

DEBATE

BEYOND POLEMIC: REFLECTING ON REFLEXIVE RACISM

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Painter's "polemic" revives a long running debate about the politics of discursive psychology. The charge that discursive psychology has an implicit, under-developed, or insufficiently radical political agenda is not new. Several commentators have highlighted, for example, the inherent limits of a political project focused so exclusively on linguistic analysis. Others have suggested that its relativist epistemology blunts discursive psychology's capacity to challenge political structures such as racism.

Painter's article (pp71-84, in this issue) extends this debate in two ways. First, and rather interesting, he targets a subset of discursive writings that are generally viewed as more politically astute, criticising for example, the writings of Wetherell and Potter (1992) and Billig (1995). Second, pacé the usual argument that discursive psychologists veer towards political relativism, he suggests that they are in fact guilty of "reflexive racism". That is, their diagnosis of others' racism is itself a form of racism. The latter accusation is hedged with some due acknowledgement of their contributions to social psychology. Academic proprieties aside, however, Painter's main aim in this article is one of provocation. Writing as a polemicist, he wants first and foremost to spur a reaction, and he seems content to leave the conceptual, empirical or indeed political elaboration of his own position for another day.

In this response, we suggest that Painter article may be successful in its own terms; but we question those terms. We accept that the concept of reflexive racism has the potential to work as a tool of provocation and that in this role it may have utility. (Certainly, his paper moved us sufficiently to produce this response.) As it currently stands, however, the notion of reflexive racism is far too vague, too generic and too tendentious to take us beyond the moment of provocation and towards a better

understanding of what does or does not count as racism, either in academic discourse or in everyday contexts in South Africa.

THE CONCEPT OF REFLEXIVE RACISM.

In contrast to the “direct, traditional and hierarchical form of racism we all know” (p73), Painter argues that reflexive racism operates “... through theories that identify racism in the other’s desire to maintain (cultural) boundaries and so undermine the sanction of various universals: national identity, human rights, economic development.”(p73) On the surface, this form of racial discourse seems to serve a progressive political agenda. Painter insists, however, that it produces an insidious “second order” variety of racism, which is directed at recalcitrant Others who refuse to be assimilated into a society defended from the “non-position of liberal universalism” (p74). The ideological violence (and genius) of reflexive racism, then, lies: (1) in its ability to portray an historically specific and exploitative set of “neoliberal” values as universal; (2) to brand those who cannot or will not conform to this set of values as racist; and (3) to accomplish steps 1 and 2 whilst claiming to advance the cause of anti-racism.

Reflexive racism has a wide-ranging application, which is sketched in the ambitious opening section of Painter’s article. Drawing on the work of Balibar and Zizek, he suggests that reflexive racism is bound up with the emergence of the nation state, roughly around 1789, and continues unabated to characterise the postmodern period of today. By means of “underhanded rhetorical gestures” – i.e. accusing others of racism while imposing universalism – reflexive racism has in effect furthered the interests of the liberal nation-state, and more recently has been pitted against those “threatening to obstruct the free-flow of Capital” (p76). In the second and briefer section of the paper, Painter argues that this form of racism has also permeated the writings and research practices of discursive psychologists. Here he is not making *ad hominem* attributions about the motives of individual scholars. Rather, he is suggesting that discursive psychologists have unwittingly disregarded the ideological complicity of their diagnoses of others’ racism. Accordingly, he invites them to banish from their work “the persistent undoing of politics, the lure of empty universals, and especially the reliance on various incarnations of liberal conceptions of subjectivity and the social.” (p83).

One of the difficulties we had in evaluating this argument is that neither the concept of reflexive racism nor its relationship with particular strands of discursive research on racism is clearly explained in Painter’s article. As depicted in the early sections of the paper, reflexive racism has an extraordinarily broad range of referents. The term seems to designate any attempt to diagnose racism that appeals, either overtly or tacitly, to the so-called “compromised universals of liberal and neoliberal political imaginaries” (p76). The latter include (and we are not being exhaustive here): “liberal conceptions of the state and citizenship” (p73), “economic development” (p73), “human rights”, the “life style choices promised by a global market” (p73), the “global free flow of capital” (p73), “democratic values” (p74), “integration and acculturation” (p75) and capitalist forms of “multiculturalism” (p75). In addition, reflexive racism is intimately wed to a host of related political phenomena, such as national unification, globalisation, capitalism, and postmodernism. Thus, it may be accomplished via appeals that are not explicitly racialised but presumably, at some level, carry racist implications.

The sheer range of this list of referents, allied to the vagueness of their definition within Painter's article, turns the concept of "reflexive racism" into a catch-all term that could be applied to almost *any* attempt diagnose racism or to formulate antiracist practice. In our view, this feature blunts its usefulness as analytic and political resource.

