Challenging a culture of racial equivalence

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Abstract

We live at a time when our understandings and conceptualizations of 'racism' are often highly imprecise, broad, and used to describe a wide range of racialized phenomena. In this article, I raise some important questions about how the term racism is used and understood in contemporary British society by drawing on some recent cases of alleged racism in football and politics, many of which have been played out via new media technologies. A broader understanding of racism, through the use of the term 'racialization', has been helpful in articulating a more nuanced and complex understanding of racial incidents, especially of people's (often ambivalent) beliefs and behaviours. However, the growing emphasis upon 'racialization' has led to a conceptualization of racism which increasingly involves multiple perpetrators, victims, and practices without enough consideration of *how and why* particular interactions and practices constitute racism as such. The trend toward a growing *culture of racial equivalence* is worrying, as it denudes the idea of racism of its historical basis, severity and power. These frequent and commonplace assertions of racism in the public sphere paradoxically end up trivializing and homogenizing quite different forms of racialized interactions. I conclude that we need to retain the term 'racism', but we need to differentiate more clearly between 'racism' (as an historical and structured system of domination) from the broader notion of 'racialization'.

Keywords: Racism; racialization; culture of racial equivalence; reverse racism; Ali Rattansi; racial formation

Introduction

We appear to be living through a time when our awareness of racial identity, and of the dangers of committing racial indiscretions (at least publicly), is very high indeed. We also live at a time when our understandings and conceptualizations of racism are highly imprecise, broad, and readily used to

describe a wide range of racialized phenomena. Various scholars have argued that, while forms of racism continue to flourish, we are much less certain about what 'racism' means.

In this article, I raise some pressing questions about how the term 'racism' is used and understood in contemporary British society. As Robert Miles (1989), and George Frederickson (2002), among others, have argued, the concept of racism has suffered from conceptual inflation, resulting in the declining utility of this important concept. This article examines the dangers of its over-use; yet I argue for the retention of 'racism' and the need to be as precise as possible when we use this concept. In recent years, popular usage of the term racism is widespread in describing a diverse range of racialized phenomena. Related to this, charges of 'reverse racism' abound, suggesting an implicit equivalence to the disparate and multiple forms of racialized interactions, practices, and policies which are discussed and reported – what I call an emerging *culture of racial equivalence*. In order to illustrate this culture of racial equivalence, I draw upon some recent racial controversies which have received much attention in the British media, especially those occurring on the football pitch.

This is an interesting historical moment to consider these questions in Britain: In the wake of Stephen Lawrence's murder in 1993, and the Macpherson Report's (1999) framing and recognition of 'institutional racism' (especially in contrast to the 1981 Scarman Report), to the individualization of racism and the growing dominance of 'colour blind', post-race discourses, we have lost sight of the need to understand and specify the changing definitions and dynamics of 'racism'. Furthermore, analyses of 'race relations' in contemporary Britain have increasingly noted the public's preoccupation with the Muslim 'other' and 'community cohesion', which has not abated since 9/11, the 'riots' in the Northern cities, and more recently, the murder of the soldier Lee Rigby in Woolwich.

Not only is Britain demographically much changed since Macpherson, but popular understandings and reportage of 'racist' incidents have been transformed by the widespread use of (relatively) new media forms such as Facebook, Twitter, and You Tube. As will be illustrated in this article, contemporary understandings of allegedly racist incidents are often played out in the realms of popular culture and politics, and mediated by sound bite technologies and the seemingly endless opportunity for anonymous punters to reply to and comment upon a huge array of reports (Gilroy 2012).

Allegations of racism in football will be remembered as making major headlines in the last several years, and are unlikely to abate anytime soon. In October 2011, John Terry (the England captain and Chelsea defender) faced criminal charges for racial abuse on the field against Anton Ferdinand, a Black (and 'mixed race') player for Queens Park Rangers – a first ever prosecution brought by the CPS (Longman 2011). Terry was charged with violating Britain's Crime and Disorder Act 1998, which includes various forms of

'antisocial behaviour'. Although he was not convicted in the magistrate's court in July 2012, he was later found guilty of racial abuse by the Football Association's independent commission, and given a four match ban and a fine of £220,000. Since then, controversies about racism in football have continued, most recently concerning the racial abuse Yaya Toure encountered in Moscow. As a result, some Black players refused to wear the 'Kick it Out' t-shirts as a protest against the inefficacy of the KIO campaign in curbing racist behaviour on the pitch, and there is even talk of the formation of a separate Black football association.

The Terry/Ferdinand case has ignited much debate about not only the state of English football, but also about whether Terry is, or is not, racist. While the Terry/Ferdinand case is perhaps a typical example of racism, as popularly understood (one which involves a White 'perpetrator' and a Black 'victim'), other recent cases are shaping what the public conceives of as racism, including allegations of 'reverse racism'. For instance, shifting to the halls of Parliament, Black Labour MP Dianne Abbott was recently embroiled in a 'race row' of her own, in which she was given a very public dressing-down for making allegedly racist remarks about White people. As I will discuss below, there is a growing tendency in Britain to regard almost any form of racial statement, made by anyone (of any hue), as automatically, and indiscriminately, 'racist'.

Given the prevalence of media headlines alleging the racist behaviours of football players, members of Parliament, and reality television stars, and the frequent reference to people in a variety of societal situations and interactions as racist, it is surprising that relatively little has been written *explicitly* about contemporary definitions and understandings of racism in Britain, which addresses the thorny question of what exactly constitutes racism, and who or what can (or cannot) be racist. The many instances that have received attention in Britain in recent years (as on the football pitch) suggest that while the dominant understanding of racism is still one in which a White person or institution is the perpetrator of racism (Miles and Brown 2003), the implicit assumption – that *any* racial attribution, regardless of who has made it (or the specific context in which it is made), constitutes racism – increasingly characterizes most of the popular discussion and reportage of racial incidents in Britain.

