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## Notes on racism, democracy, and research

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**ABSTRACT:** *Reactionary Democracy* addresses the mutual influences between far-right and mainstream political discourse, arguing that the renewal of right-wing radicalism has legitimized liberal racism whilst distracting us from its systemic expressions. Whilst the book is an important endeavour helping to enunciate debates on racism next to an audience interested in populism studies, political and democratic theories, I suggest we consider how such a research programme can more substantively contribute to challenge historical, structurally-embedded racial injustice: firstly, critically engaging with the shortcomings of an understanding of racism as the “denial of democracy” as a starting point for enquiry; secondly, systematically addressing the dynamic interrelation between political discourse and processes of legitimation regarding key debates and issues across the political spectrum, as well as between political debate, policymaking and institutional practice; finally, offering a historically-informed, interdisciplinary approach capable of elucidating persistent state-sanctioned patterns of racialized governance and Eurocentric knowledge production in public universities.

**KEYWORDS:** Racism; political discourse; policymaking; democracy; state; knowledge

*Reactionary Democracy: How Racism and the Populist Far Right Became Mainstream* addresses contemporary racism by considering the mutual influences between far-right parties and mainstream politics. Taking political debates and discourse

in Britain, France, and the United States as case studies, the authors set out to understand how the rightward turn of mainstream political parties for electoral gain has helped grant legitimacy to renewed far-right politics, whilst distracting us from debates on systemic racism (hence quieting the liberal mind) and from identifying (radical) alternatives (1–8).

Aurelien Mondon and Aaron Winter set out to explain how *Illiberal Racism* – an authoritarian position, often relying on explicitly racist speech, discrimination, harassment, and violence – is not merely a residue from past “traditional, *real* racism” typical of the history of enslavement or Jim Crow segregation, fascism or Nazism, which was condemned in liberal democracies. Disentangled through discourse analysis of extremist and far-right political groups, the authors argue that illiberal racism has been reconstructed since the post-war, post-colonial and post-civil rights contexts – an approach that is critical to overcome static and fixed representations of bigoted racism. The book posits that illiberal racism is actually crucial to the contemporary liberal social and political order, which constructs racism as marginal to democratic societies (e.g. the extreme right and the Charlottesville 2017 events) and mainstreams its “more acceptable” (10) far-right expressions (i.e. non-violent). In Chapter 2, the authors then address *Liberal Racism*, and the way in which its coded expressions allow for post-racial reveries, as well as for moderates and centrists to present themselves as an *alternative* to the far and extreme right. This discussion is placed in wider debates on contemporary liberal democracies – which present themselves as antithetical to racism and the *natural* alternative to fascism and Stalinist communism – regulated by elections, the rule of law, security, equality of opportunity, individual rights and freedoms. Such “protections” act as a disclaimer to the shortcomings of liberal democracies concerned with formal equality, which reduce racism to its (pathological) individual and occasional expressions – thus obscuring its structural and systemic dimensions. The analysis is most interesting in addressing how specific emancipatory struggles (namely, for gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights), and key tenets of liberal democracies (e.g. freedom of speech) have been mobilized to perpetuate racism and Islamophobia.

In Chapter 3, the analysis centres on the articulation of liberal and illiberal racism, which act as mutually enabling, paving the way both for the platforming of the far right and for the radicalization of the political mainstream. Importantly, the authors propose to be critical of the common “from margins to mainstream” plot within political science, as well as to engage with the absence of a concern with racism therein. This is addressed by

focusing on three case studies: Trump as the *new mainstream* in US politics, rather than an “anachronistic evil” (123); the 2007 presidential elections in France and how Sarkozy benefitted from the National Front's agenda; the mobilization of anti-immigration discourse in the 2016 Brexit referendum. Importantly, the chapter contributes to reconsider the meaning of the taken-for-granted *ascent* of the far-right, arguing instead for the analysis of the “normalization” of their ideas in the (political, academic and media) mainstream.

Finally, the authors address how far-right agendas have been legitimized by populist constructions of the will of “the people” (i.e. the white working class) concerning political issues such as immigration and Islam – which help frame such agendas as “popular revolts” in spite of their alignment with capitalism, inequality, exploitation, and exclusion (147). The analysis falls on media (“both left and right”, 148) and the public opinion, to argue against common understandings of “the people” as guiding the political discourse and choices of the elites. This is a much-needed exploration at times of “fake news” frenzy (and its “post-truth” correlate), the analysis of which is often carried out within a positivist framework on issues such as racism and immigration. The authors’ analysis is particularly effective in showing how the concern with immigration became a public issue through media and political interventions during the Brexit campaign. Drawing on disaggregated data on opinion surveys concerning electoral vote, the book then provides a critique to how far-right endeavours are read as representing the *will of the people*, hence both legitimating the far right as responding to “popular demand” and disparaging the “ignorant” working class for racism.