On an analytic level, the concept encourages an ill-advised conflation of distinct cases under the general category "racism of the other". Pallo Jordan's writings on language policy in the new South Africa can be treated as strangely equivalent, say, to George Bush's denuncements of Islamic Fundamentalism, which in turn find echoes within discursive psychological research on racism and nationalism. All are guilty of "racism of the other", for all unwittingly reproduce the "neo-liberal imaginary". Yet the methodology for making this kind of classification is not systematically explained in Painter's article. In practice, the charge of reflexive racism seems to be based mainly on the *assertion* that there are potential lines of collusion between disparate types of claims about others' racism and a reified ideological complex (the neo-liberal political imaginary). This may be the case, but how are we to judge when this occurs? How are we meant to distinguish genuine antiracism from the kind of antiracism Painter wants to criticise (which is, by definition, not anti-racism at all, but a form of racism)? We are not at all sure that Painter's article allows us to answer these questions.

This problem leads us to hold serious reservations about its political implications. Although there may be a certain caché in claiming that antiracism is simply another form of racism, this charge cannot be made lightly and in the absence of a detailed, painstaking argument about why this is the case within a given set of circumstances. Accomplished by means of passing examples and for the sake of "polemic", the charge of reflexive racism carries a number of risks. If the wrong examples are selected, for example, one may undermine the credibility of antiracist knowledge and practice. This brings us to the heart of Painter's argument, which concerns the supposed failings of discursive psychological research on racism.

DISCURSIVE PSYCHOLOGY AS EXEMPLIFYING REFLEXIVE RACISM.

From the foregoing discussion, the reader will anticipate that we do not agree with his assessment of this area of research, either in general or in respect of our own work on desegregation in South Africa. This does not imply that we view the so-called "discursive turn" in psychology – and related work in the tradition of discourse analysis (e.g. Duncan, 2003) – as a panacea for complex political problems such as racism. In point of fact, as we elaborate elsewhere, we have our own reservations about its gaps and limitations (Durrheim & Dixon, in press). We do believe, however, that its focus on the performative effects of everyday language is a valuable elaboration of established psychological frameworks for thinking about racism (which Wetherell and Potter (1992) gloss as "the prejudice problematic").

Discursive psychologists treat racism, above all, as a practice that cannot be understood outside of a detailed analysis of how and with what effects the "reality" of "race" is constructed within a given context. Thus, they study racism in terms of a detailed consideration of *situated practices* and *effects*. In his attempts to fit the work of Billig (1995), Wetherell and Potter (1992) and ourselves into the generic category of reflexive racism, we believe that Painter has trivialized this defining feature of discursive research.

To exemplify this point, we will revisit his discussion of an article that we wrote about the transformation of relations on South African beaches in the wake of the collapse of beach apartheid (Durrheim & Dixon, 2000). The article explored, among other themes, how “white” South African’s constructed the meaning of changing relations on a beach near Durban. We showed how ontological appeals to the “deep nature” of cultural relations served to explain and justify the re-emergence of local practices of segregation. By constructing segregation as an “anthropological universal”, we argued, our interviewees were able to question the feasibility of policies designed to end the legacy of beach apartheid. The discourse of “natural segregation” was racist *in this context* precisely because it warranted resistance to desegregation.

Painter uses this study as an example of reflexive racism in operation. He implies that second order racism is expressed via our unspoken assumption that cultural integration is a good thing. After all, in treating our interviewees’ discourse as “racist”, are we not reinforcing a “liberal construction of national unity” (p83), which acts as an implicit moral framework for our entire analysis? A hidden value system is at play here, he argues, that stops us from acknowledging, for example, how the condemnation of cultural others’ unwillingness to integrate may in itself service neo-liberal ideology.

Our response is that, to the contrary, this example illustrates the limitations of Painter’s use of the concept of “reflexive racism”, for his analysis disregards how the definition of racism necessarily involves analysis of situated contents and effects. The point of our article was not that cultural appeals in the abstract are inevitably racist. Nor did we claim that all versions of cultural integration are antiracist (of which the neo-liberal is presumably just one version, though this is not explained in Painter’s article). Rather, we wanted to show how ontological accounts of culture were being used *in context* to sanction the re-emergence of beach segregation.

But why do we treat such accounts as exemplifying racism (as opposed to, say, an expression of antiracist resistance to the ideology of neoliberalism)? The answer to this question, in our view, necessarily involves a consideration of the history and politics of beach apartheid, as well as the racialised organization of relations on the beach that featured in our study. To do this properly would take us well beyond the remit of this paper. Schematically, however, we would argue the following (cf. Durrheim & Dixon, in press):

- 1) Beach apartheid was a form of racial inequality designed not only to ensure that racial intimacy was prohibited, but also to ensure inequity in terms of access to valued resources. Whites have historically enjoyed the best beaches with the best recourses and have monopolised the majority these kinds of recreational spaces.
- 2) The beach on which our study was conducted is a case in point. Historically, it was classified as a “white beach” and served as an exclusive get away for holiday-makers from Durban and from the interior areas of Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal.

