

The Epistemic Violence of Racism

Hidden Transcripts of Whiteness

James R. Cochrane

Director of Research Institute on Christianity in South Africa
University of Cape Town

Written for a volume reflecting on the failures and challenges of the United Nations Summit on Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance held in Durban, South Africa in 2001. Describing the way in which discourse about racism has evolved in a post-apartheid era, adopts a definition of racism as embedded prejudice linked to structural discrimination. Noting that neither a biological nor a cultural basis for understanding “race” has validity, I then define the ongoing “epistemic violence” of racism, rooted in European and American history. How we will overcome racism in a context where it is no longer overtly linked to any racist regime? If racism is embedded in a paradigmatic *epistémé*, how can it be overcome without public regulation, civil transformation and personal conversion as the necessary and simultaneous conditions of its eradication?

To “pull the race card” is a common accusation in post-apartheid South African society and politics. Meant to be negative, it usually refers to regular complaints from newly empowered blacks about what they see as ongoing racist, statements, policies or practices of the elites from the apartheid era who still hold significant power in society. Those attacked—whites, but also many people previously classified “Coloured” or “Asian”—see the use of “the race card” as a ploy, a devious manoeuvre designed to escape accountability and critique for questionable actions. Also, with the demise of the apartheid state, the last society on earth to legislate and justify its policies on the basis of race, many feel either that race discourse ipso facto has been overcome, or that it is socially inappropriate, undignified, politically cheap, unfitting to the demands of reconciliation.

The beneficiaries of apartheid are nevertheless fond of speaking of “reverse racism,” by which they mean the new application of standards, measures and regulations prejudiced in favour of the victims of apartheid, particularly legislation around “affirmative action” (or “corrective action,” perhaps a better description). Discrimination through policies introduced by the new dominantly black post-apartheid leadership to rectify the huge legacy in disparities and heavily unequal position of black South Africans, is not infrequently therefore also defined as racist by those discriminated against: “They are doing to us what we did to them,” one often hears; “we were wrong, and so are they.” The inclusionary/exclusionary implications of we/they language betrays a lingering inability on the part of many beneficiaries of apartheid to identify with a black led nation.

The assumption that racism, for all practical purposes, has been overcome in the second half of the twentieth century may be found elsewhere, especially in the USA and parts of Europe. The guilt and horror, the deep sensitivities about racism engendered by the Holocaust and the decolonization and civil rights movements after the Second World War, have more recently given way

to a belief among many beneficiaries of past racist policies and practices that enough has been done, that it is time for the alleged victims of racism to “get over it” and “pull themselves up.” When this does not happen, it may fuel racism again, allegedly demonstrating that “blacks aren’t up to it.” Though tonally far more sophisticated, the same message seems to lie behind the responses of many rich beneficiary countries of the slave trade and racist activities generally, to the recent UN conference on Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance held in Durban, South Africa in 2001. The ironies are rich.

The language of race and racism is thus highly contested, and this has led many leaders and intellectuals in South Africa to call for its removal from our discourses about the future. Many others, however, call for it to be reinstated, precisely because the goal of reconciliation, or at least of a stable society, continues to be thwarted by policies and practices that make it difficult for “previously disadvantaged people” to gain their rightful place in society. Racism as it was under apartheid, in their view, is not dead, nor should we expect that it would be. This begs the question: What then are we to mean by racism? Further, how does this enter into the ways in which, despite legislation to the contrary, racist perspectives still shape key sectors and practices in society?

I will answer the latter question by dealing with the former, and I will suggest that our ways of seeing the world, the knowledge we think we have of it, are as prone to do violence to the other as any other dimension of our common existence; in short, that there is an epistemic violence at work, feeding on preconceived notions of our “self,” that reduce the image of the other on the basis of their difference, in this case, of pigmentation and culture, with practical implications. I will further argue that “whites” are more prone to this epistemic violence than black South Africans, for reasons that are seldom self-conscious. This is a controversial move that will need to be justified. Such justification goes by way of the notion of and belief in a superior culture or civilization that gives rights to those who belong to it over those who do not.

