considered integrable. Politically active migrants could thus be tied to the union; trade-union sections for migrants emerged, but overall the policy sought to integrate immigrants into the homogenously depicted French workforce (cf. Abdallah 2001, 113). Abdallah speaks of a very close connection between French workers’ struggles and migrants’ struggles; they were repeatedly able to place so-called ‘specific demands’ into a broader social context of growing ethnification of power relations as a whole. Virdee (2014) observed something similar for the UK:

By reading that history through the lens of race, through the eyes of racialized minorities who were present in every one of those moments, we find that race and class were mutually constitutive in the making of the English working class.

(Virdee 2015, 226f)

Racism itself could thus be understood in all of these studies as a form of social confrontation in which racism renews itself and contributes to a certain form of social reproduction – instead of reducing it to the subjects it produces (foreigners vs. French; racialised outsiders vs. English).

All mentioned authors’ assessments refer to their knowledge of historical migration struggles. In this respect they are in agreement with the reflections of Allen or Roediger: they all investigate the fields of conflict. What Allen describes as the concept of social control, by which he means constructing a system of rule that enables effective control of the labour force through social stratification, is reflected in trade-union and state integration policies which others (Abdallah 2001; Bojadžijev 2008; Virdee 2014) in turn describe. These works evidence that politics in its dominant form functions recuperatively: it responds to demands made in struggles by isolating some of them and integrating others. This must not necessarily be understood as a historical defeat but can be reversed in a historical analysis, for social disputes are in fact inscribed in the reorganisation of racism, politics, and production. This reorganisation can only be understood with a view to conflict.

Conclusion and possible developments

Following the notion of anti-racism as method, in conclusion we could ask how racism can be analysed without adopting a perspective in which those affected by racism are seen merely as victims. To bring these considerations into the present, we need only think of the countless workers who are referred to as the ‘shadow workforce’ of the tech industry. All those who work for shiny, global monopolists like Google, Facebook, Apple, Amazon, or Microsoft as contract workers or in subcontracted firms, and who inhabit a number of different roles across the industry, including content moderation, serving meals, driving as bike
and package couriers across cities, cleaning offices, providing security, writing code, and performing click work. First studies show that this workforce is highly mobile and flexible, and that historically-driven race, class, and gender-based orders and relationships with gentrification and growing inequality exist in tech industry contexts (Altenried, Bojadžijev, and Wallis 2017). Additionally, workers tend to become an atomised unit, dispersed across space, their labour spatially and temporarily reconfigured according to employer’s needs. The end of the factory as a spatial unity, the introduction of the ‘digital factory’ (Altenried 2017), means for the individual contractors, that the burden of responsibility for their livelihoods is placed merely on them. As a result, labour becomes more fragmented, disempowered, and made to accept lower wages despite intensifying exploitation. Such workers are stereotyped in gendered and racialised ways by their employers, which creates an ambivalent space for both resistance and at the same time such discrimination prevents them from officially organising.

Employers will attempt to recuperate the worker’s social and cultural customs as assets to the flexible workplace and process, for example in content moderation (Altenried and Bojadžijev 2017). Many of the women working in electronics manufacturing that Karen Hossfeld (1995) interviewed already in the 1980s and 1990s in Silicon Valley were resistant to traditional labour unions and generally wary of collective organising. But they did have strategies for dealing with unreasonable, sexist, and racist superiors. In her analyses she concludes:

For immigrant women workers, a successful organizing movement will be one that addresses the intersections of class, gender, race, and nationality in their lives, a movement recognizing that for women […] a work life means not only wage work but household and community labor, and often includes the struggles associated with being undocumented. What is needed is an interethnic labor and community movement that challenges gender and racial oppression as well as dangerous, unstable working conditions in the high-tech industry. And because of the global scope and mobility of the industry, such a movement must also have an international component.

(Hossfeld 1995, 429–430)

We can learn from such studies that the variegated global spaces of racism and labour that I have been investigating for this chapter are sometimes encapsulate in local images of the world. Thus, researching racism under global conditions may lead us back to anti-racism as method in that we can learn how such space does not only ‘hit the ground’ in concrete struggles but also teaches us how to understand racism and its morphologies. Those subjected to racism were and are never only objects and victims, but have defended themselves against it in various forms and practices. Resistance has historically emerged in direct or indirect, collective or individual confrontations following certain patterns of identity (as leftists, according to their origin/religion/racial or ethnic identities, as internationalists). Only in the rarest of cases did they articulate the question of social change as a question of identity or of change itself within the respective power relations. They are to be understood as a search for change in which the conditions for a better life in and against racist situations are found again and again.

Taking the disquiet in racism scholarship diagnosed at the beginning of this chapter as a motive and drawing conclusions from the theoretical considerations discussed above, I dare to put forward a far-reaching thesis for a relational theory of racism: conjunctures of racism determine, organise, and reorganise themselves in struggle – in social and political confrontations that produce, reproduce, and transform their opponents (which can be manifold) in their identity and formation. Consequently, and this point has certainly been made by many
but also questioned by others, one of the constant efforts in undermining racism is to dissolve positions of identity. The conjunctures of racism do not depend only on its internal reproductive capacity – racism’s reorganisation and development is shaped decisively by those who defend themselves against it. The fight against racism can thus be taken as the methodological starting point. Racism itself is a form of social confrontation in which it renews itself and contributes to capitalist development’s complex forms. A theory of racism must therefore not only include anti-racist practices in theoretical analysis and critique, but also include conflicts that go beyond resistance to racism in which struggles and critiques are not necessarily articulated as anti-racist (cf. Bojadžijev 2008). We must therefore always ask and define: what is the concrete conflict?

References


