Shifting paradigms: doing 'anti-racism' without doing 'race'

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Introduction

Understanding the subtle link between racial discourse and violence is particularly important at a time when, under the rubric of 'defence of freedom of speech', we see right-wing attacks on anti-racist education initiatives. Amidst media-driven moral panics surrounding anti-racist activism on college campuses, which are perceived as conflicting with the widely valued principle of freedom of speech, the Freedom of Speech Act 2023 was enacted. This legislation grants speakers the ability to address situations where they believe their right to 'free expression' has been restricted by the practice known as 'no-platforming'. This refers to the act of preventing someone from expressing a viewpoint that is deemed to be harmful and therefore unacceptable. Ironically, though the evidence for this practice is extremely limited (see for example Freeman [2022]) it also includes a provision for alleged victims to claim compensation from universities. Also, it gives powers to the Office for Students (OfS) to fine infringing institutions.

Against this background, this article delves into the complex interplay between language, racism, violence and education. It argues that the binary framing of violence as 'real' and 'imaginary' is unhelpful in comprehending the pervasive nature of racism and its lasting impact on student well-being and educational attainment. The central contention of the article is that there is considerable confusion about how contemporary discourses of 'race' and difference are deployed within educational institutions that claim to be committed to anti-racism. The extent to which advocates of 'anti-racism' routinely deploy 'racial' constructs to advocate for racial justice highlights the need to engage in a wholesale re-appraisal of the language of anti-racism and the expunging of all forms of 'race' thinking, whether this is intended to dehumanise the 'other' or as a proxy for positive affirmations of identity and difference.

The nature of racist violence

The sentence 'Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me' first appeared in *The Christian Recorder*, a publication of the African Methodist Episcopal Church on March 22nd, 1862. The African Methodist Episcopal Church was the first independent Protestant church to be founded and run by black people, and the sentence represented an act of resistance against racial slurs. The logic is simple: that, whereas physical harm is 'real', name-calling is simply a viewpoint and therefore can never hurt. Though perfectly understandable as resistance discourse, taken literally this sentiment reflects a problematic binary construction of 'violence' and 'harm' in terms of 'real' and 'imaginary' - in other words between the 'physical' and the 'psychological'.

In truth, especially in the formative years, it is difficult to deny the harmful impact of racist speech on well-being. Though on the surface educational institutions may appear as relatively safe spaces at first glance, experiences of systemic and institutional racism, experienced often as 'micro-aggressions', can be a part of the day-to-day life of racially minoritised students. There is an abundance of evidence of the link between educational success and student sense of belonging, with racial stereotyping being a key factor. A report by the Runnymede Trust, authored by Remi Joseph-Salisbury (2020), found racism to be deeply embedded in schooling, resulting in damaging and detrimental psychological effects on racially minoritised students, which in the longer term become translated into material effects such as educational attainment and success. Similarly, report after report offers qualitative and quantitative evidence of the damaging effects of racism that is woven into the very fabric of further and higher education (see for example Arday and Mirza, 2018; Orr, 2022).

An important consideration that must be taken into account is how we define violence. If defined as a physical act then it follows that speech is never violent. But if we define violence as anything that has the potential to cause harm to persons or property or both, then clearly racist speech can be seen as a form of violence. Moreover, moving beyond the individual to the collective, when words and ideas are used to negate/erase/demonise/distort entire human civilisations, cultures, traditions, languages and world views, this is referred to as 'epistemic' violence. Moira Perez (2019: 1) suggests that this distinct form of violence 'is exercised in relation to the production, circulation and recognition of knowledge on the one hand and the denial of epistemic agency for certain subjects'. De Sousa Santos (2015, p149) argues that just as physical violence can range in intensity and effect, this is a form of violence that 'in extreme cases results in the death or genocide of subordinated cultures and their knowledges'. In some senses, one can argue that 'sticks and stones' require 'words' to provide a rationalisation for physical violence.

The nexus of race

The socio-historical analysis of the idea of race reveals a complex trajectory, with a recurring theme of justifying violence and oppression. The genesis of contemporary discourses on race can be situated in the 17th century, a period marked by the transatlantic slave trade, white European settler colonialism and the European Enlightenment. Against this backdrop, a racialised 'langscape' emerged, entwining discourses of 'race' into the fabric of societal norms. This process led to the normalisation of what Stuart Hall termed 'everyday racism', where race, class and geography converged to form a nexus shaping discursive landscapes within specific institutional contexts.