Racism: Naturalized Prejudice and Structural Discrimination

To clear the way, it is important to acknowledge, first, that prejudice or discrimination, both implying some judgement that we make about something or someone, is not in itself either inappropriate or unjust. Thus racist discourse is not necessarily the same as prejudicial discourse (such as “xenological” discourse,¹ by which the stranger is distinguished from oneself). Prejudgements are part of mental functioning. Prejudices are embedded prejudgements arising from enduring experiences that shape our way of seeing a person, and they are normal. Such prejudices often lead to discrimination, on ethnic, religious, cultural, aesthetic, philosophical or other grounds. Racism and its analogues (such as sexism), goes one step further: It naturalizes these prejudices, takes them as fixed and given, and thus removes them from new learnings and experiences, from revised judgements, from self-critical questioning.

When naturalized prejudices are *structurally* embedded in cultural and social matrices that act as “taken for granted” background knowledge, then an essentialism emerges which in principle regards and treats the other as lesser, irrespective of the actual qualities or character of the other. When such an essentialism finds leverage through the exercise of power in dominating the other,

¹ Patrick Wolfe, “Race and Racialisation: Some Thoughts,” *Postcolonial Studies* 5, no. 1 (2002).

then an institutional form of racism emerges that seems normal and normative, even sometimes to its victims. Part of this institutionalization process includes the construction of forms of knowledge about oneself and about the other that support domination and subjugation, that legitimate the position of supremacy of the one group and the subaltern status of the other. On this basis, violence against the other may be systematically justified and defended.

A familiar example is the history of eugenics, most notoriously the basis of supposedly scientific experimentation and measurement in Hitler's Germany. Besides already abundant evidence debunking such theories of physically rooted racial differences, the new human genome research should put paid to such ideas forever.² Biological determinants of "race" have no foundation. Within religious thought, some attempts have been made to provide an alternative grounding for race theory, including within my own country where ideas about Ham, the differentiation of languages at Babel, and the like, were used for this purpose. None have withstood critical exegesis, however, and most of these ideas, though they might still find popular purchase, are an embarrassment even for many people who previously propagated them. That theories of nature or God cannot sustain any supposedly objective criteria for race, suggests that our epistemologies concerning "race" are culturally constructed.

In sum, a statement, belief or attitude about difference alone does not make racism. The component of power is crucial, in particular the capacity to exercise disadvantageous power over the other on the basis of difference. This echoes, among others, the position of George Fredrickson, whose wide-ranging studies suggest that racism is not the same as "group prejudice based on culture, religion or simply a sense of family or kinship." Rather, racism "either directly sustains or proposes to establish a *racial order*, a permanent group hierarchy that is believed to reflect the laws of nature or the decrees of God."³ Hence even xenophobia is not racism, though it may be used to uphold it when fear of the stranger in one's midst is institutionalized in social structures and legitimated through claims that have the status of knowledge, that is, of established or self-evident truth.

The Epistemic Dimension of Racism

The issue of established, self-evident, or naturalized truth is crucial to the overall argument. This suggests a third criteria for racism (besides "difference" and "power"), namely, a worldview or intellectual paradigm that holds the Other to be humanly deficient by nature, innately, and hence, irrevocably. If the other is subhuman in some definitive way, then it becomes much easier to treat the other as undeserving of what oneself has. Domination seems both natural and necessary, strict separation from the other essential; even genocide becomes feasible when this other is seen as a permanent threat of some kind (e.g. to the "purity" of one's own "race" in Nazi Germany). This would be full blown racism. It is important to keep in mind that there are lesser, "softer" forms of racism where assimilation rather than separation is possible, but whose practical effects

² The Human Genome Project has shown DNA differences between various groups in Africa to be greater than any general differences between ethnic or "race" groups, suggesting that all human beings derive from one or another of these primal African genetic pools. Thus a "white" Englishman might be closer genetically to a particular "black" African than that person is to another African, and more distant genetically from a particular white Englishwoman than from his African counterpart. In any case, even these differences are minute in comparison to differences with other species of any kind.

