

— LETTERS
on LIBERTY



**THE DANGERS OF THE
NEW ANTI-RACISM**

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We stand on the shoulders of giants, but we shouldn't be complacent. We can't simply rely on the thinkers of the past to work out what liberty means today, and how to argue for it.

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Academy of Ideas team

THE DANGERS OF THE NEW ANTI-RACISM

It is a very peculiar thing that at a time when Britain's population has never been more ethnically diverse and relations are relatively civil, an academic theory has developed to argue that the opposite is true. Critical Race Theory claims that underneath the generally peaceable character of most people's lives, there is a seething bed of aggressive racism and unbridled 'white privilege and power' bordering on the psychotic. If unchecked, it is argued, this aggression can lead to the literal and metaphorical erasure of black lives.

Many people are perplexed by this. Most people generally act in good faith and do not see themselves as racists. Most of us agree that racism is abhorrent and want to be part of any opposition to it. Likewise, most of us agree that while the structural racism of the past might have been defeated, racist prejudice still exists and should be challenged when it raises its ugly head. As such, concepts like 'unconscious bias' come to be half-heartedly accepted. One might think, 'I can't remember having been consciously racist, but perhaps maybe I am unconsciously biased in a racist way'.

While anti-racist movements in the past might have been based on a material fight for rights and freedom, the question of unconscious racism is markedly different. The problem with this new form of anti-racism based on Critical Race Theory was recently exemplified in the Channel 4 programme *The School That Tried to End Racism*. Diversity experts were brought in to teach black pupils that black is white and white is black. Children who played together as equals were told they are not equal at all. The more that black children admitted their disadvantages and feelings of upset, the more they were applauded by the teachers and ‘diversity’ experts. In turn, the more that white pupils accepted descriptions of themselves as privileged, the closer they were to becoming ‘a good ally’ and winning some measure of patronising sympathy. The show was grotesque and painful to watch.

To understand how this divisive way of thinking is possible, we must understand what the new anti-racism stands for and how it represents a break from the anti-racism of the recent past.

Understanding the new anti-racism

The concepts of white privilege, unconscious bias, black oppression, microaggressions and whiteness reveal the psychological provenance of the new anti-racism. A well-known proponent of these ideas is Kehinde Andrews, expressed in his book *The Psychosis of Whiteness: the celluloid hallucinations of Amazing Grace and Belle*.¹ In my view, it would have been better if the book had remained within the academic confines of post-humanist critical theory - a delectation to be discussed between himself and his students, rather than becoming a significant part of the wider discussion of race and racism.

Whiteness is no longer a colour, but a psychosis rooted in a fundamental inequality based on skin colour. White people, who have historically occupied most of the high-status positions in political and public life, cannot possibly know the experience of a black person.

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White privilege is trickier, because there are these darned statistics that show it is often white males at

the bottom of the pile. Proponents of this idea have to engage in some creative thinking to justify it. Their argument is that although white people can suffer from poverty and other disadvantages, they cannot have experienced life as a black person. Therefore, they can have no idea of what it feels like to be in a minority. Black people in Britain are a numerical minority and from this it is assumed that their experiences of life, even if they are socially and economically successful, will always be marked by this experience and the psychological depredations that it entails.

Being a good ally presupposes that white people cannot be neutral or bystanders in a context where black people are being subjected to such egregious and frequent racial harassment. The harassment may be subtle compared to the past, no longer featuring explicit racialised slurs, humiliating treatment at the hands of immigration police or being frostily told that the room for rent has been taken. Today's racism, we are told, has such wily and subtle forms that most of us can't really see it. This only proves how ill-educated and unaware most of us are.

To address this, we need to educate ourselves. But today's anti-racists don't intend us to meet and talk with people of different skin colours. Neither are we supposed to read widely, think deeply or write our

thoughts freely in a way that is true to ourselves. No, the new meaning of ‘educate yourself’ means to read uncritically a small number of books that share the same message. And if you haven’t read those books, you must say you have and say you love them, or be condemned as ignorant.

At the heart of these concepts is the fundamental idea that white and black people must approach the world with different views. Black people need to examine and re-examine their feelings and memories - sifting through all those moments of self-doubt caused by words or acts that were never called out. In contrast, white people need to educate themselves by reading books that reveal their privilege to them and suggest they embrace a degree of monitoring and positive discrimination.

If to talk and question is accepted as an exertion of unwarranted power, then there can be no basis for any level of communication, never mind solidarity.

Most importantly, white people need to understand that to question the testimony of a black person is not an acceptable part of an attempt to ascertain truth or establish common understanding. To do so is a threat to black subjectivity.

Reni Eddo-Lodge, author of the best-seller *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race*,ⁱⁱ responds to being questioned by white people: 'Their intent is often not to listen and learn, but to exert their power, to prove me wrong, to emotionally drain me, and to rebalance the status quo.'