As this review was being written, Trump supporters stormed the Capitol in Washington, DC, on 6 January 2021 – generating consensual condemnation across most of the political spectrum in both sides of the Atlantic – and the book surely proves timely. *Reactionary Democracy* is easily read, without much academic jargon and likely to appeal to a wide audience, from the general public to journalists, those interested in political affairs, as well as students and researchers of political and democratic theories. Significantly, the authors bring some conceptual clarity to debates in the study of populism and provide important contributions to think about the relation between the far-, extreme- and traditional right. Academically, it can be perceived as part of a growing endeavour to address the question of racism in the field of populism studies. This is a most welcome aspect, as too often these fields are studied by entirely different academics and branches

of knowledge – respectively, sociologists and political scientists – often reflecting disciplinary confinements and disparate understandings of what racism is (and is not), and its relation to contemporary liberal democracies.

*Reactionary democracy* is most interesting and useful in its dissection of liberal racism – approached through discussions on Islamophobia, gender equality, free speech, human rights – illustrating how racism flourishes under liberal conditions and how mainstream political discourse may legitimate the visibility, agendas and positions of the far right. However, upon completion of the book, some key interrelated aspects remained less explored and called for further research. Whilst the overall aim and scope of the book is important, and many of the issues addressed below are acknowledged in the conclusions, we might ask whether the conceptual analysis and research strategy does sufficiently challenge dominant approaches to racism – particularly considering that the book is likely to reach an audience where debates on racial injustice are less established.

Firstly, regarding the conceptual analysis, it would have been important that *Reactionary Democracy* theoretically discussed the articulation between a notion of racism as a “bad idea” (11–16) – an ideology conveyed in public discourse – and that of race as a modern political practice – summoning its material as well as symbolic aspects. Conceptually, the work by Mondon and Winter allows for a broad understanding of racism, acknowledging its structural and systemic dimensions. Nevertheless, the approach and scope of the analysis may leave this out of sight, particularly where the monograph engages mainly with discourse by political figures and commentators. Given the abundance of mainstream, liberal understandings of racism within what Julian Henriques called in the 1980s the “paradigm of prejudice studies”, clearly addressing often taken-for-granted conceptions would have contributed further to debate race as a political construction and institutionalized practice – particularly important next to readers interested in political science and democratic theory, where post-colonial, anti-imperialist and decolonial intellectuals have not been so influential (e.g. Anibal Quijano, Enrique Dussel, Stuart Hall, Immanuel Wallerstein, who examined how race is embedded in European modernity). By not clearly articulating a critique of liberal racism, we may unwillingly contribute to perpetuate a generalized conception of racism as a set of “wrong” beliefs and “pseudo-scientific” ideologies disconnected from wider political ideas and everyday practices – the legacy of what Alana Lentin called the *UNESCO tradition* in public debates since the 1950s. UNESCO's *Four Statements on Race* (published between 1950

and 1967), which sought to withdraw political and scientific legitimacy from the concept of race, helped to enshrine certain key notions that influence debates to date. In the Statement *The Race Question* (1950), for instance, the problem of racism is identified as residing “in the minds of men”, constituting the “denial of democratic principles”, and being eradicated through “education and scientific knowledge” (1–2). This approach has considerably influenced subsequent academic work, as well as political solutions. Given the centrality, in the debates analysed, of the notions of racism as “ideology” or “prejudice” espoused by “racist subjects”, a “breach of democracy” to be countered by rationality, a consistent interrogation of their reiterations in political discourse would be a fruitful endeavour, specifically by helping to address the limitations of the notion of racism as the denial of democracy.

Hence, although *Reactionary Democracy* is timely and raises important questions in the debate, by making evident the intersections between the ideas of key political figures and the agendas of the far-right, to advance the debate we need to question how our conceptual approaches and research strategies may contribute to challenge liberal and Eurocentric understandings of racism. Studying racism as a relation of power constantly re-enacted and recreated through routine policies, processes, and practices that are structurally embedded in our contemporary democracies – the legacy of modern colonial and nation-making processes in Europe (following Frantz Fanon, Philomena Essed, David T. Goldberg, Barnor Hesse) – would require a different strategy of enquiry. For instance, further research may systematically unravel how liberal reiterations of racism in electoral and political discourse are shaping, and reflect, policymaking and everyday decisions in our democratic institutions: how crucial ideas and debates travel back and forth between mainstream and margins, between discourse, policy, and practice and are articulated in the words and deeds of Ministers and Secretaries of State, decision-makers, bureaucrats, policy experts, local authorities, and other stakeholders; or how they are translated into official initiatives, policy measures, formal complaints, legal processes, science budget rationales and fund allocation.

