

DEBATE

THE POLITICS AND META-POLITICS OF REFLEXIVE RACISM

Desmond Painter
Department of Psychology
Rhodes University
Grahamstown 6140

There is an interesting and revealing moment in Dixon and Durrheim's response (pp85-91 in this issue) to my article. In the original I say that *we*, as discursive social psychologists, should banish a number of political universals "from *our* practices" (p83). In their summary and critique of my position, however, the "our" is swiftly dropped, to become "them" and "their". In their version it reads, "he invites *them* to banish from *their* work" (p86).

This is not surprising. Dixon and Durrheim council caution, fearing that the kind of critical questions I ask might undermine the academic and political credibility of discursive psychology. By distancing me somewhat from this approach, then, they can defuse the threat to some extent. Attributing my arguments to a mixture of provocation and theoretical misunderstanding, they safely cast aside some, if not the majority of the claims I make and questions I ask. Instead they provide me – as one would with someone who didn't *quite* understand – with another rehearsal of their research on informal segregation on a South African beach. This is not to deny that some of their criticisms of my article are well grounded and that I have constructed some arguments that might be underdeveloped or simply wrong.

I will not deal here with all the issues Dixon and Durrheim have raised. I will rather make a few further comments about the notion of reflexive racism as I have tried to use it in my article and as I imagine it could be used in other contexts as well. I will also (briefly) further elaborate my concerns regarding the absence of an active and progressive meta-political imagination in discursive psychology. This notion of "meta-political" is not one that I have used in my article, but it might be useful. It makes it possible to acknowledge that, if we put polemics aside, Dixon and Durrheim are quite right to insist on the empirical rigour and political integrity of their work. Their defense, however, is of something I didn't really wish to attack. I was interested in another level of political articulation, one that *has* to move beyond the particulars of an analysis: our articulation of the category of "the political" as such, of the frameworks that give meaning to our particular political actions and claims, or the political imaginaries from which and, importantly, *towards* which we work. I still believe that this meta-political component is underdeveloped in discursive psychology, my own work included, as indeed it is in the rest of the social sciences as well. If I am wrong in making these claims, or if they are

irrelevant, then hopefully these further comments will clarify that. If, on the other hand, I have a point or two, then hopefully these will also seem somewhat less ambiguous.

Let me start by distinguishing, once more, the rhetorical features of reflexive racism from “differential” forms of racism. To explain the latter very simply, racist talk often develops differential and exclusive notions of “us” – there is a “them” that “we” cannot and should not mix with. Whether with reference to biological or cultural universals, division and segregation between groups are presented as given and immutable. This logic was the mainstay of apartheid, and it is exactly the informal continuation of this kind of racism on a South African beach that Dixon and Durrheim have described with great success. The importance of their insights into the persistent desegregation of public space for the development a democratic culture is perhaps best captured by the political philosopher, Iris Marion Young (2000:196): “Space itself matters. Few theories of democracy, however, have thematized the normative implications of spatialized social relations”.

But “us” can also be used in different, and equally suspect ways. Here I am thinking of an “us” that seems genuinely inclusive, able to embrace differences and resolve racial, cultural, religious and linguistic conflicts. I am thinking of moral appeals to inclusiveness and belonging that renders any resistance to the “us” deeply problematic – in fact, that blames the existence of inequality and conflict onto the failure of Others, often but not always conceived as “minorities”, to integrate into the apparently neutral public culture. Various strands of modernist political ideology and social organisation have supported such constructions of “us” – liberal or civic nationalism is probably the most obvious example. Billig (1995), for example, has shown how postmodern theorists unwittingly reproduce a normative nationalism, even as they celebrate the fluidity of identity and accuse *others* of nationalism. (Billig, studying the often implicitly nationalist position from where “the nationalism of the other” is identified and critiqued provided me with a useful mould for understanding “the *racism* of the other”. Incidentally, Dixon and Durrheim try to ignore this explicitly acknowledged influence, *twice* claiming that I criticize the book in which Billig develops these ideas, **Banal Nationalism**. Their wish to locate my arguments outside discursive psychology must have gotten the better of their usually meticulous reading, because Billig is in fact criticized for a few sentences he wrote in another book altogether.)