The evolution of racialised discourse reached a critical juncture in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, culminating in the language of eugenics. Despite ongoing attempts to rehabilitate it, the concept of 'race' can only exist as an ideological construct. Historical evidence underscores that its only function has been the construction of generalised myths and tropes about human population groups. These constructs, rooted in perceived biological, psychological and moral differences, have perpetuated significant harm throughout history.

While crude biological assertions of race may seem confined to the fringe ideologies of white nationalists, there is a contemporary resurgence in the reworking of 'race' and nation among right-wing factions within racialised minorities. This is where political and religious nationalists within former colonial countries engage in the reinterpretation and conflation of the concepts of race, national and ethnicity, highlighting the enduring and adaptable nature of racialised discourse.

A striking illustration of the contemporary reshaping of racial discourses within the former colonies is evident in the ascendancy of Hindutva in India. Originating in the 1920s through the writings of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, Hindutva advocates for the dominance of Hinduism in India, seeking to transform the nation into a Hindu majoritarian state. Though commonly thought of as a religious movement, in truth Savarkar's call for Hindu solidarity was based on what Yilmaz (2023) terms 'civilisational populism'. This refers to the trend where, in diverse political, religious and geographical contexts, due to a complex range of historical and geopolitical factors, populists gain political and electoral traction by arguing that there exists an existential crisis that imperils the nation's identity, culture and heritage. Just like old-fashioned constructs of race based on immutable biological differences, *civilisational populism* 'seeks to categorize people globally based on religious identification, emphasizing values that are perceived as conflicting across different civilizations'; and in the current period 'this trend is observable in various regions, including Europe, India, Sri Lanka, Israel, and several Muslim-majority nations' (Yilmaz, 2023 pp1-2).

In a piece entitled 'Nazism and Hindu Nationalism', Vikram Visana (2021) argues that the key difference between the two ideologies is that whereas 'Nazi symbolim drew on various racist European anthropologies', Hindutva finds its justification in a 'mythical fair-skinned "Aryan" race-subjugated India'. Moreover, resonating with the logic of social Darwinism, 'they used religion as a political tool to establish a caste system which integrated the local population but maintained racial segregation'. It is this enduring significance and capacity of 'race' to morph, adapt and be repurposed that led Theo Goldberg (2023) to emphasise the enduring significance of 'race' and racism as touchstones in both historical and contemporary political dimensions. They serve, he argues, as reflections of a nation's identity, capturing its past, present and future aspirations. The concepts persist, evolving in renewed terms, as contested ideals regarding who fully belongs to the national community and the progess made toward achieving complete belonging for all social groups are reflected and registered within the societal consciousness.

Paradigms and paradigm shifts

The philosopher Thomas Kuhn (2012) in his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* proposed that scientific progress was not a smooth and continuous process but occurred through shifts between periods of normal science and revolutionary science. Kuhn described normal science as the period when scientists worked within an established paradigm, solving puzzles and anomalies. The scientific community shares a set of assumptions and methods during this phase. According to Kuhn, scientific revolutions occur when accumulated anomalies challenge the existing paradigm. A paradigm shift happens when a new framework (paradigm) emerges that better explains the observed phenomena and solves the problems that the old paradigm couldn't.

Most critically, Kuhn introduced the idea of incommensurability, suggesting that paradigms may be so conflicting that scientists within different paradigms may struggle to communicate effectively. A resolution to this requires a cognitive shift in how we perceive and interpret the world. To describe the profound alteration in how individuals view and interpret the world, Kuhn used the term 'gestalt switch'. It's not merely a gradual accumulation of new information but a fundamental change in the underlying discursive framing of theories. To illustrate this, he famously refers to the duck-rabbit diagram below, first as (representing) a duck and then as (representing) a rabbit.

The new way of perceiving reality or a new paradigm demands a re-evaluation of past theories and concepts. Whilst some previously accepted ideas may be reinterpreted within the new conceptual framework, others are consigned to the dustbin of history.
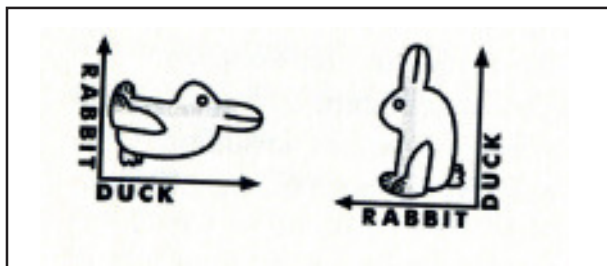
Enter the language of race

The idea that human beings are constituted of different biological racial types is one such perspective or paradigm that prevailed in the period associated with scientific racism. This period gave birth to all kinds of primary and secondary assumptions and discourses about human difference, associated with both physical and psychological differences. Who or what is a 'black person' or a 'white person', a 'black family' or a 'white family', a 'black community' or a 'white community', or any shades between 'black' and 'white'? On the surface, expressed in such simple binarisms, this seems like a straightforward question.