One key danger is that an all-purpose and widespread use of the term 'racism' fails to differentiate between quite disparate forms of racialization, by lumping all racialized phenomena under its umbrella. In fact, older debates concerning 'racialism' versus 'racism' revealed how difficult (and elusive) it can be to define and to agree upon a set of clear criteria for what constitutes racism as such. For instance, the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah (1990) conceived of 'racialism' as the [mistaken] belief that there are distinctive heritable characteristics which are present in human beings who can be divided up into

so-called races (and see Benedict 1945). According to Appiah, although 'racialism' is misguided, he would not assign the term 'racism' to such a belief, because while racialism entails the essentialization of racial groups, it does not necessarily attribute inferiority or superiority to such alleged differences (Frederickson 2002). In Britain today, Appiah's conceptualization of 'racialism' (involving racially essentialist beliefs and attributions) constitutes one of the ways in which racism is now understood.

The growing recognition of racism's plural character (and its many possible incarnations), for instance racisms directed at specific groups (e.g. anti-Semitism) is important, but to conceive of this term so broadly (and in relation to such diverse people and phenomena) results in an overly loose understanding of racism in which we are all potentially racists or the victims of racism (Song 2003). Given the ubiquity and inflation of the term 'racism' (or some conceptual variant), some scholars, such as McGhee (2005), have responded to this difficulty by theorizing contemporary forms of othering and hatred through a wider vocabulary – '. . . racism, asylophobia, Islamophobia and homophobia in the UK . . .' (2005: 3). And while this work provides a strong examination of these differing, but related phenomena, based upon hatred and prejudice, the term 'racism' is never defined, but treated, rather, as an obvious given.

I argue that rather than backing away from tricky concepts like racism, we need to refocus 'racism' as an important concept which captures the multiple and varied racial phenomena and interactions occurring in contemporary British society. In particular, assertions of racism need to be unpacked so that we know *how* and *why* particular interactions are said to be racist, and whether these social phenomena can be understood as ontologically equivalent, or require further conceptual differentiation.

Changing understandings of racism

Let us start by reviewing some older bodies of research, and conceptualizations of racism, and how they have changed over time, from classical formulations to more recent, postmodern understandings of racism. This article cannot provide a comprehensive account of the evolution of racial thinking and discourses (see Benedict 1945; Banton 1977; Montagu 1964). There is no one continuous strand of thinking or debates concerning race and racism in Britain, and I will draw upon both British and American scholars who have written about 'racism' in a wide variety of ways.

In Britain, older debates about 'race relations' centered upon making sense of why ethnic minority people, many of them immigrants (at that time), encountered differential and often discriminatory treatment in relation to a racially stratified society (see Rex 1970; Rex and Tomlinson 1979; Banton

1967). These older debates also questioned whether structured power differentials between Black people and White people meant that ethnic minority people could not be regarded as racist (see e.g. Sivanandan 1982).

The 'race relations' framework was followed by Marxist theorists such as Miles (1989) who conceived of a process of 'racialization' in which specific sectors of the population were regarded as racialized minorities in the context of the capitalist world economy. However, the neo-Marxist perspective of scholars associated with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (e.g. Stuart Hall, Hazel Carby, John Solomos, Paul Gilroy) noted that it was problematic to conceive of a capitalist class as all-controlling, and that a less deterministic way of thinking was needed to make sense of contemporary racialized interactions and ideologies, including a consideration of how White working-class people adopted racist beliefs. Rather, these British scholars emphasized the ways in which ethnic minority people actively resisted forms of racism, which were constantly changing.

A number of analysts have noted that the concept of 'racism' 'entered the lexicon of "common sense" only in the 1960s' (Winant 1998: 757). Indeed, various scholars have argued that racism as we know it today is historically modern (see Hannaford 1996; Goldberg 2002; Frederickson 2002; Lentin 2008). Scholars and lay people use the term 'racism' to refer to racial epithets, stereotypes, ideologies, beliefs, physical attacks, policies, institutions, and states. As Ben Bowling (1998: 2) points out, 'The process of naming the problem is not simply a matter of semantics but reflects the intensely political process of conceptualization.'[2] Furthermore, various scholars have questioned the use of 'race' and its limitations as a critical concept (see St. Louis 2002).

Among the various conceptualizations of racism, some scholars emphasize individual (and group) processes concerning racial prejudice, while others address more collective, societal dynamics, and an analysis of power differentials. These are not strictly competing explanations – often, they shade into each other, with different emphases. For instance, in a widely read sociology textbook, Macionis and Plummer define racism thus: 'A powerful and destructive form of prejudice, racism refers to the belief that one racial category is innately superior or inferior to another' (2012: 354). One scholar of race and racism, John Solomos (1993: 9), argues that '. . . racism is broadly defined in the sense that it is used to cover those ideologies and social processes which discriminate against others on the basis of their putatively different racial membership'. And as many analysts point out, racism is not a static phenomenon, so that it can be expressed and manifest in multiple forms (Fox 2012; Garner 2009).

While some analysts distinguish between racial prejudice and racial discrimination, others do not. In *The Nature of Prejudice*, Gordon Allport's (1954) definition of racial discrimination is distinct from prejudice; Allport argues that discrimination is the behavioural component of prejudice, which

may remain latent. As Michael Banton (2002) has observed, unlike the term racism, racial discrimination can be defined more precisely and concretely, as evidenced in the UN declaration of human rights: within this declaration, racial discrimination is understood as a violation of legally defined human rights, with specific forms of legal redress by governments. However, popular use of the term racism has tended to conflate racial prejudice and racial discrimination (Banton 1997).