If to talk and question is accepted as an exertion of unwarranted power, then there can be no basis for any level of communication, never mind solidarity. The new anti-racism says race is a construct, but it's a construct that race experts, activists and academics depend upon to justify their existence as the 'anti-racist experts' who can help us 'educate ourselves'.

Race is essentialised - it is given the authority of a fact of nature. In a banal sense, it is true that a white person cannot experience life as a black person experiences it. But this is true of any individual. We don't have full or direct access to another's interiority. That's why, over the course of human history, we have created a symbolic culture - the most important part of which is language itself. If we accept language as a tool of oppression, as Eddo-Lodge and others claim it is, we can contribute nothing but our atonement. This is what 'educate yourself' ultimately means: admit your failings and recant, or suffer the consequences.

This narrative reduces human experience and subjectivity to being wholly determined by a single factor or variable. In reality, we have multiple affiliations that cut across groups we are put into by others, as well as those we choose for ourselves. We can be both a minority and majority simultaneously, depending on what variable we give precedence to. For example, a black student on campus is often a minority if the variable is skin colour. But the same student will be part of the majority if the variable is age. This picture becomes even more complicated when we include things like gender, sexuality or class.

The spread of the new anti-racism

If limited to academia, all this would be bad enough. After all, eccentric race, social and gender critical theory abounds in university settings. But the unchallenged influence of these ideas on wider society is concerning.

Take the 2019 EHRC report on racial harassment at universities: *Tackling racial harassment: universities challenged*.ⁱⁱⁱ The report is cited as evidence to support a proposal by Universities UK that academics should receive training about ‘white privilege’ and ‘uncon-

scious bias'. The problem is that this evidence is very weak.

In the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) report, racism is defined as 'unwanted behaviour, related to a protected characteristic, that violates a person's dignity' or 'behaviour that creates a hostile environment'. These criteria are completely subjective. There is no objective guide as to what might constitute violating personal dignity or make an environment hostile. What gets classed as racist harassment is defined by an interpretation of the implied victim's feelings. Moreover, these conclusions are based on a survey of students that elicited just 585 responses out of a total student cohort for 2018/19 of 2.38million.

It is deeply worrying that far-reaching changes would be proposed on the basis of such flimsy evidence, but it is typical of the quality of the rest of the evidence provided. By any established criteria or standards of empirical research, this is ludicrous.

Today's anti-racists, then, are not bearers of new enlightened knowledge. Their ideas are more like beliefs, which try to garner some intellectual status even though their claims fail to meet established standards of reliable knowledge. Instead, they rely on poetic rhetorical devices and highly selective examples

from history or statistics in order to explain contemporary social reality. As Eddo-Lodge argues: 'To talk with defiant white people is a frankly dangerous task for me.' She cannot, she claims, continue to exhaust herself because 'generation after generation of white wealth amassed from the profits of slavery [is] compounded, seeping into the fabric of British society'.

So slavery, for Eddo-Lodge, stains the fabric of British society. But can it be put right and washed away? Elementary questions such as this are obscured by her reliance on seductive prose above serious historical reflection. Worse still, much of the argument is done at metaphorical gunpoint, with frequent insistence that we must listen because the author is in existential danger.

No matter how well intentioned, these tactics can only get more and more authoritarian.

Rather than serious historical or philosophical argumentation, the proponents of the new anti-racism frequently resort to delegitimising their opponents. Any challenge to these ideas is called out as an attack on black people: if you don't agree, you must be a racist. No matter how well intentioned, these tactics can only get more and more authoritarian. The

consequences of such thinking - a growing climate of censoriousness, a fear of speaking one's mind, and a pervasive sense of unease about saying or doing the 'wrong' thing - are being felt by more and more people outside of academia.

Human-resources departments in private companies, libraries, community centres and charities accept these highly contentious beliefs from dodgy academic discourse and implement them wholesale in what they see as improved professional practice. New codes of speech and behaviour abound, layers of new personnel and 'diversity' experts are flourishing. In some cases, the policies may be purely performative, but there are many instances where people's livelihoods and reputations have been threatened for falling foul of such codes. This isn't just a threat posed to workers by Twitter mobs, but employers, administration teams and, most worryingly of all, their own colleagues.

As a result, people are being disciplined - not for deliberate provocation, or even telling a risqué joke, but for questioning the one-strike-and-you're-out nature of many of these new policies. It's deemed unacceptable to ask whether there might be an alternative way to understand a person's words or actions. Little wonder that its critics have compared the new anti-racism to a virulent form of religious

fundamentalism - heavy on original sin and light on redemption.

Why has a set of divisive, intellectually weak and ethically dubious beliefs come to have such influence? Because they have the backing of sections of our political class and institutional guardians.