Take the example of twin sisters Lucy and Maria Aylmer from Gloucester, pictured below. One was born 'white', the other 'black'; they both are from the same family but how will they experience life? All the evidence suggests that Lucy, who will be perceived as 'white', against a whole set of measures such as educational attainment, morbidity, mortality, hate crimes, employment and earning propects, anti-natal and post-natal care etc., is likely to fare much better than her sister Maria, who will be classified as 'black'. In truth, Lucy and Maria are no different from any other twins, so who is doing the classifying and for what purpose? And the answer is, all of us, because we/they are born into a world where identity is already to some degree mapped out by a pre-existing racial langscape.

Binary thinking is a process that involves perceiving and categorising concepts, ideas, people or phenomena in terms of oppositional pairs or dichotomies, such as 'East and West', 'intelligent and stupid', or 'believer and non-believer', 'human and animal'. In essence, binary thinking is a cognitive framework that simplifies the world by framing it in terms of opposing pairs. While it offers clarity and simplicity, the danger is that it can oversimplify complex realities and may not adequately capture the richness of diverse experiences and ideas. And so, when we talk about black people or white people, we are paradoxically not referring to skin colour per se, but to a set of social constructs.

Race does not exist, but 'race' does! If you are slightly perplexed by what sounds like an irrational statement, I urge you to look more closely, and you will notice the inverted commas. Inverted commas, also known as quotation marks, are often used in speech to indicate that a word or phrase is being referred to in a specific way. They can suggest that the term is being used in a non-literal or unconventional sense, to highlight irony or scepticism, or to distinguish it as a term with a particular meaning in each context. Language, as a tool of communication, serves as a mirror reflecting the intricate dynamics of society, culture and power. One facet of language is its use in racial contexts, where the term 'race' often appears within inverted commas or quotation marks, signfying a contested and complex terrain. This practice points to the intricate issue of racialised language, its

implications, and the dangers it poses in shaping perceptions, driving social hierarchies and perpetuating racism.

In this nuanced discourse, the utilisation of inverted commas around the term 'race' serves as a warning sign, highlighting the contested nature of the concept. This convention is widely employed by sociologists who seek to challenge the notion that human beings can be neatly categorised into distinct groups labelled as 'races'. The use of inverted commas, in this sense, acts as a warning urging us to critically evaluate the widespread assumption that race signifies inherent and differentiating characteristics among human populations. The field of study known as 'race science', which seeks to correlate observable physical traits with supposed genetic differences influencing attributes like intelligence and moral character, has been largely discredited by most serious scholars. Most, but not all, scientists concur that inherent variations in personality or intelligence do not align with racial categories based on phenotypical or genotypical differences. Angela Saini (2019), for example, in her book *Superior: The Return of Race Science*, highlights the dangerous implications of such ideas and underscores the importance of recognising the social and cultural complexities that shape human diversity.

However, while the scientific consensus has shifted towards dismissing race as a biologically determined construct, the concept of 'race' persists as a potent idea that can evoke both racist and anti-racist sentiments. It is imperative to comprehend how the idea of race infiltrates discourses aimed at stratifying human populations based on hierarchies of value. This is often accomplished through the creation of binary categories, where one group is deemed superior to another due to fundamental differences, Such dichotomies are pervasive in the language of racism, manifesting as *coloured/non-coloured, Eastern/Western, Muslim/Christian, European/Asian/African* and, perhaps most directly, *Black/White*.

The inherent complexities of human diversity challenge the practicality of defining clear boundaries between these binary categores. Skin colour, often used as a defining trait, exhibits an infinite spectrum of shades, rendering the Black/White divide biologically untenable. Thus the very foundation of such categories falters upon examination and we come to realise that the language of 'race' finds its logical expression in terms of 'racism'. Of course, anti-racism is all about people, but the solution to racism lies not only in changing attitudes and perceptions, but also in simultaneously dismantling the infrastructure of race, which is to be found in language, culture, institutional structures and historical legacies.