Secondly, the focus of *Reactionary Democracy* pre-empts a systematic analysis of the role of progressive forces, and mainly the left, in the perpetuation of racism. This would deserve a dedicated section or chapter, or maybe a follow-up to the book. Although possibly not within the scope of an analysis centred on *reactionary* politics, this broader focus of research would help to offer a more solid contribution to the study of the political

mainstream, as well as disrupt a view of the left as monolithic or tightly divided into categories (i.e. “regressive”, “revolutionary”). Focusing the analysis mostly on discourse on the right – although presenting examples on the left (e.g. 37, 76, 83, 138, 197) – may frame racism as exceptional or marginal to certain democratic political cultures. There is a need for more systematic analyses capable of disentangling the continuities and discrepancies between electoral agendas and political ideas across the spectrum: whilst public issues such as immigration and national identity have featured mainly amongst the agendas of the right, the specific ideas espoused (e.g. controlling immigration, opposing to substantive change in national historical narratives) have featured in discourse across the political spectrum – albeit with a different tone and measure.

Traditionally, studies on democracy and populism have often exempted the democratic left from empirical scrutiny, despite its role in legitimating certain racial anxieties – concerning issues such as social inclusion, national history and heritage, secularism, gender equality, or education. The notions and practices sustaining racism find wider political and social consensus than the utterances and ideologies espoused by extremists and reactionaries on the right. Significantly, they emerge from the contradictions within social democracies – espousing a free market and a strong state – as examined by Stuart Hall (1979) in *The Great Moving Right Show*. Education, an arena where “progressiveness” gave way to a rightward move and where neoliberal policies became firmly entrenched, is particularly interesting to unravel this. In New Labour's first term in office in Britain (1997–2001), government measures on “educational standards”, “school discipline” and “setting by ability” – which had hitherto been perceived as a Tory obsession – were re-worked under the banner of inclusion. Tony Blair's Third Way politics, expressed in the 1996 manifesto *New Labour, New Life for Britain*, were not only a pragmatic answer to the almost two decades long Tory rule, but also responded to the emergence of the New Right. What can be called the “modernization of the comprehensive principle” in educational policy (a number of neoliberal political initiatives and discourses that perpetuated Conservative's agenda) did not cause electoral controversy or originate sensationalist headlines; yet, ordinary measures adopted towards “Standards, Standards, Standards” – the motto of David Blunkett, New Labour's Secretary of State for Education – contributed to legitimize neoliberal education under a technocratic rationality and to perpetuate racial inequality in compulsory schooling. Promising to increase “standards for all”, such measures and policies actually targeted

the (white) middle-classes so as to raise the status of state education and avoid white flight from urban schools (as analysed by David Gillborn, myself, and others). This illustrates the relevance of considering liberal notions such as “inclusion” not as “flawed” (see 66), but as key discursive devices deployed by the mainstream left to legitimate political ideas, discourses and solutions that sustain racism, if not in intent, at least in consequence. Following Chris Mullard's (1988) call, we need to thoroughly examine the persistence, in policies, practices, and official statements, of “progressive control” – as opposed to “transformative change”, which implies the recognition of institutionalized racism as a problem. “Progressive control” is a dynamic process that adaptively respond to changes in material and structural circumstances and resistances by introducing newer forms of control. Accordingly, considering the role played by the left in legitimating the scope and terms of the debate on racism (including in the refusal to tackle institutional racism head on in many European contexts), extending the analysis of politics to include progressive circles is particularly important to advance our understanding of how anti-racist systemic critiques and alternatives have been resisted by traditional political allies. In the book, the absence of a consistent discussion on the politics of race espoused by a wider range of political figures in the left, such as Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, and Jeremy Corbyn in the Labour Party in Britain, François Hollande and Emmanuel Macron in France, or Democrats Bill Clinton, Barack Obama, Joe Biden in the US, is thus apparent. A thorough appreciation of how progressive circles are responding to the rightward political discourse around specific events and crises, in terms of public discourse, policymaking and engagement with social mobilization, would offer a more substantive contribution to the political and academic debate. The promise of political change regarding racial injustice announced by Joe Biden's first days in office cannot obscure the implication of Democrats' governance in the perpetuation of racism, or that such announced changes are responding not only to Trump's racist policies but also to increasing pressure by grassroots movements, amongst which Black Lives Matter, over the past decades. The authors' expressed commitment to identifying radical alternatives (5) would be enhanced by engaging not only with competing political discourse on the right, but also with critiques to, and dialogues with, the left, particularly from grassroots activism. Such research programme would allow to consider the dialectics at play between reactionary and progressive forces in the renewal of racism in contemporary democracies.