Yet for social psychologists Operario and Fiske (1998), racial oppression is said to be fundamentally based upon both racial prejudice and power (with an emphasis upon how and why it is still widespread): 'Racial oppression thus derives from a) power – the disproportionate ability of some individuals or groups to control other people's outcomes; and b) prejudice – the universal tendency to favour the in-group over the out-group' (1998: 49). Without both of these key variables, they argue that 'racism could not manifest itself as individual-, institutional-, and cultural-level phenomena'. As they point out, power is crucial to our understanding of what we call racism because states and societies historically have had the power to arbitrarily create and enforce racial classifications in which some people are regarded as more physically, mentally, and culturally superior than others (Spickard 1992), enact race-based laws, and the power to subordinate people through forms of social and economic control (Operario and Fiske 1998:38; see also Sidanius and Pratto 1999).

Thus more radical, structural, and systemic understandings of racism see it as a web of structural and institutional arrangements (see Blauner 1972; Hall et al. 1978; Sivanandan 1982; Wellman 1999; Feagin 2000; Bonilla-Silva 2010). According to such a perspective, racism is institutionalized, based on a system in which the White majority 'raises its position by exploiting, controlling, and keeping down others who are categorized in racial or ethnic terms' (Blauner 1972). These structural analysts challenge purely psychological and individualistic views of racism: racism has an objective reality (and is not just located in someone's prejudicial view). In other words, racism is systemic, comprehensive (all actors involved), and *rational*, based on the interests of White people (Wellman 1999; Feagin 2000). According to Wellman:

> A position is racist when it defends, protects or enhances social organization based on racial advantage. Racism is determined by the consequences of a sentiment, not its surface qualities . . . White racism is what White people do to protect the special benefits they gain by virtue of their skin color. (1999: 187)

In fact, various US scholars have argued that intentionality is not a prerequisite for racism: 'Racism is often habitual, unintentional, commonplace, polite, implicit and well meaning' (Desmond and Emirbayer 2008). Importantly, these scholars are clear that racism is intrinsically a White invention, created and

perpetuated for White privilege, and should be understood in terms of its consequences, whatever the intentions (Carmichael and Hamilton 1968).

These formulations of racism have tended to conceive of power in quite bald terms – i.e. White people characterized as empowered, while ethnic minorities are the powerless victims of racism. However, some analysts, such as Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1994), have advanced a theory of 'racial formation' (in which they discuss a variety of 'racial projects') which is more nuanced. In one of the most influential books on racism in the USA, the authors define racism '. . . as a fundamental characteristic of social projects which *create or reproduce structures of domination based on essentialist categories of race*' (1994: 162 (my emphasis)). This definition is especially helpful because racially essentialist claims on their own are not sufficient to constitute 'racism' as such; rather, such essentialist categories or ways of thinking must be shown to 'create or reproduce structures of domination' in specific historical contexts. Omi and Winant criticize the mechanistic and additive equation in which racism = prejudice plus power, which draws upon a monolithic notion of power in a wholly top-down fashion. As they point out, other than in absolutist regimes (such as the former South Africa), even relatively disadvantaged ethnic minorities are not powerless – i.e. in societies such as Britain, power is diffuse and situated at various levels and sites (Song 2003).[3]

Nevertheless, the recognition of the diffuse nature of contemporary power dynamics does not mean that we should lose sight of the differential distribution and manifestations of power, or the relatively negative or positive social values embedded in disparate forms of racial essentialisms which are attributed to disparate 'racial' groups. As discussed below, the importance of 'structures of domination', history, and racial ideologies for many contemporary debates about 'racism' has been largely obscured by a postmodern theorizing on 'racialization', which, despite its limitations, has been helpful in advancing a more subtle understanding of racial incidents.

Old to 'new' racism

Important changes in the status and experiences of ethnic minority people in many multi-ethnic Western societies, as well as growing attention to the assumed privileges of Whiteness (see Bhopal 2011; Garner 2009), has engendered a great deal of debate about how to characterize minority people's status and experiences. In the post-civil rights period, we have witnessed considerable mobility for some sectors of the ethnic minority population. Not only are direct and indirect forms of discrimination illegal, as stipulated in the Race Relations Act of 1976, the Race Relations Act 2000 placed an obligation on thousands of public authorities to 'promote good relations between persons of different racial groups'. We know that not all ethnic minority groups fare badly in socioeconomic terms, especially Britons of Indian and Chinese

backgrounds. In fact, a higher proportion of people from many ethnic minority groups enter university than do White people (Modood 2004). Nevertheless, a recent and comprehensive report by the Human Rights and Equalities Commission, 'How Fair is Britain', and the numerous reports by The Runnymede Trust, still shows persistent forms of racialized inequalities among certain groups.

Legislation formally banning various forms of ethnic and racial discrimination has resulted in what some analysts call 'new racism' (or 'cultural racism') (Barker 1981; Taguieff 2001), which has largely replaced the more blatant, 'old' forms of racism. As argued by Barker (1981) and the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS 1982), among others, the discursive articulation of racism has changed, given the public prohibition on overt expressions of racial hatred or disdain. With the decline in nineteenth century scientific racism and the horrors of the Holocaust, publicly racial discourses based on biological notions of superiority or inferiority among races are no longer intellectually or politically viable (Modood 1997: 154; Montagu 1964). The Macpherson Report's definition of racism acknowledges its more subtle manifestations:

> Racism in general terms consists of conduct or words or practices which disadvantage or advantage people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin. In its more subtle form it is as damaging as in its overt form. (Macpherson Report 1999)

Furthermore, racism is understood to arise in relation to a number of factors – not only colour, but also culture, ethnicity, and religion. The increasingly sanitized and 'cultural' attributions of difference have, nevertheless, been employed to suggest indelible and problematic cultural differences between people of different ethnicities and/or religions, for instance in relation to discourses about traditional cultural practices and the putative 'backwardness' of Asian Muslims (see CCCS 1982; Alexander 2000; Modood 1996; Gilroy 1987; Barker 1981). Another characteristic of this new racism is its reliance on a 'banal nationalism' which effectively excludes minority ethnic people from belonging in the nation (Billig 1995; McGhee 2005). Such newer forms of racial discourse draw upon commonplace forms of explanation employed by ordinary people, as opposed to either extremist groups or blatant bigots (Wetherell and Potter 1992; Bonilla-Silva 2010; Wellman 1999).

