The beginning and the end of racism – and something in-between

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Racism is a historical fact and ongoing reality. Any visit to a slavery, Holocaust or apartheid museum should provide evidence enough. If not, walk through a post-apartheid city, examine the racial disparities in spatial and economic data, or hear the pain and protest of those who have borne the brunt of 400 years of brutality and unfreedom. We might call this Racism with a capital R.

And yet, despite its brute reality, racism is also a social construction, a subject of discourse. Call this ‘racism’ with scare quotes (which I will use only where necessary). Of course, we should be wary of overdrawing the distinction between Racism and ‘racism’ – the raw reality and the cultural cooked constructions (Derrida, 1970). Nonetheless, the crude distinction can help sharpen our focus on the way racism has become cooked, mythologized, and to what ends.

At first, Racism didn’t know itself as ‘racism’. The word did not exist. It was unselfconscious. For most of its history, what we now call racism was known by other names: trans-Atlantic trade, slavery, abolitionism; the white man’s burden, governance, colonialism, the will of God, separate development, democracy, the natural order of things, and so on.

It was only in the 1930s that the word sprang into circulation. There were recorded isolated uses of the word racism dating from as early as 1902 (Oxford English Dictionary; Denby, 2014), but it was only with the rise of Nazism that the word gained currency and traction (Safire, 2006). On the one hand, it was used to discredit the Nazis’ belief in race differences. Frederickson (2002) says that Hirschfeld’s (1938) posthumously published book, Racism, ‘first gave real currency to the term “racism”’ (p. 162). On the other hand, ‘racism’ was also used as an emblem of identity, ‘popularised through Mussolini’s public embrace of razzismo (racism) in the second half of 1938’ and worn with nationalistic pride by his followers (Myburgh, 2016).

Although many argue that Racism existed before the word was coined and popularized, its appearance did mark a momentous change. Frederickson (2002) observes that ‘the concept of racism emerges only when the concept of race, or at least some of its applications, begin to be questioned’ (p. 156). ‘Racism’ emerges when the political and oppressive use of race categories become conscious of themselves as Racism. Interestingly, this momentous shift occurs at home in Europe, to problematize the way the Nazis had drawn racial
distinctions between citizens of Europe in the quest to isolate an Aryan essence of the Caucasian race. European anti-Semitism (and other Otherings) might have been ancient and contested (Arendt, 1973), but it was only after the political project built on race science that it became ‘racism’.

At the end of the war, the defeat of fascism sounded the death knell for a celebratory identification with nationalistic racism. Racism was to become a mark of shame, an object of scientific investigation, and (later) a subject of government and social administration.

**Authoritative definitions of racism**

The horrors of the Holocaust quickly led to the judgment that racism was a prejudice, irrational at its heart. In one generation, social science had shifted from studies of race to studies of racism. Samelson (1978) describes the *volte-face* in psychology. In the 1920s, ‘most psychologists believed in the existence of mental differences between races; by 1940, they were searching for the sources of “irrational prejudice”’ (p. 265). The slew of prejudice research after the war had one thing in common: race was treated as an unreality, and belief in race difference was deemed to be prejudice. Klineberg (1951, p. 505) describes national stereotyping as ‘autistic thinking’. Adorno et al. (1950) described anti-Semitism as both social disease and mental pathology. Perhaps most famously, Allport (1954) says the antipathy stems from ‘faulty generalization’.

It is not an exaggeration to say that nearly the whole of the social sciences and the humanities – the postwar liberal tradition – has been opposed to prejudice and racism. Racism was something that others practiced. It was a problem to be understood and eradicated.

Although much writing about racism assumes that the nature of the problem is self-evident, close inspection of the theoretical and empirical literatures shows that this is far from true. The definition of racism has been hotly contested both within and between disciplines. Definitions have changed over time and across contexts, both because of differences in the phenomenon itself and the differing politics of the writers.

In the postwar context of the 1950s and the 1960s, research in the social sciences focused on the irrational nature of prejudice, stereotyping, and myths about race differences. The first three UNESCO statements on ‘the race question’ sought to show that the idea of race differences lacked scientific validity, and holding such beliefs was thus not justified. It was only in their forth statement in 1967 – written some 17 years after the first statement – that the UNESCO committee first problematized “racism”, which they defined as ‘antisocial beliefs and acts which are based on the fallacy that discriminatory intergroup relations are justifiable on biological grounds’ (UNESCO, 1969, p. 51). This definition of racism as false beliefs was ‘incorporated directly into the social sciences in the 1960s and 1970s’ (Miles and Brown, 2003, p. 60).