I have further tried to show that a similar logic of “us” might well operate under emerging post-nationalist, global conditions as well. What is more, these all-inclusive political imaginaries, especially nationalism but also various forms of liberalism, still serve as the meta-political default settings of much social science. As Ulrich Beck (2003) argues, we have not even begun to disentangle the “methodological nationalism” of the social sciences – and he is mentioning only nationalism. This willingness to acknowledge the historical reliance of even critical social sciences on compromised political universals and various failed meta-political programmes is vitally important, I believe, and they give my charges of reflexive racism the relevance Dixon and Durrheim are unwilling to agree to.

But the notion of reflexive racism can of course be employed quite effectively in contextually grounded studies of situated talk and action that Dixon and Durrheim rightly see as discursive psychology’s main contribution to the social sciences. One possible

example comes from my own work (Painter & Baldwin, 2004). In this study white learners of an Eastern Cape secondary school spoke about language and multilingualism in their school and in South Africa. These learners were not exploiting the differential potential of having many languages in the school to argue for a sort of cultural or linguistic apartheid. Instead, they accentuated the universally shared, inclusive features of English (and, to a lesser extent, Afrikaans) to render African languages out of place in the public domain. Speaking or affirming the latter violates the inclusive “us”, the post-apartheid, reconciled South African rainbow nation. African languages introduce misunderstanding, suspicion and racism. Embroidering on a post-apartheid, liberal democratic “us” thus becomes a powerful tool with which to resist multilingualism and preserve a linguistic (and along with it racial and class) status quo. Similar studies could feasibly investigate how white people use inclusive notions of “us”, like nation building, reconciliation, the rainbow nation and human rights as ways to defuse and brand as racist, for example, comments by President Mbeki about poverty, the so-called two nations, and continued structural inequality. These should indicate, I hope, that the concept is, at least empirically, not as useless as Dixon and Durrheim suspect.

These more contextually specific, careful analyses were however not what I had in mind in my article. I was interested not in the political but *meta-political* articulation of our research findings. This is something that inevitably takes us *beyond* the particulars of the research context. Dixon and Durrheim’s main problem with my article is that it plays fast and loose with contexts, that it introduces too many of them. I would argue that it is exactly this kind of confusing proliferation of the contexts we work in, along with the historical reliance of the social sciences on now severely compromised political universals that make meta-political re-articulation and reflection necessary. Instead of saying that Dixon and Durrheim were wrong *in* the particular context they were studying, I wanted to insist that their reading is more than merely a disinterested, empirical report *of* or *about* that context. It is already steeped in the meta-political dimension, even though it doesn’t want to spell it out. While a strategic empiricism, based on a distinction between academic and lay accounts, might be useful for making discursive work acceptable to mainstream journals and a broader social psychology community, it comes with a cost. My question thus still awaits an answer: what are the political imaginaries, the utopias if you will, that (should?) animate the particular moral and political stances we take?

As long as such discussion is postponed, or treated as threatening and counterproductive, there is little reason to expect that even the most well-intended and sophisticated analyses will *not* be articulated with less than useful political imaginaries – especially banal nationalism, liberalism and neo-liberalism. The aim of my polemic was to provoke arguments about why this is not the case. Instead, Dixon and Durrheim have told me what I know: what they have found in their studies, that it was well executed and that it is politically important. We agree on this.

Perhaps they are right, and are these kinds of discussions out of place in the ordinary business of social psychology, or in a social psychology of the ordinary. Maybe our task is exhausted by the particular research contexts we write about, and the particular politics and anti-racist practices they embody and embrace. This in itself is certainly no small task. Still, I would hope for something more. In the meantime, however, method,

the research setting and implicit boundary drawing between academic and lay accounts are still used to keep this discussion at a distance. In the old days social psychologists were caught in the laboratories with the world outside, barely commented on. I am sure Durrheim and Dixon would not want to keep us on the beach, with the same world waiting.

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