

correspondents at large

## Racisms without Racism

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INITIATED IN THINK TANKS FOLLOWING WORLD WAR II, NEOLIBERALISM TOOK HOLD OF POLITICAL IMAGINARIES IN THE LATE 1970S AND THE 1980S

as capitalist enterprises vigorously sought to expand their market reach in the face of structural challenges and adjustments, economic and political. Technologies of travel, communication, and information flows became speedier and more sophisticated, further shrinking distances and compressing time. Associated regimes of population management and rule accordingly were pressed into forging novel strategies.

Neoliberal commitments became increasingly institutionalized as the rules of Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, and Helmut Kohl sought to restructure their respective states. From the 1930s through the 1970s, the liberal democratic state had offered a more or less robust set of institutional apparatuses concerned in principle at least to advance the welfare of its citizens. This was the period of an emergent caretaker state, what Zygmunt Bauman has called the pastoral state, marked by expansions of social security, welfare programs, various forms of national health care, and public education, including higher education, in some states to the exclusion of private and religiously sponsored educational institutions. Notwithstanding the contradictions at the heart of the liberal caretaking state, it was committed at basis to an underlying safety net applicable to those considered full citizens. These citizens were widely presumed to be white, especially in the liberal democracies of the global North.

In the wake of the civil rights and anticolonial movements, when the caretaker state absorbed increasing numbers of residents whose ancestral families emanated from the global South, state bureaucracies grew into major employers of historically excluded groups. A growing proportion of the racially identified populace became increasingly optimistic regarding access to middle-class amenities. But much as inner cities in the United States were abandoned by white flight from the 1960s onward, so the caretaker state came under mounting attack as it widened its pastoral reach across diverse populations. The state came to be viewed among a commanding sector

of the electorate, if not as black, certainly as tending to promote and service the interests of racially minoritized citizens.

These concerns cohered under neoliberal influence, causing state commitment and function to shift. The neoliberal state has molded itself over the past three decades to maintain its competitive edge internally and among other kinds of states and to secure itself from perceived threats from without, almost always racially shaped. The state has shifted from its caretaking commitments to ordering and securing the flows of capital (human and financial), goods, services, and increasingly information, ensuring that disruptions would be minimized. The neoliberal state accordingly has troubled itself with securing private interests from the projected contamination and threat of those deemed for various reasons not to belong, those considered to have little or no social standing, and those whose welfare is calculated to cost too much economically or politically. Call this, by contrast, the traffic-cop state.

In short, 9/11 hastened and heightened the shift already well under way from the caretaker or pastoral state of mid-twentieth-century welfare liberalism to the traffic-cop state of the millennial turn. As Jean Comaroff has succinctly stated, neoliberalism is not so much a break with capitalist state formation as “an intensification of some of its core features.”

Race, a core feature of state modernization, now operates on a register less obvious than before, if still crucial. As a technology of determination and population management, race is now mobilized in different ways when applied inside and outside the contemporary state.

In their extraterritorial dispositions—as technologies of geostrategic positioning external to state boundaries—racial implication and significance are mobilized, if often only implicitly, as a mode of securitization, control, expansion, and competition. Within the state, by contrast, race has hardly disappeared. Rather, it has been confined to expressions of private preferences. The more robustly neoliber-

eral the state, accordingly, the more likely race is immune from state intervention so long as race has no government force behind it.

Neoliberalism, then, does not reduce altogether the sphere of government regulation and intervention. It dramatically alters the relation of state to private sphere. It protects the private sphere from state incursion. In doing so, it also ensures a space for extending socioracial interventions—demographic exclusions, belittlements, forms of control, ongoing humiliations, and the like—difficult or impossible any longer for the state to carry out baldly in its own name. Given the regime of equality before the law or of government-protected rights, the state can no longer be seen to engage in or to license racially discriminatory acts with respect to its own citizens or legitimate residents. To do so would call into question the grounds of its legitimacy as the defender of both freedom and equality. Instead, state reach is curtailed, so that expressing and acting on private racial preferences are mostly beyond state delimitation.