In Britain, discourses of race and ethnic minority status and racism have also been significantly shaped by a number of demographic changes: First, migration and 'super-diversity' (Vertovec 2007), especially from the enlarged EU post-2004, has introduced ethnic minority people who are clearly foreign, yet White – prompting debate about forms of racism targeted at White Eastern European migrants (such as Polish migrants) and about the usual coupling of minority status and 'colour' (see Fox 2012). Second, there has also been a notable growth in 'mixed race' people and relationships, which has engendered

discussion about the continuing salience of race and racial boundaries across an increasingly diverse British population (Aspinall and Song 2013). Third, understandings of racial disadvantage have also been shaped by the recognition of White working-class disadvantage (Reay, David, Ball 2005), for instance, in relation to educational attainment – so that minority ethnic people are not exclusively and automatically associated with economic and social disadvantage.

Racialization, intersectionality and the broadening out of racism

Accompanying this gradual shift from 'old' to 'new' racism, and these demographic changes, is the growing use of the term 'racialization'. While there is no *one* conceptualization of racialization (and some analysts use this term as distinct from 'racism' while others do not), various analysts have argued that racialization is the process of creating racial categories, or the process by which (usually) non-whites have been socially constructed (see Banton 1997; Miles 1989; Lentin 2008).

> According to Ali Rattansi,
> 'This [racialization] acknowledges that propositions, insults, and more elaborate doctrines are liable to vary in the degree to which they contain the elements of what I have referred to as 'strong' or 'hard' racism. (2007: 107)

Thus while some forms of racialization may elicit explicit and extremely negative beliefs about the innate inferiority of a group, other forms may invoke beliefs and images which are less extreme and more double-edged. So one key way in which the notion of racialization is helpful is that rather than ascertaining whether an interaction or event is, or is not, racist, it entails a relativistic assessment of each racial interaction (an interaction which can make reference to racial, religious or ethnic background and/or characteristic), and the *degree* to which it can be regarded as racist. In fact, Rattansi notes that 'racialization' does not necessarily imply that those subjected to it are regarded as inferior (2007: 107). There is no attempt at one definitive understanding or measure of 'racism'. In a nutshell, racialization is a looser concept than racism and refers to a variety (and varying degrees) of racial thinking and attributions.

In using this term, a number of more postmodern scholars, such as Ali Rattansi, have argued for the need to move away from the absolutes of racists versus non-racists, as this way of understanding the world is said to be ineffective in capturing the much messier, more contradictory, and varied attitudes and beliefs that many people hold today. According to Ali Rattansi (2007: 2):

> . . . [I]t is my view that public and academic debates should move away from simplistic attempts to divide racism from non-racism and racists from

non-racists . . . one of the main impediments to progress in understanding racism has been the willingness of all involved to propose short, supposedly water-tight definitions of racism and to identify quickly and with more or less complete certainty who is *really* racist and who is not [emphasis original].

Rattansi's important observation applies to the growing number of cases in which less than clear-cut allegations of racism are on the rise, and subject to wide public debate. For instance, in the summer of 2013, some people regarded the 'go home or face arrest' poster campaign (now revoked) aimed at illegal migrants in the UK as 'racist' while others saw it as a commonsense matter of upholding the law. One recent case reported in the daily London paper, *Metro*, concerned the case of a White hip-hop fan who had shouted 'nigger' (as a form of greeting) at a Black man in the street. Christopher Jones was charged with the use of racially aggravated words when he was overheard using the term to a group of men, which included one Black man. However, Jones argued that he was not racist 'because he likes rap music, "has more black friends than white friends" and that he had used the word as a "term of endearment" ' (Smith 2012: 11). In agreement, magistrates in North Staffordshire ruled that Jones had not used the term in a way which meant to be hostile to the Black man. As this example shows, the specifics of who (and in what context) one says 'nigger' is crucial in judging whether someone is or is not being racist.

In the more high profile John Terry/Anton Ferdinand feud, there is little doubt that Terry actually uttered racially abusive language toward Ferdinand. However, according to Rattansi, the distinction between *a racist act* and being *a racist person* is an important one, and he discusses the difficulty in judging people as out and out racists. Rattansi draws on the case of football commentator Ron Atkins, who (believing the microphone was switched off) once described a Black football player as 'a fucking lazy thick nigger' (Rattansi 2007: 120). While Atkins' remarks are undeniably offensive, Rattansi notes that some Black players spoke out in defense of Atkins, as he had helped to promote Black football talent. Rattansi concludes that (2007: 120–1): '. . . [football commentator Ron Atkins], like many others, has contradictory and ambivalent responses to black people . . . Like most people in Britain, he has culturally absorbed both sorts of views . . .'. So, if we apply Rattansi's lens, even if we were to agree that Terry behaved in a racist manner toward Ferdinand, this does not automatically mean that he behaves in such a way (consistently) toward other Black or other minority ethnic players or people more generally. Nor would it necessarily mean that Terry is definitively a racist person.

With a few exceptions, the growing emphasis on *racialization*, as opposed to racism, has resulted in a broadening out of our understandings of racism, so that it is not necessarily or automatically understood to be perpetrated by

White people (or solely experienced by visibly non-White people). There is no singular way of being racist (see Rattansi 2007; Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992; Solomos and Back 1996), and various British scholars have criticized (albeit in different ways) a racial binarism which has traditionally conceived of racialized interactions in terms of a Black/White field (see Modood 1994; Cohen 1996; Hickman 1998). Furthermore, the essentialization of collective categories and identities, including both White and ethnic minority people, is problematic (Gilroy 1998).