- 3) Its desegregation is now generally treated as a “problem” by “white” holiday makers but, unsurprising in light of its history, as an opportunity by “black” holiday makers (see Durrheim & Dixon, 2004).
- 4) As such, we have charted the reproduction of various forms of informal segregation, embodied within observable practices of “white flight” from contact with “black” beachgoers (Dixon & Durrheim, 2003).
- 5) We would go further and suggest that relations on this beach can be read as a metonym for a broader transformation of the racial organisation of coastal holidaying in South Africa.
- 6) A key aspect of this process is the geopolitical reordering of the white family vacation. Increasingly, white families are avoiding their “traditional” holiday venues (e.g. Durban), which have become desegregated, and are seeking the security of places “further up the coast”. These places tend to be defined, inter alia, in terms of who or what is *not* there (see Dixon & Durrheim, in press).

It is in the context of *this history* and *set of racialised practices* that we have diagnosed essentialist accounts of “natural segregation” on beaches as racist. They reconstitute forms of racial isolation that service an historically specific form of racial inequality. Far from being tempted by the so-called “lure of empty universals”, our analysis is stubbornly particular, being grounded in a detailed, sustained and evidential account of social change and conservation at a particular moment of South African history.

By contrast, we would argue that it is Painter’s use of the concept “reflexive racism” that is universalist. Extraordinarily generic in scope, it works at a level of conceptual abstraction that enables the indictment of virtually any claim about the racism of others’, whilst maintaining a thin veneer of historicity by making vague appeals to the rise and threat of neoliberalism. Ironically, given his denouncement of particularisms masquerading as universals, Painter’s own argument flattens, decontextualises and abstracts the concept and practice of racism. This lack of specificity makes it useless as a tool for the kind of anti-racist politics we have articulated in our publications.

BEYOND POLEMIC?

We suspect that many of the shortcomings we have identified in Painter’s argument reflect the genre of writing in which he is working. It is not incidental that the term *polemic* features in the paper’s title and elsewhere. This article is in essence a stylised attempt to provoke. Painter, one suspects, is keenly aware that labelling others’ work as racist is likely to incite a response. In fact, it is ideally suited to this task. In general, allegations of racism nowadays demand a response because, as Billig (1988) notes, most people want to belong to “moral community of the unprejudiced”. In this sense, Painter’s position is rhetorically effective.

We would also accept that polemics may play a useful role in a journal such as **PINS**. They help to unsettle orthodoxies, puncture complacencies, and ruffle feathers. Just as a good opposition keeps governments’ honest, the academic polemicist nurtures healthy scepticism for received conceptual frameworks and values. This serves a valuable function in all forms of psychological work, including work in the discursive tradition that Painter takes as his object. When asked about the politics of their work, it seems to us that some discursive psychologists confess too readily to an under-

developed political imagination or, as Painter suggests, justify a lack of political engagement in the name of methodology. In principle, then, we welcome the kind of article Painter has written.

Painter's article also demonstrates for us, however, the limits of polemical writing, namely that it rarely moves much beyond provocation. Too often polemics offer neither a fully-fledged critique, nor a clear alternative to the received way of thinking about or doing things. For this reason, we feel that Painter's article ultimately stands in lieu of, and thus defers, the more difficult project of elaborating and transcending the limits of the discursive psychology of racism, if that is his agenda (see also Painter & Theron, 2001). This task will require a more substantive engagement with particular traditions of discursive research; and a more constructive assessment of what might be put in their place. Allusive references discussed "in brief" and out of context will not suffice.

For our own part, we feel that this enterprise needs to be undertaken with due caution. Discursive psychology is undoubtedly an influential body of work and thus merits critical evaluation. At this juncture, however, do not see the political expediency of a mounting a sustained attack on that relatively small and marginalised body of work that has attempted to extend the psychology of racism beyond the study of prejudice. Nor do we think that South African psychologists should necessarily embrace the kinds of internecine squabbles that have led to the estrangement of British social psychology into a series of "camps", each equally convinced they are on the road to salvation. This has made for a lively intellectual climate. Yet it has also nurtured unhelpful forms of solipsism and disengagement. In a strange reversal, the defence of particular theoretical traditions has become more important than the forms of life they were designed to explore (or change) . . .

The latter point indicates another, perhaps more positive, direction in which concept of "reflexive racism" might be developed. This concerns its potential role in elucidating how South Africa's "transformation" is constructed, translated and resisted by ordinary people. The section of Painter's article concerning the everyday consequences of language policy seems to be particularly promising in this regard. We suspect, however, that the practical development of this kind of project will require both a clarification of the concept of reflexive racism and a more penetrating analysis of its historical and political implications in South Africa.

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