In diluting, if not erasing, race explicitly in all public affairs of the state, neoliberal proponents seek to privatize racisms alongside almost everything else aside from security-state apparatuses. They seek to protect the determination and expression of preferences behind a wall of privacy, untouchable by the state, the outcome of which is to privatize race-based exclusions. Categories of race disappear as much from keeping account of discrimination as ostensibly from producing discrimination itself, thus leaving untouchable the condition that the accounting is supposed to identify, articulate, and assess. Devoid of race in the public sphere, racism—as modes of racially driven subjection and exclusion, debilitation and humiliation, preference satisfaction and privilege expansion—is freed up to circulate as vigorously as individuals or nongovernment (or non-government-funded) institutions choose in private.

As race disappears from the socioconceptual landscape, then, racisms (in their

plurality) are pushed further and further out of sight, out of existence, unmentionable because the terms by which to recognize and reference them fade from view and memory.

As the analytic and critical terms of articulation are dimmed, deleted, distorted, and redirected, the conditions once referenced by “racism” have not disappeared but have assumed new form and taken on new significance in novel social conditions. The new modes of debilitation and degradation, humiliation and dehumanization, often directed at renewed clusterings of what once were identified in explicitly ethnoracial terms, require a new analytic vocabulary and referential articulation. They are not just raceless racisms, as numerous commentators recently have called them. Nor are they simply racism without racists, the refusal to acknowledge individual or even institutional racist expression (Bonilla-Silva). They are *racisms without racism*.

Racism without race (“raceless racism”) encompasses exclusionary or debilitating racist expressions where the targeted group is not identified through the use of explicit racial language. Racial reference becomes implicit. The exclusion piggybacks on the history of targeting the group in question. An employer in an all-white neighborhood can achieve the equivalent of spelling out that “no blacks need apply” by listing as a criterion of employment that applicants must live close to the workplace. Consider a world in which only the children of middle- and upper-class citizens presumptively go to college, white family wealth outstrips tenfold that of black families, and college admission criteria skew silently toward cultural habits most identified with white middle-class life. In that world of presumptive whiteness, racial categories no longer need to be explicitly referenced or invoked for whites to continue to benefit from the social structures privileging them. Justice John Marshall Harlan saw this clearly more than a century ago when in his dissent to the majority ruling of *Plessy v. Ferguson* he declared that

white Americans, having so much historical advantage over blacks, should have nothing to fear from going racially color-blind (559).

In the case of “racism without racists,” racism persists, as Albert Memmi once put it, no matter that almost no one acknowledges being a racist (3). The language of racial reference becomes coded, embedded. Racially indexed structural inequality persists while the racially privileged do nothing to delimit or reverse it. Exonerating explanations and rationalizing legitimations are crafted to mask the racial grounds of the injustices, making them seem more natural and inescapable than they are. “Racism without racists,” in short, is a form of bad faith. It turns racial social arrangements either into givens of nature, hence inherently unalterable (“it’s natural to chose to live among one’s own”), or into deep-seated cultural dispositions unlikely to change (“they’d rather party and complain than work hard”).

Racisms without racism, by contrast, concern the extension and exacerbation of the condition without the category and of the mode without the (same) meaning. It is not that traditional racisms have disappeared—quite the contrary. Racisms continue to exist, to proliferate. They are plural, in kind as much as in quantity. Populations defined in classically racial terms—as black, or brown—continue to be excluded, degraded, and humiliated. The modes, forms, sociologies, and even rationales of these racisms often mimic classic precedents. But the racisms’ identifying accounts or defining contours lack the former sharpness, torn as they are from the classic conditions of racist articulation. For one, those engaging in racisms without racism neither use traditional explicit racial language nor, for various reasons, comprehend that their practices and expressions are racially toxic.