Accompanying the rise of a broad understanding of racialization, feminist scholars adopting intersectionality in their analyses of racialized experiences have increasingly argued that racial experiences cannot be understood solely in relation to 'race'. For instance, in the USA, Patricia Hill Collins' (2000) work on the matrix of interrelated oppressions has been highly influential, especially among feminist scholars. In Britain, Coretta Phillips (2011) has also emphasized an intersectional analysis, and has argued for the importance of examining the role of racialization at the micro, meso, and macro levels if we are to make sense of long standing inequalities found among ethnic groups, such as in educational attainment. Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1992: 2) contend that various 'modes of exclusion, inferiorization, subordination and exploitation' can involve differing levels of severity, and are 'differentially experienced by different class, ethnic and gender categories'. Like Anthias and Yuval-Davis, Rattansi (2007) '. . . does not assume that racism is simply a property of white cultures and individuals' and argues '. . . that racism has always been bound up with a myriad other divisions, especially those of class and gender' (see also Hickman 1998; Cohen and Bains 1988). Furthermore, some analysts such as Andreas Wimmer (2013) have recently argued that social scientists need to consider the possibility that 'race' and racisms may not always be centrally implicated in the social dynamics and divisions we witness across contemporary societies.

These writings suggest that, in Britain, an overly homogenizing 'one size fits all' understanding of racism, as elaborated by some analysts, is problematic. While such conceptions of racism, conceived primarily as structured systems of power in which White people have historically benefited, are still necessary (as I argue below), they are not particularly helpful in making sense of the myriad racial incidents which now occur in multi-ethnic societies, where the actors in these incidents are not always easily categorized in relation to the majority or minority groups, or as the oppressors or the oppressed.

In most theorizing on racialization, it is now generally accepted (in Britain) that ethnic minorities too are capable of racist acts and behaviours. However, the theoretical emphasis on 'racialization' has inadvertently resulted in a situation where the relativistic bent of racialization has collapsed multiple and variable forms of racial phenomena (including assertions of 'reverse racism') into an undifferentiated mass which requires more critical scrutiny.

Given the plethora of competing definitions and the varied ways in which claims of racism are made, a refocusing and rethinking of *racism*, as a more specific form of racialization, helps us to assess the myriad claims of racism made in contemporary Britain. While no one definition of racism can be held to a gold standard of utility, we need some basic guidelines on the criteria we use in assessing the many racial interactions and incidents which are said to be racist: when are certain forms of racialization racist, or on the 'hard' end of racism? Equally, when may it be inappropriate or inaccurate to label certain interactions or people as racist? How does the recognition that ethnic minorities too can commit racist acts inform our understanding of racism?

Most contemporary British writings about racism have not yet sufficiently examined assertions of 'reverse racism' (especially in comparison to scholarship on race in the US), which are increasingly reported in the popular press; nor has there been much thought given to instances of interethnic (or intra-ethnic) conflict and tension in British society. In order to challenge a widespread culture of racial equivalence, in which all interactions involving some reference to race or cultural difference is deemed racist, or just one of many putatively similar forms of racialization, we need to go further and delineate by what criteria an interaction, person, policy or way of thinking can be said to be racist. In the remainder of the paper, I discuss and evaluate several high profile 'racist' incidents which have been widely reported in the British media (including some allegations made against ethnic minority people) in order to illustrate why we need to curb such a culture of racial equivalence. In doing so, I draw especially upon Omi and Winant's conceptualizations of racism and 'racial projects'.

Contesting easy equivalences

Emblematic of the broadening out of understandings of racism in Britain, the 'Stephen Lawrence Inquiry' (1999) (commonly known as the Macpherson Report) defined a racist incident as follows: 'A racist incident is any incident which is perceived to be racist by the victim or other person'. In this definition, there is no suggestion that the victim of such an incident is necessarily non-White. The report's definition of a 'racist incident' is not useful for either legal prosecution or academic debates, as it is overly broad and 'wishy-washy'. So, broadly conceived, this definition of a racist incident exemplifies the current tendency to impute equivalence to all racialized acts and interactions in Britain, encouraging a culture of racial equivalence. But, as discussed above, not all racialized interactions are necessarily racist, and they may differ in motivations, consequences and severity. The Macpherson view that any incident can be racist, subject to the perception of the actors, militates against a reasoned argument for why an instance of racialization is racist, or in what way it is problematic (and see Phillips 2011).

Such a culture of racial equivalence can permeate any sphere of social life. Last year, my son (who attended a predominantly White primary school) informed me that his White friend said that White people were victims of racism, and that calling White people a 'snowball' would be racist (see Troyna and Hatcher 1992). I was assured that this claim was not in jest. While such a term, if delivered with enough venom, may be hurtful to a White child, it does not have the deep resonance or stigma attached to words like 'Jew', 'Paki', 'nigger' and 'chink'. There can be no easy, two-way equivalences between terms like 'snowball' and the many racial terms of denigration levied at various ethnic minority people historically (Feagin 2000). Though not discussed by Rattansi, a corollary of his binary transcending framework, then, is that simplistic assertions of 'reverse racism' can also be problematic.

We now regularly witness remarks which allege the equivalence of any colour-based remarks, including those about White people. For instance, in response to the Terry/Ferdinand feud, Dave Whelan (Wigan Athletic chairperson) said:

> I think we should forget colour and . . . you know, it doesn't bother anybody. Sometimes a footballer, when they're playing at such a level, with the stress there is. . . . If they call somebody White, if they call somebody Black, you've just got to get on with it.