The consensus that racism was irrational prejudice was short lived. Already by 1971 social psychologists were suggesting that a new form of racism had arisen. David Sears and Donald Kinder found that a sample of liberal Californian suburbanites opposed a black mayoral candidate on nonracial grounds, not out of unjustifiable beliefs about biological differences (Sears and Kinder, 1971). Across the Atlantic and the Academy, writers began heralding the advent of a new racism – one that supported racial equality and desegregation in principle, but that used arguments about culture, fairness and pragmatics rather than biology to justify discrimination in practice (e.g. Barker, 1981; Gaertner and Dovidio, 1986; Katz and Hass, 1988; Balibar, 1991).

Disciplinary backgrounds also contributed to the contested definition of racism. Wieviorka (1995) identifies three kinds of definitions of racism: as prejudice, as ideology and as practice. Traditionally, psychologists had viewed racism as a manifestation of underlying
prejudice, with cognitive or motivational roots whereas sociologists tended to view racism systemically as an ideology. By the 1990s, an inability within either tradition to uncover a ‘deep unity of racism’ led scholars like Wieviorka (1995, p. 37) to define racism in terms of practices such as segregation, discrimination and violence – or in the discourse and political and legal relations that justified such practices (see also Goldberg, 1993; Omi and Winant, 1995).

Diverging political perspectives have also contributed to the contested definition of racism. For example, writing in Britain in the 1990s, Gilroy (1992) argued that the ‘moralistic excesses practiced in the name of antiracism’ required urgent and radical critique. A version of racism had become institutionalized and defended by a bureaucratic class and the black petit bourgeoisie, shrouded in a ‘spurious cloak of legitimacy’ (p. 587) and invested in a limiting view of blacks as victims. In that context, racial justice and the unlocking of human potential required an alternative definition of the problem. The anti-racism of one generation had become troubling to the next (see Donald and Rattansi, 1992; Solomos and Back, 1994).

In the varieties of authoritative discourse there are many divergent definitions of racism and a contested politics of anti-racism. Occasionally these different points of view clashed, resulting in heated exchanges, especially when definitions demanded that the specific contents of racism be identified in a specific context (see Durrheim, 2014). Psychologists, for example, clashed over whether or not opposition to affirmative action or liberal welfare policies or implicit biases are racist (Tetlock, 1994; Tetlock and Arkes, 2004; Jussim et al., 2015). Similar contestations have arisen in specifying which ideological contents are racist. An interesting instance of a familiar refrain was aired in the media in the wake of #RhodesMustFall protests at the University of Cape Town in 2015. Economists, Seekings and Natrass (2015) argued that affirmative action should target economic disadvantage and that a race-based policy bordered on racism itself. Sociologist, Xolela Mangcu (2015), countered that this class-based argument amounted to a motivated ignorance of the singular reality of anti-black racism and the experience of black pain, which he implied was definitive of racism itself.

Academic discourse works towards authoritative definitions of racism. Each theory and each measure of the phenomenon includes some contents in the category ‘racism’ and excludes others. Is racism irrational or can it be rational? Does it involve beliefs specifically about biological differences? Which practices, policies, beliefs and biases are properly labeled racist? Can blacks be racist and whites anti-racist? And who can legitimately speak to and decide on these issues? Whose is the final voice of authority regarding ‘racism’? Seventy years of academic research and writing about racism has taught us that it is exceedingly difficult to tease the truth of racism from the interests, politics and disciplinary perspectives of the authors. Each contribution to the sciences is also a reflection of a socially situated point of view.

Racism as an everyday concept

The category of racism soon migrated from science to everyday use. It was especially useful for oppressed groups and targets of discrimination to frame their experiences. Philomena Essed’s (1991) groundbreaking work sought to develop a ‘new approach to the study of racism’. She was less interested in the ‘mechanisms of racism’ that had been studied by social scientists than ‘Black definitions of racism’ which she suggested would be ‘interesting as an object for academic inquiry’ (pp. 1–2). Racism had become self-conscious in a new way. Whereas it might have been transmitted in practices and routines that the dominant group deemed to be normal – an invisible knapsack of privilege, unrecognized, unacknowledged and unproblematized (McIntosh,
2008) – racism had become a powerful tool for oppressed groups to describe their experiences and to formulate action. Essed shone the torch of analytic scrutiny on the ‘real racial drama … the fact that racism is an everyday problem’ (p. 10).