As the concept ceases to have social purchase, the condition becomes unreferenced, unrecognizable; and, in turn, as the condition recedes from grasp, the category expressive of the experience—*racism!*—becomes

increasingly transparent. See-through, see-past, unseen. Literally meaningless and, so considered, no longer applicable to our times. This evaporation nevertheless leaves the social landscape steeped in the toxins of conditions no longer recognizable, unaddressed, impossible to redress.

These anthracic racisms, then, without the ostensive reference of race, free cruelty from constraint. They underpin torture denied (“we don’t torture” even as “we” waterboard) and collateral damage apologized for (“sorry, we didn’t mean it; they got caught in the firing zone”). Dehumanization—reduced standing in the geopolitical moral hierarchy—is waved aside by virtue of *realpolitik*’s plausible deniability. The geopolitical reality principle embeds what in effect is racial characterization while at once evaporating any and all explicit or even conscious racial reference. The targeted population, as a consequence, is opened to invasive treatment just as its members are rendered impervious to considerations of justice. They receive almost no consideration other than as inputs in instrumental calculations by the powerful assessing only their own security interests. So as racisms have become more difficult to trace, old targets have taken on new significance, and new targets and their rationalization have condensed.

The concept of *racisms without racism*, then, is the peculiar expression of neoliberalizing globalization. It is the way of governing distinction, in the global scheme of enduring freedom, considered too different and difficult to deal with. It is the (re)institutionalizing of racism gone private, the privatizing of institutionalized racisms. Racisms cut off from their historical fertilizer. Racisms born again, renewed, but shorn of referential language. The inherited critical vocabulary for identifying, articulating, and condemning them no longer fits. This vocabulary comprises political expressions unrecognized as free because they are driven by forces outside themselves, illegible to those external to their

circles of persuasion. At worst, they are projected as beastly violence against the inevitable advance of freedom and democracy.

The consequent counterviolence of containment cannot possibly be racist not just because no races exist but also because the threatening expressions it seeks to contain are unrecognized as properly human. The projected action as metonym for the person, for the (national) character, is beastly, monstrous, mutant, after all. *They* behead; doing so is a condition of their culture. The action is outside legitimate human conduct. Hence, *we* can’t be racist just as *we* don’t torture. Even though a bad apple or two may. The individualization of wrongdoing, its localization as a personal and so private expression of preferences, erases institutional racisms as a conceptual possibility. As strictly and reductively moral matters, racist acts and institutional patterns or effects are unlikely to be prosecuted under the law; they are regarded as personally offensive, morals offenses, more like consuming pornography than causing injury. Even “hate crimes,” as crimes exacerbated by hate, are recognized as crimes first, crimes accentuated by a condition that makes the matter worse, the potential sentence longer. The personalization of hate, its psychologizing of an irreducibly social condition, is an add-on, a legislative afterthought, institutionalizing a matter that by premise ought not to be but just won’t go away. These are the awkwardnesses, the inconsistencies, produced when racist expression is restricted to the private sphere, when racisms proliferate in the reductive impossibility of being recognized as precisely racist.

Racisms without racism offer (up) a porous social prophylaxis, condomizing neoliberalizing society as much against itself as against its constitutive outsides. The society resorts to two interactive modes of prophylactic population management. As fuel to financialized interaction, privatized preferences, and the incessant expansion of capital and informational flows and individual consumption,

it orchestrates mixtures of people across demographic divides. These mixtures, nevertheless, are constrained by cultural and criterial horizons identified with structures of racial whiteness. Where mixture fails to contain, constrain, and conduct flows—where rogue elements (threaten to) disrupt commerce—the violent force of security-state apparatuses is invoked to prevent interruption of the circulations conducive to wealth production for the fortunate few.

Racial neoliberalism, in the final analysis, extends by building silently on the structural conditions of racism while evaporating the very categories of their recognizability. It is, as I have undertaken to reveal, nothing short of racisms without racism.

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## NOTE

This essay is drawn loosely from the concluding chapter, “Enduring Occupations,” of my *The Threat of Race*, forthcoming from Wiley-Blackwell.

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