Like the prior example, this statement suggests an equivalence between calling someone Black and calling someone White (both in terms of the morality of the act itself, as well as the assumed impact of calling someone White as opposed to calling someone Black). Such advocates of a colour-blind approach typically understand any racial terms and interactions as equivalents (*The Guardian* 2011; Bonilla-Silva 2010). In their critique of the contemporary ubiquity of 'diversity' in a multitude of writings and policies, Alana Lentin and Gavan Titley (2008) make a similar observation about the way in which a diluted, yet all-inclusive notion of 'diversity', tends to reduce all such diversity into a bland kind of equivalence: 'However, what this inclusivity potentially does is firstly to equalise all differences, and secondly, to reduce all inequality to difference'. So the specificity of particular bases of diversity (e.g. racialization, versus sexism), tend to be equalized and obscured by a bland 'celebration of human diversity writ large' (2008: 19).

Central to the growth of this culture of racial equivalence are assertions of both racism and reverse racism via new(ish) communication and media technologies which have instant reach to a huge audience. Typically, such charges of racism (and reverse racism) tend to be monolithic, and delivered in formats which are not conducive to the elaboration of detailed and careful argumentation and explanations; as such, these brief articles, blogs, and tweets do not properly assess the nature and specifics of each racial interaction or event. Furthermore, claims of 'reverse racism' can be misleading because the term

suggests an automatic (and unqualified) parity and likeness between racial infractions committed by disparate groups of people, with often very different motivations, histories, and social experiences. While both White and ethnic minority people are *capable* of acting in a racist manner, it is imperative that we are clear about *why, and in what ways*, *particular interactions or policies constitute racism as such*.

A culture of racial equivalence is evident in the ways in which some high profile cases are reported in the UK media. For instance, in January 2012, Black Labour MP Dianne Abbott responded to a Black freelance journalist's comment that many of the Black leaders shown in the media were out of touch with the people they supposedly represented. In response to this journalist's critical commentary, Abbott later tweeted: 'White people love playing "divide and rule". We should not play their game'. This remark led some (including an Asian Conservative MP, Nadhim Zahawi) to call for her resignation, dubbing her remarks as 'racist'. The MP, Zahawi, wrote on Twitter: 'A healthy society should not tolerate any form of racism. DAbbott should apologise and resign or Ed M must sack her.' (www.telegraph.co.uk – 06/01/2012). Leaving aside the fact that party politics underlies Zahawi's cry of racism, no one publicly challenged his allegation (other than Abbott), and the Labour leader Ed Miliband reportedly insisted upon a public apology for her statement.

Abbott's remark certainly racially essentializes White people (and is thus a form of racialization) – but can we say that it is racist? As discussed above, forms of racialization can be seen on a continuum of soft to 'hard' racism (Rattansi 2007). Omi and Winant's definition of racism provides a helpful way to differentiate racism from the broader notion of racialization. According to their definition, essentialist categories of race, while objectionable, are not sufficient, on their own, to constitute racism; rather, they must be used in a way that creates or reproduces structures of domination. Returning to the Terry/ Ferdinand feud, Terry would be viewed as racist in this interaction if what he appears to have said to Anton Ferdinand communicates an attribution of racial inferiority, and this act reproduces structures of domination in which White people have historically denigrated Black and other minority people.

By comparison, if we examine the Abbott tweet, there is no doubt that she employs essentialist categories of race, in which all White people are characterized as opportunistically engaging in behaviour which will divide and damage Black people and their collective ties. But her tweet does not meet the second part of Omi and Winant's definition concerning the reproduction of structures of domination. So not all racial generalizations – even ones deemed objectionable – are necessarily racist. Nor does Abbott's tweet qualify as racist if one were to apply the Macionis and Plummer definition discussed above ('. . . racism refers to the belief that one racial category is innately superior or inferior to another'), because her generalization about White people makes no reference to the idea that White people are inherently inferior (or superior). If

anything, her tweet articulates her view that White people and institutions can employ a divisive tactic which disadvantages Black people – it is a commentary (however accurate or not) about the historical structure of White domination, and exemplifies the use of a knowing strategic essentialism to make a political point. Thus racial essentialisms (even of a negative nature), on their own, do not constitute a sufficiently robust criteria for how we define 'racism', as not all racial essentialisms create or reproduce structures of domination, or damage and denigrate their target populations to the same degree (or in the same ways).

One important coda to the John Terry/Anton Ferdinand saga was that Rio Ferdinand (also a football player), the brother of Anton Ferdinand, was charged with misconduct by the Football Association. Rio Ferdinand found himself denying that he was being racist toward Ashley Cole, a 'mixed race' player for Chelsea (and a team-mate of Terry's, who testified on his behalf). The charge against Rio Ferdinand arose from the fact that Ferdinand had affirmed a tweeter's reference to Cole as a 'choc ice'. The person who tweeted Rio Ferdinand had written: 'Looks like Ashley Cole's going to be their choc ice. Then again he's always been a sell out. Shame on him.' Ferdinand then responded to this tweet: 'I hear you fella! Choc ice is classic! Hahahahahaha!!' (Steinberg 2012). When accused of being racist (for endorsing this tweet's characterization of Cole), Ferdinand retorted that far from being racist, his use of the term 'choc ice' simply meant that he was calling Ashley Cole 'a fake' – that is, not being authentically Black: ' "What I said yesterday is not a racist term", he tweeted. "It's a type of slang/term used by many for someone who is being fake. So there." ' (Steinberg 2012).

This scenario is fascinating: Rio Ferdinand, who is 'mixed race' (Black and White), is accused of being racist toward another 'mixed race' player, Ashley Cole, because he had endorsed the term 'choc ice', which is commonly used to mean 'black on the outside, but white on the inside'. Ferdinand denies that his use of this term is racist. Clearly, the term 'choc ice' is pejorative; this term is not used in relation to the wider population – it is a term reserved specifically for Black people who are seen as 'sell outs' or 'race traitors'.