The everyday use of ‘racism’ was not restricted to oppressed groups. Racial dramas were unfolding in other settings, which required the objectification and problematization of racism. As the human sciences took a discursive turn, researchers were ready to begin ‘mapping the language of racism’ (Wetherell and Potter, 1992). A large body of research quickly emerged to show how racism had become impressed on commonsense and was expressed in everyday conversations and talk in institutional settings (e.g. Van Dijk, 1987a; Goldberg, 1993; Teo, 2000; Reisigl and Wodak, 2005). *Everyday racism* included beliefs, opinions and arguments, both subtle and blatant, ‘that directly or indirectly contribute to the dominance of the white group and the subordinate position of minorities’ (van Dijk, 1993, p. 5; Augoustinos and Every, 2007).

It was soon discovered that the hallmark of everyday racism was its refusal to recognize itself as such. As the social taboos against racism strengthened, those accused of racism were able to formulate their own definition of the concept, excuse themselves, deny racism, and make counteraccusations of racism (Cohen, 1992; van Dijk, 1992; Augoustinos and Every, 2007; Billig, 2012). The discursive work of accusation and denial depended on contrasting commonsense understandings of racism that were developed to counter each other (Durrheim, Quayle, and Dixon, 2016).

This work on everyday racism has been profoundly important. Not only did it show that racism occurred in everyday micro-sociological interaction, where the great forces of history and ideology, psychological motive, and cognitive deficiency took hold in concrete contexts of social life. More important even, it showed that these historical, sociological and psychological agents reflexively understood their lives and actions in terms of the category ‘racism’ and participated in life in its terms. Ordinary people and elites were lay critics and lay scientists as they argued about the reality or unreality of both race and racism. As in authoritative writings about racism, in everyday life, racism acquired a dialogical character. It was something that others practiced, and each definition was shaped in part by alternative definitions that were deemed to be wrong.

Although the discursive tradition of scholarship was critical of ‘mainstream’ treatment of racism in academic work and governance (see e.g. Gilroy, 1987; Condor, 1988), it remained part of the tradition of liberal social science, opposed to racism and presuming to know what racism is (see Durrheim, 2016). Researchers went to great lengths to show that categories of ‘race’ were potent social constructions, but they seldom subjected the category ‘racism’ to the same treatment. Of course, scholars recognized that the concept was pejorative and used as an epithet (Banton, 1970) or as a ‘coat-of-paint’ to color one’s opponents (Gilroy, 1987). Discourse analysts also showed how versions of racism were developed by ordinary people, treating these as social constructions (Wetherell and Potter, 1992; Reisigl and Wodak, 2005). However, the work conveys a strong sense that the authors know what the problem of racism really is, and against which the other definitions (especially of people characterized as ‘racists’) can be judged to be limited, wrong, or ideological. Studies of everyday racism have continued to be exercises in authoritative discourse, mapping the language of Racism.

### ‘Racism’ as a social accomplishment

Only relatively recently has research on everyday racism taken the final step in conceptualizing racism a social construction. The critical factor here is not so much the authoritative
model of racism that any instance conforms to or not, but the implicit or explicit agreements that can be garnered for one or other definition of the concept. Addressing the psychological literature on prejudice, Condor and her colleagues argued that what counts as prejudice is a ‘social accomplishment’ whose nature ‘ultimately depends upon its acceptance or rejection on the part of an audience’ (Condor et al., 2006, p. 458). ‘Racism’ is here cut free from any predefined content. Anything can be ‘racism’ or ‘not-racism’ depending on what is allowed to stand as such in any social context. Expressions of hate and sympathy, acknowledgment or denials of bias, belief in the existence or not of biological categories, and support for equality and inclusion or inequality and exclusion can all count as either ‘racist’ or ‘not-racist’ in particular situations among specific audiences (cf. Durrheim, 2017; Greenland et al., 2018). In ordinary, institutional and academic conversations and debates, participants are alert to conceptions of what could count as racism and they work hard to ensure that what does count as racism does not fatally rupture social interaction. Collectively they cultivate agreements and disagreements about the meaning of racism and develop relationships with friend and foe as they live and argue about their experiences, events, politics and social change.

This thoroughgoing constructionism is practiced most consistently by conversation analysts, who refuse to orient their readings of discourse around authoritative definitions by which researchers know and recognize racism and reach judgments about what is racist or not. To the contrary, their focus is strictly limited to participant-developed understandings of racism. Stokoe (2015) adopts as a starting point, not racism, but the ‘possible-ism’, something that is marked by the speaker or audience as possibly racist.