³ George M. Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 5, 6, emphasis in the original.

may be no less devastating (e.g. the genocidal impact of American settler policies and practices on Native Americans).

In all cases, the common denominator is a hierarchical view of human beings along ethnic or “racial” lines founded on “the presence and articulation of a belief that the defining traits [of the other] are innate or unchangeable.”⁴ These need not be physical or natural traits. In the development of new forms of the “scavenger ideology” (Frederickson) of racism, culture may form the basis of such beliefs rather than science. Apartheid ideology and its notion of “separate development” is the classic example, while the discipline of anthropology, itself in important ways a product of racial theories, has contributed to various constructions of superiority and inferiority in its history.⁵

European or “Western” culture has had a peculiar tendency to develop such theories and to put them into action, so Frederickson concludes from his extensive comparative studies across time and in different societies. He traces this tendency to trajectories of mercantile and capitalist expansion from the late medieval through the modern period, parallel to European colonialism and slave trading. Its roots too in anti-Jewish ideas that strengthened in the wake of the Spanish Inquisition. Initially ancestry (bloodlines) or religious belonging framed most discourses about the Other, rather than pigmentation, physical or mental attributes; but as time went on, the latter grew in significance in Europe. What enhanced this tendency toward racism and provided the fertile background for its twentieth century apotheosis, Frederickson argues, was the rise of the European Enlightenment tradition—a deeply paradoxical situation, given that the Enlightenment took human emancipation through Reason to be its key theme. What explains the paradox?

Frederickson’s answer is provocative: the “full flowering” of racism occurred in the West or European circles because of the “dialectical interaction between a premise of equality and an intense prejudice toward certain groups.”⁶ His point is simple but profound: The only way to justify—to oneself and to others—practices of domination and entitlement such as those that accompanied the slave trade, colonial ventures and settler conquests in the face of a simultaneous proclamation of human equality, fraternity and liberty, is to assert a fundamental difference between oneself and those that one dominates. The social, human and natural sciences that arose with the Enlightenment seemed to provide such justification through various race theories, all of which presumed the superiority or ascendancy of the “white race” over others.

The notion of a “white race” had to be constructed first, and it crystallized fully only in the eighteenth century. Linnaeus, Johan Friedrich Blumenbach, comte du Buffon, Thomas Jefferson, Voltaire, Saint-Simon, Herder, Fichte, Hegel and several others contributed to the necessary paradigm. The Enlightenment view on Reason was that it offers clear and definitive judgements. If the use of reason, particularly through Cartesian method, the basis of modern experimental science, produced results that showed the “white race” to be in some essential way superior, then the disadvantageous treatment of the inferior other could be legitimated. One finds in many of the key thinkers of the period arguments about the supposed inferiority or inalienable strangeness

⁴ Ibid., 140.

⁵ See Faye V. Harrison, “The Persistent Power of “Race” in the Cultural and Political Economy of Racism,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995).

⁶ Frederickson, *Racism*, 12.

of the brain capacity, reasoning capacity or civilizational capital of “non-whites,” to which is often linked a supposed excess of emotion or animal drive. The black Other in some degree is thus subhuman; if the primary differential is cultural, then the other could be seen as a minor, an undeveloped junior to the superior group; if natural, then the other could be seen as a different species. In each case, a complex set of ideas and evidence is woven into a particular structure of knowledge having the status of supposedly objective reason. Various racist policies then become possible, including an enduring paternalism on the one hand, or elimination on the other. Knowledge and power join prejudice in effecting epistemic violence.