Thirdly, considering the two interrelated aspects addressed above, we need to consider how the conceptual framework, object of analysis and research strategy address the realm of politics whilst remaining ambiguous about the relationship between ideology, racism and the state. *Reactionary Democracy* proposes a critique of psephology, which deploys electoral politics and balloting as the benchmark to untangle social and political trends. The authors argue that the (quantitative) analysis of vote may amplify or misconstrue the relevance of far-right parties, most notably through the erasure of abstention that conflates voter and citizen in newspaper headlines (109–110) and obscures the responsibility of elites (blaming the “rise of the far-right” on “the people” [112]). Whilst this approach is most welcome, the selection of public discourse and debates analysed, particularly in second half of the book, falls mainly on political-party leaders and figures (including Donald Trump, Nigel Farage, Boris Johnson, Jacques Chirac, Nicholas Sarkozy, Marine Le Pen), and centres on the study of political speech around key balloting events, namely the Presidential elections in the US and France and the Brexit referendum in 2016. Hence, although the data informing the analysis is not “electoral politics” (144) it is mostly discourse around electoral events. Whilst the authors do recognize that it is “necessary to distinguish between electoral and ideological successes” (208), the selected choice is not without consequences. On the one hand, the analysis of aforesaid discourse may amplify differences between ideological positions and formations and overlook the democratic consensus around the terms and limits of the debate on racism – as addressed above. On the other, the analysis of discourse around electoral events and issues falls short of challenging the primacy of *transient* political cycles and *presentist* readings of the current conjuncture (e.g. immigration control), thus being of limited value to scrutinizing the role of the state in racialized governance. The classic political economy analysis by A. Sivanandan (1976) in *Race, Class and the State* on 1950s-1970s political debates remains a key text to consider the re-enactment of state racism through stricter immigration control across different political conjunctures.

Although the historicity of the debates analysed is not completely absent from the book, there is an insufficient engagement with interdisciplinary work produced over the last decades within race critical theories, postcolonial studies and decolonial thought addressing the relation between racism and state. Considering these issues at length would have helped develop the argument further, so as to untangle how persistent institutionalized racism perpetuates the *Racial State* (David T. Goldberg 2002), not only



through the passing of measures that reinforce inequalities, but also by the inaction of democratic governments in persuasively rejecting racist practice and creating a public consensus around the unacceptability of all discrimination – this is directly related to political discourse. A more robust conceptual approach would similarly help to build a consistent analysis of the role of mainstream academia in legitimizing racism. We need to disentangle the relationship between politics, policy and scholarship, as suggested by Philomena Essed and Kwame Nimako (2006), in *Cultures of Scholarship and Public Policy on Immigrants/Minorities in the Netherlands*. Their analysis of the emergence of an industry of minority studies is revealing of the institutionalization of public policy, being characterized by the ample funding of research and publications *about* minorities, opportunity hoarding by growing institutional consortia, limited perceptions of racism and its denial, and the pathologizing of racialized populations. As the authors argue, the study of this process of institutionalization helps uncovering how hegemonic research paradigms are concealing the historical and institutional nature of racial injustice. Engaging with discussions on how specific cultures of scholarship in public universities and institutions are legitimating the agendas of the right – hence going beyond identifying complicit academics as “opportunistic scholars“ – would have given a most-needed edge to the research.

In conclusion, whilst pointing to issues that could enrich the scrutiny of the debates addressed, my argument is not grounded on the lack of comprehensiveness or the incompleteness of the book. Rather, I consider that the conceptual approach and analysis would be a more substantive contribution helping to challenge mainstream studies of populism and democracy (precisely where the study of racism is less established) if there was a more consistent engagement with epistemological approaches committed to examining the joint role of political and academic frameworks in sustaining enduring patterns of racialized governmentalities. Significant published work on the embeddedness of racism in contemporary liberal democracies propels discourse analysts and political scientists to consider – as a starting point of conceptual enquiry systematically informing the analysis, rather than as a foregone conclusion – its relation to everyday practices and mainstream decision- and policy-making processes shaping the distribution of symbolic and material resources. Western democracies *are* racial.

## **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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