Possible-isms can be difficult to pin down, and whether the possible-ism ends up being regarded as racism or not depends on how it is treated by the participants; whether it is deleted, topicalized, supported or challenged.

Possible racism is an ambiguous event. In contrast to the certainty of authoritative discourse and other definitive judgments of racism, possible-isms are barely recognizable. Sometimes they pass through a conversation silently as unmarked implications (see Durrheim, 2012; Durrheim and Murray, 2019). On other occasions, they may be tacitly recognized and marked with ‘parenthetical inserts’ and other subsidiary activities (e.g. hedges, disclaimers, qualifications) that treat an expression as a possible racism that could be challenged (Whitehead, in press) and that orient to prospective problems and lay the foundation for repair (see Schegloff, 1992). However, the ambiguity of the possible racism is preserved, keeping race and racism implicit and the potentially problematic expression deniable (Stokoe, 2012; Whitehead, in press).

Hearers of a possible racism (including its author) face a dilemma regarding how to react: will they ignore the racism, support it, collude, or challenge it? Agreeing with or ignoring a possible racism exposes the hearer to the moral judgment of complicity, whereas challenging the possible racism is a disaffiliative act that has the potential to threaten rapport and lead to conflict (Stokoe, 2015; Whitehead, 2015). Intricate maneuvers are often needed to manage this fine moral economy. Once again, conversation analysts have shown how tacit evaluations can be used to signal a repairable possible hearing of a possible-ism.

The investments of both speakers and hearers in avoiding interactional trouble means that explicit expressions and hearings of racism are often dispreferred. Possible-isms are therefore designedly ambiguous, ‘slippery’ (Durrheim and Murray, 2019), ‘hard to capture cases in social life’ where ‘talk that looks like a possible-ism might turn out not to be’ (Stokoe, 2015, p. 443). What counts as racism in any concrete instance is developed in ‘(re)negotiation by participants in the moment–by–moment unfolding of interactions’ (Schegloff, 2006, cited in Stokoe, 2015, p. 429). What then stands as ‘racism’ are the specific expressions and hearings that are either treated implicitly as such or rise to the surface as such in social interaction.
‘Racism’ is thus forged in the fires of ‘participant-administered accountability’ (Whitehead, 2017) through which participants themselves decide on what counts as racism and manage the moral accountability of making such attributions.

‘Racism’ as identity performance

There is a sharp contrast between the authoritative anti-Racism of scholars like Miles, Banton, Omi/Winant, Essed, and many others, and the tentative constructionist studies of ‘racism’ undertaken by Condor, Stokoe, Whitehead, and others. The former are self-confident in knowing what is wrong with the world and saying what needs to be done. The latter are focused solely on instances of micro-interaction and on fleeting representations of what counts as racism in the immediacy of the cut and thrust of social interaction. The constructed, contested and changing nature of ‘racism’ definitions that are apparent in everyday and academic interactions raise challenging questions about the foundations of authoritative discourse. The constructionist perspective suggests that all definitions of racism – expert and lay, authoritative and everyday – are social accomplishments whose authority rests on social agreements. However necessary this anti-foundationalism might appear, it comes with one great challenge: how to recover a critical, systemic and political treatment of racism upon which to found an anti-racism (cf. also Hoyt, 2012)?

Discursive social psychology offers a potential solution. A great body of literature now shows how social constructions can gain purchase in social life by way of (1) the functions that such constructions perform in concrete instances of deployment, and (2) the fact that particular versions of racism gain authority by their use in shared and enduring routines (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; cf also Fairclough, 1992). Shared depictions of racism – what Wetherell and Potter (1988) call ‘interpretative repertoires’ – develop because they are effective pragmatically in resolving particular kinds of interactional trouble that arise in a particular society (cf. Cohen, 1992). For example, the idea that black people were ineducable was used to defend segregated, unequal education in apartheid South Africa as a non-racist policy (Dubow, 1991)! But such categorical depictions of difference lost their currency and needed to be replaced by alternative depictions of racism that could regulate inter-racial encounter and exchange in the post-apartheid context (Durrheim and Dixon, 2005; Durrheim, 2014).