The implication, if the reasoning capacities of the other are seen as deficient, is that their understanding of the world, their knowledge, their culture is deficient or undeveloped. Ironically, reason itself, watchword of the Enlightenment, turns into the basis for an ideology of superiority. This ideology is sustained by the supposed superiority of ostensibly European (including North American) inventions in science, technology, transport, music, education (the rise of the idea of the university, for example), and governance,⁷ and by the evident practical success of such inventions in many cases (leaving aside the potent ambiguities, the dark side, of much that we associate with “modernity”).⁸ Biological racism grounded its sense of superiority in the natural scientific attempt to delineate difference. Cultural racism grounded its sense of superiority in notions of civilization versus savagery or barbarism. The latter sees whites as culturally dominant by right, other cultures as hierarchically cascaded below “white” culture which is seen as the foundation of the global culture.

David Krell further points out that notions of culture or intelligence cannot be divorced from aesthetics—specifically, European sensibilities about African bodies. Thus Hegel, for example, in an extended discussion on Africa in his *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences*, accepts that Africans have some humanity and some intellect, yet nevertheless believes that:

... they show no inner drive [inneren Trieb] to civilization. The most horrid despotism dominates their homeland; they do not come to feel the personality of the human being—for their spirit is quite asleep, remains submerged in itself, makes no progress, and thus corresponds to the compact, undifferentiated mass of the African land. (EPS, 10:59–60)⁹

Hegel is thus even able to suggest that European slavery of Africans, because it took them out of their environment, offered them an improved condition over that in the geographic homelands. Africa itself breeds lesser humanity. Europeans, by implication, could be degraded by contact with African bodies or Africa as such.

This odd geographical argument, echoes of which still resound, continues the theme of superiority and inferiority along other lines. It illustrates but one example of thousands in the literature and philosophy of the Enlightenment and its host cultures of a way of seeing Africans in particular and blacks in general, that we may rightfully call paradigmatic. It points to a set of theories

⁷ The adverbs “supposed” and “ostensibly” point to the growing scholarship which brings many claims about European invention into question, suggesting instead that there has been a wide sharing of knowledge across the globe that is deeper and longer than has often been assumed in earlier writings.

⁸ Racism itself and its concrete effects, in this analysis, being part of this dark side. The ambiguities of the modernist project, in all its dimensions, are of course much more present to us today than ever before, and constitute a field of academic discourse in itself that is characteristic of the early twenty-first century.

⁹ Quoted in David Farrell Krell, “The Bodies of Black Folk: From Kant and Hegel to Du Bois and Baldwin,” *Boundary 2* 27, no. 3 (2000): 125.

and concepts that are taken to be normative, by which all exceptions can be explained. It forms, to use Foucault's language, a dominant *episteme*, a hegemonic structure of knowledge linked to power that appears self-evidentiary to its bearers. even as its archeology shows it to be clearly socially and historically constructed in a context of domination and subjugation. It finds its contemporary parallel in what many call "Afro-pessimism," a unrelenting and often powerful tendency to assume, as taken for granted, that everything African is marked by failure, lack, diminution—an inherent, hence naturalized, condition associated with Africa and blackness more generally. Any counter-indications, any contrary evidence, is then taken to represent the exception that proves the rule. Simultaneously, one's own structure of knowledge and judgements of experience are viewed as both normative and superior, making racism a signifier of unconscious self-identification. It seems thereby to disappear.

Overcoming Racism

This is a potent ideology, and as paradigmatic (Thomas Kuhn), it takes a revolution in thought to overthrow it. As long as one stays within the paradigm, practical experience merely offers further evidence of what one apparently already "knows," and exceptions are just that. The mental, psychological, indeed spiritual (in the Platonic sense of *nous* linked to *psyche*) foundations of such a paradigm shape an entire epistemological structure. It is a structure that does violence to the other, that refuses *a priori* a genuine encounter with the other who is radically different, that thereby naturalizes not only one's view of the other, but also of oneself. In this sense, it is a deficiency of the self as well.

The idea of racism as a paradigmatic epistemic structure fits well with Frederickson's sense of it as a "scavenger ideology," for it explains the dynamic which Faye Harrison notes, namely, that "While having continuities with its past, race assumes new forms and is reconstructed and manipulated within a range of contemporary contexts."¹⁰ The earlier challenge of Black Consciousness in South Africa, embodied in the movement that did so much to question and confront white power and knowledge in the late nineteen sixties and seventies, has thus not lost its pertinence. Now, as then, it is not the overt, conscious racist who compounds the problem of racism, but the "liberal" ("free") person who believes "colour" and "race" to be irrelevant, and themselves to be untainted by racism, even as the very terms in which this is stated reveals a deep-seated epistemology of cultural or civilizational superiority.