Thus, the charge of racism against Rio Ferdinand is based upon the use of a term which evokes colour (Black on the outside, but White on the inside) and notions of racial essentialism and authenticity – that while someone is actually Black, he is 'acting' White, and effectively serving White interests. There are a number of problematic aspects of such attributions (and termi- nology). For one, the 'choc ice' term (or 'oreo', 'coconut', 'banana' – a cognate term used in reference to East Asian-origin people) references entirely reductive and essentialist understandings of who someone is: i.e. one cannot be both Black and White – rather, someone is either Black or White. So such terms reinscribe quite dated understandings of static and mutually exclusive racial selves.

The claim that Rio Ferdinand is racist for agreeing with the tweet is patently absurd – Ferdinand's implied charge of 'race traitor' or lack of racial authenticity (toward Cole) does involve racially essentializing Cole, but it does not reproduce structures of domination; nor does it refer to a belief in the inherent racial inferiority of Ashley Cole. It is an admittedly crude and politicized jab which draws on the idea of not only racial authenticity but also an enforced racial solidarity (a theme in common with Abbott's tweet above). Rio Ferdinand is not a racist in this interaction; nor is Ashley Cole a victim of his racism. But Ferdinand is giving credence to (as evoked by the tweeter's use of 'choc-ice') essentialist understandings of racial categories, such as 'Black' and 'White'. Now, if Ferdinand had said that Cole was not a credible witness in the John Terry case because he was Black and therefore unintelligent, that *would* have been a racist remark.

We need to retain the use of the terms 'racism' and 'racist' but we should be clear about why a form of 'racialization' (a broader, more neutral term) con-stitutes an instance of 'racism', for instance, by applying specific criteria such as theorized by Omi and Winant. And we should use a wider and more varied vocabulary to distinguish between a variety of racial phenomena, e.g. ethno-centrism or xenophobia directed at recent Eastern European migrants. For instance, British Indian parents who want their daughter or son to marry another Indian-origin person can be said to be ethnocentric, but not neces-sarily 'racist' – yet such an attitude is often automatically labelled as racist in the British press. If these parents were opposed to their child marrying someone of a different ethnic or racial background (e.g. someone Black Car-ibbean or Chinese) because they believed such a person to be inherently inferior (in some way), such a view would be racist because such an antipathy toward Black or Chinese people reproduces ideologies concerning inherent racial differences and racial inferiority – which reinforces (historical) struc-tures of domination. But if these same parents objected to a White son or daughter in law, because they saw White British culture as objectionable, this would not necessarily be racist, for such a view does not create or reproduce structures of domination. You *could* say, however, that these Indian parents were being ethnocentric and prejudiced against White people, as all White people and 'culture' are essentialized in an unfavourable way. Furthermore, forms of *racial hostility* (e.g. as evidenced by some ethnic minority people toward White people) should not be conflated with racism as such.

The substantial insights gained by writings on racialization should not mean that we should jettison our use of the term 'racism', especially an understand-ing of racism which highlights the historical context and 'structures of domi-nation' (as elaborated by Omi and Winant 1994). Theorizing on racialization which emphasizes the ambivalence and contradictions embedded in *individ-uals'* racial attitudes and behaviours has enabled us to analyse multiple *racial incidents* with more care and specificity, but in doing so, it has also fostered a

highly individualistic and privatized understanding of 'racism' which obscures conceptualizations of racism as structured systems of power and domination which have a historical basis.

Race consciousness, 'reverse racism', and historical amnesia

Another example of a growing culture of racial equivalence is the tendency to regard all race conscious policies as instances of 'reverse racism'. In the wake of anti-racist legislation and the post-civil rights era, there has been a backlash against race-conscious policies, and recurring moral panics about immigration and social cohesion are unlikely to abate (Finney and Simpson 2009; McGhee 2005). Some analysts wish to claim that we now (or should) occupy a colour blind society (see Ignatieff 1999). Barack Obama's 2008 election to the White House has bolstered some neo-conservative analysts' claims that ethnic minorities are no longer disadvantaged, and that we now inhabit a post-racial world (see Browne and Carrington's 2012 special issue contesting such assertions). Some analysts have asserted that we should and need to go 'beyond' race to achieve a truly equal and tolerant society (see Mirza 2010; Malik 1996). In Britain, Munira Mirza (2010), the Deputy Mayor for Education and Culture of London, argued in a special issue of *Prospect* magazine: 'Does this heightened awareness of racism help to stamp it out? Quite the opposite. It creates a climate of suspicion and anxiety.' (Mirza 2010: 3).

Increasingly, race conscious policies are seen as problematic. However, as discussed above, not all forms of racialization (or representations or projects of race) are necessarily racist (Omi and Winant 1994). As Amy Gutmann (1996), among others, has argued, forms of race consciousness (such as in forms of affirmative action – which are increasingly embattled in the USA, and effectively illegal in Europe) may be important for a more socially just society:

> But color blindness is *not* a fundamental principle of justice. . . . Fairness is a fundamental principle of justice . . . and it is a principle that does not always call for color blindness, e.g. in relation to employment, education, or university admissions in our *nonideal* society. To respond to racial injustice with a color conscious principle or policy is therefore not to commit any wrong at all, provided the principle or policy is consistent with fairness. (1996: 107)

Ronald Dworkin also argued that race conscious distinctions are not generally wrong because there is a difference between racial distinctions that reflect prejudice *against* members of a disadvantaged group (and are used to perpetuate the disadvantage) and distinctions that are designed to *redress* the disadvantage (Dworkin, cited in Gutmann 1996: 118).

However, determining (consistently) which race conscious policies and projects are justified is highly contested, and we must assess the objectives and

consequences of each 'racial project' carefully. A rethinking of contemporary racial projects is pressing because in comparison with the recent past, the 'old' polarities of White/non-White, or what we mean by 'ethnic minority', have become categories which are constituted by highly diverse people, especially in terms of class and privilege, ethnicity, and various forms of belonging.