In an effort to give shape to critical constructionist anti-racism, researchers have attempted to specify in more detail the functional aspects of shared racism representations that arise in particular societies to fulfill the interactional accountability demands needed there. Durrheim and his colleagues proposed that ‘racism’ constructions be treated as ‘identity performances’ (Durrheim, Quayle, and Dixon, 2016; Durrheim, 2017; Durrheim et al., 2018). This draws analytic attention to three related functions of ‘racism’ and the routines by which they are accomplished: identification, explanation, and mobilization. An analysis of racism-related identity performances can help understand the force and function of racism constructions. These are collectively and dialogically produced as moral foundations in various forms and instances of social interaction.

1. Identification

All the work reviewed thus far shows that racism is a moral field (cf. Garcia, 1997; Miles and Brown, 2003; Whitehead, 2017). The moral high ground is occupied by those who are able to develop definitions that paint others as racists and that normalize and excuse their own practices. At its heart then, the social accomplishment of developing a successful definition of racism is an identity project (Klein, Spears, Reicher, 2007) in which the ‘moral community’ of the prejudiced are differentiated from the irrational, bigoted world of the racists (cf. Tileagă, 2007; Billig, 2012).
The role that racism constructions play in identity performance may be illustrated by Montgomery’s (Montgomery, 2005) analysis of Canadian high school history textbooks. Textbooks published in the 1960s represented racism as ‘exceptional ideas or occurrences contained to the distant past or to non-Canadian spaces’ (p. 430). The moral high ground that Canadians occupied was developed by way of contrast with racist others: hooded Klansmen, Americans, Adolf Hitler and apartheid South Africa. Although textbooks published after 2000 acknowledged racism within Canada, these were portrayed as ‘isolated occurrences confined to exceptionally flawed individuals or to unusual times’ (p. 437).

Accusations of racism and depictions of racist others are means for claiming the moral high ground, but they also risk rejection and reversal, portraying the racism critic as instrumentally playing the race card or manifesting real racism and intolerance (see Augoustinos and Every, 2010; Goodman, 2010; Goodman and Burke, 2010; Durrheim et al., 2018). Heated contestations can result, pitting one version of racism against another, in a form of discourse in which each party displays an uncompromising belief in the correctness of their views and the wrongness of the opposing view. This is a Manichean field of belief and morality developed around identity categories of the real racist that are deployed in accusation and denial as different parties seek to occupy the moral high ground. In each corner, like-minded fellows agree what the problem is and sneer at the racists and their sympathizers in the other corner.

The contestation rests on two sets of common ground. First, the idea that racism is wrong is typically accepted by all parties. Second, there is a shared and limited set of core representations of the prototypical racist that revolve around the image of the irrational bigot (Billig, 2012), the momentary, explicable lapses of reason and control (see Figgou and Condor, 2006), or as a slip of the tongue (Burford-Rice and Augoustinos, 2018). This common ground, together with the differences of positioning and strategies it supports are all part of the field of identification that is our object of study.

2. Explanation

The politics of identity described above is thoroughly imbricated with the politics of social change. ‘Racists’ and ‘anti-racists’ find themselves at loggerheads over concrete current issues: migration, school and housing policy, policing, welfare, employment equity, government, sports team selections, and so on. All these debates revolve around a defense or critique of the status quo. In each instance, constructions of racism are deployed as explanations for some social ill. In particular, ‘racism’ explains why people would promote or support a flawed – racist – program or policy.

The use and political functioning of ‘racism’ constructions have become increasing evident with the rise of populist movements across the globe. Durrheim et al. (2018) studied one such contestation that emerged in the campaigning toward the UK referendum to leave or remain in the European Union. Days before the referendum, the populist UKIP party launched a media campaign supporting the Leave vote by depicting migrants pouring into the UK. The campaign, the party, and the leader, Nigel Farage, were branded racists by most mainstream politicians and commentators, even those that supported the Leave campaign. They were accused of ‘disgusting racism’, using Nazi imagery of racial others to whip up fears of foreigners. Farage defended the campaign as an ‘undoctored’ depiction of the immigration crisis facing the UK, and his supporters rallied around him, arguing that it was the political mainstream, invested in the status quo, that were ‘playing the racism card’ in order detract attention away from the real challenges that immigration posed.

To be sure, the accusations, denials and counteraccusations of racism were identity performances which (re)drew boundaries around who belonged to the moral community of
the unprejudiced and provided instantiations of such identification. At the same time, they were developed as explanations of what was wrong with the world and what needed to be done about it.