Because racism arises in relation to a paradigmatic order of knowledge that tends to be unaware of its limits, it may only be undone by deconstructing and reconstructing the paradigm itself. It is likely that this can only be done effectively when at least two conditions are met: public and social institutions—including the state, its bureaucracies, and various levels of governance—would have to promote policies and practices which consciously probe this paradigm and criticize it; citizens and their organizations or associations would have to confront the effects of the epistemic paradigm in their own contexts; and individual persons would have to confront their implication in assuming and reproducing it in themselves. In short, public regulation, civil transformation and personal conversion are the necessary and simultaneous conditions of eradicating racism.

¹⁰ Harrison, *Persistent power of "race"*, 49

Herein lie many individual, communal and social challenges, precisely because it is in the nature of an entrenched, enduring paradigm to resist its dissolution until it becomes clear that the paradigm itself is dysfunctional. Such clarity may only arise when dissonances and conflicts reach a point at which their resolution becomes more important than holding on to a fixed position, or when one's experiences and encounters of the other go beyond the boundaries one takes for granted.

I have tried to suggest along the way that the real issue for those who have been beneficiaries of the political economy of racism lies in the way in which an entrenched world-view concerning blacks or Africans acts subliminally, subconsciously, even unconsciously, so that any discussion of racism or criticism of one's own behaviour, thinking and actions as racist is immediately rejected or assumed to be unnecessary. Changing governments is much easier than changing epistemic constructs. Yet this is precisely what is required in the face of accusations of racism by those so accused, however much they may suspect such accusations to be wrong or deviously motivated (even accepting that there are those who do manipulate blame for dubious ends). We need a "cultural critique of whiteness as the key site of racial domination," recognizing that this is a hidden site defined unconsciously if not consciously as "white public space." This is to grasp that "whiteness is a structural location that confers exclusive privilege, a standpoint from which to view and assess Self and Other, and a set of cultural practices that is usually unmarked, unnamed and normatively given. This relative invisibility both enhances and is an effect of its dominance."¹¹ Here we find the hidden transcripts of whiteness.¹²

As Harrison points out, "The racism of the postmodern era is not understood to be a uniform configuration of power and experience, nor is it necessarily expressed in overt language and consistent practices. As Gregory puts it, "racial meanings are implicated in discourses, institutional power arrangements, and social practices that may or may not be explicitly marked as 'racial' (109:25)."¹³ Or Harrison once more: Epistemic violence exists, and it consists in systematically, regularly and repeatedly denying the alterity and subjectivity of the other in ways that perpetuate the subjugation of their knowledge and that reiterate discourses of domination.

South Africa is no longer a racist regime in any sense.¹⁴ But this is to describe a regime, rather than an epistemic structure. A change in regime does not imply a change in epistemic structures, even if it opens the way for the latter. The assumptions I make are that racist structures change quickly at some levels but slowly at others; and that the effects of a racist epistemic structure, once entrenched, endure in the living adult generations who have imbibed it. Changes are likely to occur more quickly among the rising young generation who do not live under a racist regime or order, to the extent that inherited paradigms of knowledge are subject to question and critique in open encounter with the Other.

¹¹ Ibid., 63.

¹² The concept of "hidden transcripts" comes from James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

¹³ Harrison, *Persistent power of "race"*, 58

¹⁴ Fredrickson, *Racism*, 100-1 distinguishes five features of an "overtly racist regime," namely: (1) differences are permanent and unbridgeable; (2) its ideal is "race purity"; (3) segregation is mandated by law; (4) outgroup members are excluded from the polis; (5) access by the outgroup to resources and economic opportunities is severely limited. None of these apply to post-apartheid South Africa.

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