This persistence of racial discourse within society's fabric is particularly intriguing in the context of the so-called 'post-race' era, where it is suggested that the blending of heritages, and the dismantling of racial boundaries appear to gain momentum. Despite these trends, systematic

inequalities and racism endure, and to comprehend this conundrum we need to shift our focus from the body to cultural norms and institutional structures and systems. That does not mean we ignore the body but, rather than seeing it as a biological entity, we need to understand how race enters the body as the social process of 'racialisation'. This term was first coined by Robert Miles (2004) when he described racialisation as 'a dialectical process by which meaning is attributed to particular biological features of human beings, as a result of which individuals may be assigned to a general category of persons which reproduces itself biologically'.

Building on the argument that 'race' needs to be understood as a process rather than a thing, Sara Ahmed (2002) suggests that describing people as racialised entails acknowledging the intricate processes through which bodies are attributed with racial identity. Racialisation is a dynamic process unfolding over time and space, and 'race' in this regard can be understood as an outcome rather than a marker of origin. In short, nobody is born with a race; it is something that becomes given to us. This concept of the 'racial body' also emphasises that race is intertwined with embodiment, indicating that racialisation occurs by marking bodies as the very locus of the racialisation process itself. It's within these spaces that the idea of 'race' thrives, albeit subtly.

The terms 'white privilege' and 'black disadvantage' perfectly illustrate this phenomenon, encapsulating the complex social mechanisms that perpetuate historic racial inequalities, that then become embodied in the lived experiences of us all. The notion of 'white privilege' has in recent times come under attack from some quarters as being contradictory, since not all 'white people' possess privilege, which is true (see for example Brendan O'Neill's stinging critique in *Spiked* 31/1/2023). The point isn't to deny that all kinds of inequalities exist in society, rather to argue that this kind of thinking becomes hostage to the kinds of thinking discussed above, where 'race' is deployed as a biological construct. The term 'white privilege' rightly seeks to acknowledge the reality of racial inequities without resorting to the highly problematic idea of inherent racial differences.

The term 'whiteness' here functions as a floating signifier, devoid of inherent meaning but possessing immense potential for interpretation and manipulation. Whiteness has been extensively examined within critical race theory, postcolonial studies and cultural studies, revealing its role in constructing narratives, ideologies and racialised power dynamics. Almost on a global scale today 'whiteness' is synonymous with 'normality', 'goodness', 'beauty', 'rationality' and 'entitlement'.

Its adaptability illustrates its potency to reinforce power structures and empower those who can or who are allowed to take refuge in it. No wonder skin-lightening creams are so popular amongst historically oppressed 'non-white' people in a phenomenon known as colourism, which is defined by Hargrove (2019) in a piece entitled 'Light Privilege? Skin Tone Stratification in Health among African Americans' as 'a system of inequality that grants special advantages to lighter skinned individuals.

Conclusion

If the idea of race was relatively fixed and stable, after so many years of anti-racist activism and theorising, one might have expected it to have been consigned to the dustbin of history. Far from it! The uncanny and chameleon-like capacity of 'race' to appear and reappear suggests the idea that if anything it is more insidious today than in the past. The problematic use of racialised language, characterised by the deployment of inverted commas around the term 'race', underscores the complexity of discussing race in contemporary discourse. The language surrounding race navigates a delicate balance between recognising historical injustices and avoiding the reification of biological racial differences. By scrutinising these linguistic choices, we open doors to comprehensive discussions on the historical, cultural and systemic dimensions of racism.

In doing so, as well as ensuring a more nuanced and accurate representation of the complex dynamics of 'race' and racism, we avoid becoming entrapped in the blame game. But ultimately, until and unless we find a way to escape what Paul Gilroy (2000) has termed the *allure of 'race'* and develop a new language that is truly anti-racist, which is both able to confront 'racist' discourse and is at the same time capable of the destruction/ declassification of that very same discourse, I honestly cannot see how we can ever end racism. And when we realise that neither black nor white are colours and that, indeed, there is no 'colour' in our skins or anywhere else, and that colour simply is a reflection of wavelengths from surfaces, we will continue to allow the bogus idea of 'race' to deny both our individuality as persons and our collective identity as members of the human race. And so nothing short of a paradigm shift is likely to consign race to the dustbin of history. Until then, anti-racsts must continue to track and confront this idea wherever and whenever it raises its ugly head.

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