3. Mobilization

As explanations, the discourse of racism is directed at the social accomplishment of persuasion. ‘Racism’ is developed in a rhetoric that seeks to convince an audience that one way of depicting the world is based on reality while another is based on racism. But, as political discourse, constructions of racism cannot rest content as persuasive discourse. They also need to move audiences to action (see Reicher, 2012). The mobilizing function of racism constructions emerge from the two other functions. Individuals and collectives can be mobilized to action by persuasive explanation of social wrongs that interpellate categories of people and place them on the moral high ground, supporting a righteous indignation.

The mobilizing functions of anti-racism can be found in the contemporary rise of populism. While the anti-immigrationism, policing, hardening of borders, and the self-glorifying nativism of populist movements is regarded as racism by their ideological opponents, proponents and adherents certainly do not view themselves as racists. To the contrary, a common theme in their discourse is the idea that they are victims of prejudice. In the debate over Brexit studied by Durrheim et al. (2018), Farage’s supporters complained of being victims of prejudice by the mainstream establishment, and that fallacious portrayals of them as racists should be embraced with scorn and worn as an emblem of resistance. Schröter (2019) has similarly shown how anti-PC discourse functions in Germany to portray the liberal consensus and political elite as silencing free speech and using this constructed victim-status as a means of rallying support for ideas regarded as social taboos, including an implicit (or even explicit) defense of Nazism.

Accusations of racism made against leaders may thus be turned to political advantage as they seek to portray themselves as victims of powerful others and the prejudiced anti-racism orthodoxies they hide behind. There may thus be mileage to be gained from inviting such criticisms by making extreme and provocative comments, and meeting the inevitable chorus of execration with the mobilizing response: ‘see how they treat us as a “basket of deplorables”’. This positioning as a victim against scripted accusations of racism can help leaders to position themselves as prototypical members of an oppressed class of those wrongly regarded as ‘racists’.

The identity category of the racist is therefore not only a tool for managing participant administered accountability, it is also a tool for enacting category prototypicality around which leaders can mobilize others (Haslam, Reicher, and Platow, 2011).

In sum, identity performance theory focuses attention on the way particular versions of ‘racism’ are constructed to serve three interrelated functions: identification, explanation, and mobilization. ‘Racism’ is not the aberration it seeks to depict. It is a kind of social glue that cements the meeting of hearts and minds, constructing patterns of agreement (and disagreement) about which versions of racism can be deemed acceptable and pass through social interaction. Agreements about racism affect the direction of micro interactions, but also gain purchase by affecting the individual and collective agents who identify themselves and act in its terms. In so doing, racism discourse begins to construct the world in its image as opposing camps of ‘racists’ and ‘decent people’ take formation in social life and politics.
Conclusion – the end of racism

It is a significant fact that the word racism entered into circulation only when the horrors that European nations had practiced against colonized others began to be applied to citizens at home in Europe. In a sense, this marked the beginning of the end of racism. Racism became self-conscious of itself as ‘racism’ and in the process it became a tool to define itself out of existence by the slippery and endlessly shifting process of dialogical distancing, attributing racism to others.

For most of its history, because of the liberal consensus in postwar society and the social sciences, authoritative versions of Racism have held sway, capturing the imagination of progressives and proponents of anti-racist projects of all kinds. Together, they collectively forged a new morality – one of the last vestiges for foundational moralizing discourse in a secularizing world.

Yet, as the liberal consensus has broken down, as the world has become more unequal, divided, and insecure, the moral currency of anti-racism has entered a cycle of inflation that threatens to expose its fragile foundations, constructed on the shaky ground of social identification and political maneuver. As the legacy of colonial violence has spilled back into the old white world of Europe and North America by way of terrorism and immigration, criticisms of racism have become shriller. The muscular critique of racism from the traditional left is something of a last stand. ‘Racism’ has become unmoored from Racism. The centre cannot hold as historically privileged groups portray themselves as racism’s victims. In the USA and Europe, but also in Asia, Africa and Latin America, brutal nationalisms of all kinds are now being developed as bulwarks against racism, rather than its expressions.

The success of ‘racism’ as a moral framework for identification, explanation and mobilization may have provided the seeds of its own undoing. Political discourse has become a cacophony of racism versus racism. Social media interaction, identification with opinion-based groups (McGarty et al., 2009), and the information glut have promoted social fragmentation in which broad-based social movements and pockets of homophilous interest groups use constructions of racism to practice the politics of identity and social change and vie with each other for the moral high ground.

References