So while a shift toward a broader and more nuanced understanding of racism has occurred among many British scholars, so that we are better able to theorize specific *racial incidents* involving sometimes contradictory and ambivalent people, we also need to retain an understanding of *racism* which is not overly relativized or solely individualistic in emphasis – racism as a structured system of power and domination (while changeable) which has a historical basis. Furthermore, assertions of reverse racism often fail to consider the historically specific ways in which racial hierarchies and inequalities were institutionalized. The concept of racism cannot be understood in a wholly abstract, formulaic way, divorced from the lengthy history in which beliefs and practices about racial inferiority and superiority emerged and were consolidated. Whether this is understood in relation to the treatment of Black pupils in British education (see Gillborn 2008), the racialized stop and search tactics which disproportionately target ethnic minorities (Bowling 1998; Phillips 2011), the Holocaust, or the transatlantic slave trade, the historical context in which White racisms (in its myriad forms) have occurred cannot be erased or replicated. For instance, Mugabe's policies in Zimbabwe are racially discriminatory, in that they discriminate against White people, qua their Whiteness. This treatment of White farmers in Zimbabwe is reprehensible, and racially discriminatory, but to see their treatment (for instance) as the mirror equivalent of former Rhodesia's treatment of Black people would be wrong-headed, and would erase the historical context and weight of colonial history. The treatment of White landowners is political retribution (however wrong it may be), and is not motivated by the long-standing belief that they are racial vermin.

> As Desmond and Emirbayer (2009) argue,
> there is no such thing as 'black institutional racism' or 'reverse institutional racism' due to the fact that there is no existing history of a socially ingrained and normalized system of domination designed by people of colour that denies White people full participation in the rights and privileges of society.
> . . . (Also, see Cashmore and Troyna (1990)).

So while there are practices and policies which can formally discriminate against or disadvantage White people, on the basis of their Whiteness (and are thus *racially discriminatory*), this does not necessarily constitute 'racism' as such – though, increasingly, 'White' is not an uncontested category. We must attune ourselves to the qualitatively different motivations, historical experiences and consequences of such behaviours, practices, and policies which are said to constitute racism and 'reverse racism'.

Discussion

Widespread and frequent allegations of 'racism' in Britain are increasingly played out in popular cultural forms such as football, or in debates about whether a reality TV contestant is or is not racist. To claim that an interaction is 'racist' no longer tells us very much, as such assertions are so rife. Furthermore, the ways in which we digest and interpret such interactions are complicated by the fact that they can go viral via new media technologies (e.g. Twitter, You Tube) which involve multiple layers of allegation and reportage. So we need to pay more attention to why and how someone or something is said to be racist, or somehow constitutes an instance of racism. Given the numerous reported instances of racism, which have been alleged in relation to both White and ethnic minority Britons, understandings of racism must consider the complex histories, positionings, behaviours, and consequences of such a diverse range of racial interactions and phenomena.

The trend toward growing equivalence in how racism is understood (as experienced by almost anyone, and understood to apply to a wide array of interactions involving *almost any utterance of racial terms and attributions*) is worrying, as it denudes the idea of racism of its historical basis, severity and power. These frequent and commonplace assertions of racism in the public sphere paradoxically end up trivializing and homogenizing quite different forms of racialized interactions. Not all forms of racialization constitute 'racism' because not all racially based modes of thinking or behaving are based upon the belief that human beings can be differentiated according to essentialist understandings of inferior or superior racial groupings; nor do all forms of racialization create or reproduce structures of domination. As such, we need to retain both a nuanced understanding of *racial incidents* (helpfully brought about through Rattansi's theorizing of 'racialization') and an historical understanding of *racism* in which essentialist categories of race are employed to create or reproduce structures of domination (Omi and Winant 1994).

The tendency to call all racially based policies 'racist' undermines the legitimate need to (selectively) retain race consciousness (Gutmann 1996) – this should not be conflated with 'racism' or 'reverse racism'. For now, some degree of racial awareness (though what concrete form this should take is of course subject to debate) is necessary for addressing racially based inequalities. As Omi and Winant have argued, racial projects can be progressive, as well as reinforce racial inequalities. So Ignatieff (1999) is wrong: there isn't too much race – there is, however, too much 'loose talk' and indiscriminate assertions of racism.

The considerable challenge for future theorizing in this area is to connect forms of racialization and racism (in combination with other key variables) at the micro, meso and macro levels (Phillips 2011). Much of the future debate concerning racism in Britain will concern the degree to which we should

highlight White people and White supremacy in our analyses of 'racism'. In fact, in a recent symposium in the journal *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 'race systems' theorists like Feagin and Elias (2013) argue that Omi and Winant's racial formation theory does not sufficiently specify White supremacy and White privilege.

We still need to ask: Who or what is engaged in the racialized act, and with what purpose and impact? What is the content and impact of this racialized act/behaviour/or policy, and does it create or reproduce structures of domination (such as racial hierarchies)? What is the historical context within which particular interactions and beliefs occur? Posing such questions militates against the assertion of easy equivalences in relation to disparate forms of racialized phenomena and interactions. At the same time, in addition to the material consequences of structured inequalities, it is crucial that we discern the motivations, agendas, and back stories to social phenomena which are said to be racist. To do so would strengthen, not weaken, our ability to make claims about racism taken seriously.

(Date accepted: October 2013)

Notes

2. Indeed, Banton (1977) rejects the term 'racism', as he has argued that the nineteenth century arguments (and ideology) about race and racial difference were discredited by scientists in the postwar period.

3. According to Rattansi, many anti-racists believed only White people could be regarded as real racists because only White prejudice could actually translate into a power against minorities. Countering this logic, he argues that this formula cannot account for 'the many relatively wealthy and powerful non-White individuals who expressed racist views' (Rattansi 2007: 130).

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