The ideas of Eddo-Lodge, Afua Hirsch, Robin DiAngelo and others, although logically incoherent and under-substantiated, are very well suited to the needs of today's political and cultural elites. Western elites stand compromised after decades of technical managerialism.

Perhaps our institutional desperados think they can borrow a bit of ethical gloss from being on the right side of history via today's anti-racism.

The new petit-bourgeois class desperately needs some legitimacy. All that monitoring and mind-numbing anti-intellectualism could never be justified by appeals to greater efficiency. But perhaps our institutional desperados think they can borrow a bit of ethical gloss from being on the right side of history via today's anti-racism. After all, technocrats and anti-racists both have a strong impulse to control people's behaviour.

Another reason why so many in positions of power are ready to endorse these beliefs, no matter how unconvincing they are, is because they target white people - the numerical majority. As has often been the case in history (not just in Britain), the majority are seen as a potential problem from the point of view of the elites, who are a minority. While it is superficially embarrassing for politicians and chief executives to admit their white privilege, this is a small price to pay for what they get in return. In addition to some measure of ethical kudos (mainly among themselves), their self-flagellation in the name of anti-racism provides an ideology that ensures an ethnically diverse working class remains divided. The majority is put on the defensive before they can even speak. For the capitalist elite, this is quite handy.

The new anti-racism is not something that can be dismissed as an annoying or secondary issue. It is in fact a diversion from real class politics. Indeed, to borrow from Walter Benn Michaels and Adolph Reed's discussion of anti-racism in America, this *is* the new class politics. It's not the same as the way in which some of the old left once understood it - where anti-racism was the agent for radical disruption of the status quo. Instead, in today's context, it is anti-racism, not racism, that is the agent of the ethical restoration of the political status quo.

The past and present of anti-racism

In the past, anti-racism was once based on a theoretical understanding of capitalism as a way of ordering society. The main differentiation between people lay in an individual's relationship to the means of production (and re-production, to give Pierre Bourdieu his due). This central cleavage is expressed in the existence of different classes. Inequalities are relational, but where you stand in such a social order can have observable effects - from wages to the right to own property, even physical stature.

A capitalist social order could, under certain conditions, grant certain rights - equality before the law, the right to vote or the freedom of movement and assembly. These were hard-won gains, but capitalism was unable to grant these rights to all people. For others, these rights remained more rhetorical than substantive. The need for racial thinking to justify the social order has meant that it can exist independent of a biological fact like skin colour. The unlucky minorities have included Irish, Jewish and working-class people.

The problem for an anti-racist in the past was how to ensure the formal rights afforded to some - such as middle-class, white men - were extended to all. There

was common ground with others, including liberals, in the desire to extend formal rights wherever they were missing. But more radical anti-racists hoped that in this process, the limitations of formal rights per se would become evident and spur on the recognition that something more revolutionary was needed.

One example of how the anti-racism of the past was often connected to class solidarity is that of the Grunwick dispute. In 1976, Asian women at the Grunwick Film Processing Laboratories in West London realised two things: they were being paid less than their mainly male colleagues and they were being treated in a derogatory way due to their ethnicity and skin colour. In response, they started a strike.

Jayaben Desai, a leader of the strike, and her colleagues knew that to win better pay, and in the process greater respect, they would need to talk across lines of skin colour. They used the political, intellectual and ethical resources they had to hand to do just this. They persuaded an initially reluctant trade union and other groups to support them in what turned out to be a two-year strike. The development of this solidarity was expressed through continuous support on picket lines and a mass demonstration of over 20,000 people. It's not just the numbers that are important, but what these women believed they were there to do and how they went about it.

The Grunwick strikers may not have won their dispute, but their efforts improved conditions for women who stayed on and likely contributed to the Equal Pay (Amendment) Regulations 1983, which enforced equal pay for work of equal value and has improved the lives of the majority of women in Britain ever since.

That was anti-racist solidarity then. And while there is little to be gained from a nostalgic view of the past, it is worth reflecting on some of the beliefs of the old anti-racism that the new ideology rejects.

We can decide that as a black person or a white person, the noun 'person' is more important than the adjectives 'black' or 'white'.

We can be differentiated by all sorts of things, including ethnicity, and these differences may well influence the way we each experience the same social reality. But we do have that social reality in common - not one for black and one for white. We have symbolism - language, informal and formal knowledge, art, popular culture and many more things where aspects of our experience can be shared. Most importantly, we have politics - the space where individuals meet as equal citizens to articulate, argue

and sometimes ridicule with the aim of persuading each other.

In the very act of engaging in political debate, we establish the common ground that makes solidarity possible. We cannot do this if communication is ruled out of court or morally delegitimised from the start. We can decide that as a black person or a white person, the noun 'person' is more important than the adjectives 'black' or 'white'. This is what universalism means - and it is needed for solidarity and democratic politics. This new anti-racism must be challenged and exposed for the reactionary, anti-human and elitist ideology that it is.

References

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