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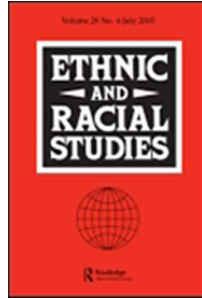
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A note on theorising race and other things

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A Note on Theorising Race and Other Things

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Abstract

In the spirit of 'furthering debate and reflection' in this response to *Theories of Race and Ethnicity* we consider here the pertinence of the theme of resistance that occupies particular chapters within the collection and which has been central to key works within the wider race critical scholarship. Yet, when the larger field of contemporary race study is considered, we also note that other contiguous concerns – including capitalism, religion, nation, and war – are key factors in thinking through racism. Here we further elaborate on how future theorisations of race and ethnicity must engage with these domains.

Keywords

Race, Ethnicity, resistance ✦, Theory, capitalism ✦, Religion

Solomos and Murji's *Theories of Race and Ethnicity* (TRE) constitutes a predictably authoritative and timely anthology of contemporary race study. The book traverses a diverse set of issues that have shaped recent debates, particularly in relation to the notion of the postracial. In the spirit of 'furthering debate and reflection' (xiii), we consider here a number of chapters and the variety of ways that the different contributors further compelling re-engagements with major strands of social theory that have been historically central to critical race work. But it is specifically Bassel's 'Acting "as" and acting "as if"' and St Louis' 'Can race be eradicated?' that we elaborate upon in this response – in order to note how the two chapters recoup the importance of fronting *resistance* within race scholarship. Thinking through resistance has of course been central to most texts canonical to our field. After all, a sophisticated account of racism's resonance at any given time is necessary precisely because it helps us understand both how it is already being resisted and also how it might be better resisted. Yet, when the larger field of contemporary race study is considered, we can also note that other contiguous concerns – including capitalism, religion, nation, and war – are key factors in thinking through race; factors which we believe are either absent or underdeveloped in this collection. In detailing these oversights, our contention is not with the book itself as we appreciate that no collection can be anywhere near comprehensive (2). Rather, we take the occasional shortcomings with this collection's thematic reach as an opportunity to briefly formulate certain thoughts on those areas which we believe must be

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3 central to a decidedly *contemporary* analysis of race and racism in order that the project of
4 resistance can be effectively pursued.
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7 Bassel's chapter on Ranciere, intersectionality and resistance and St Louis's chapter on the 'post-
8 racial problematic' profit from the complex way in which they address the theme of anti-racist
9 resistance. But the very different routes taken by the two authors in parsing the scope and
10 character of resistance also reveal a variety of other conceptual moves of equal importance to the
11 contemporary study of race and racism.
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16 First, Bassel recuperates, via her reading of Ranciere, a powerful engagement of a post-
17 structuralist, humanities approach in developing a theory of racial subjectivity and anti-racist
18 resistance alike. There has been a recent steering away from some of the more prominent
19 continental names in critical theory and/or anti-capitalist analysis, notwithstanding the
20 cacophony of race theory which tracks a Foucauldian line. This is unfortunate given how fruitful
21 the works of Althusser, Balibar, Deleuze, Derrida, Kristeva, and Laclau and Mouffe have been
22 for previous conceptualisations of racial formations.¹
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28 Contemporary canons of post-structural and/or critical theory are not however unproblematic,
29 often exercising a significant Eurocentric erasure when trying to fold in issues of race and racism
30 (102-103). This unfortunate truism should not, however, deter an extended engagement with
31 these influential theoretical voices that operate outside of the orthodox, policy-friendly drawing
32 of sociological boundaries. And it is precisely such a turn to a space outside of sociology that
33 proves so effective in Bassel's chapter. Taking Ranciere's category of the 'rupture', Bassel opens
34 up a fascinating ontological gap between subject constitution (racial identities) and political
35 resistance. Her attention to the resistances which materialise from a position of 'not-existing' (98,
36 102) – 'undocumented' women ('sans papiers' [94]) – throws open important and
37 underappreciated political possibilities. Possibilities which take us from the position of 'acting as'
38 to an acting 'as if' – an 'if' which mobilises images of being and 'self-definition' (104) beyond the
39 terms by which the social is otherwise pictured, 'ordered' and distributed' (98). Decisive here is
40 Bassel's ability to address head-on the substantial problems of post-structural critical theory,
41 particularly its often presumptuous desire to erase or disavow particularity – e.g. racial and
42 gender identities as an invalid ground or 'resource' for politics (102-103, 104-105). Bassel
43 resolves this outstanding failing of contemporary critical theory through incorporating an
44 intersectional perspective as based on the work of Hill Collins. What consequently transpires is
45 not only an exciting reinterpretation of Ranciere, but equally, an impressively tight and delicate
46 reading of intersectionality. Particularly interesting here is the ability to bring about an
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3 intersectional analysis which does not fall foul of an overstated emphasis on the individual (108-
4 109). Instead of drawing attention only to the unique matrices of multiple oppressions and/or
5 privilege that constitute an *individual par excellence*, Bassel offers a novel intersectional emphasis on
6 overlapping figurations of multiple 'identity claims and communities' (109).
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10 Bassel's chapter is hereby remarkable on two counts. It actualises a unique and bold synthesis of
11 different theoretical currents (Ranciere and intersectionality) but also, it does so in the interests
12 of both documenting but also enabling further political resistance (in this case, the struggles of
13 undocumented women). The theme of resistance is worn a little lightly in many of the book's
14 other chapters. The majority of contributions outline, quite rightly, the renewed terms by which
15 racism exerts a hold over modernity. But in the course of such analysis, the realities of everyday
16 resistances become only an occasional concern. We welcome therefore Bassel's strong emphasis
17 on already existing resistances and also the future spaces which might facilitate further
18 resistances.
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22 Brett St Louis' intricate reading of the 'post-racial' and 'post-racialism' also picks up on the
23 theme of resistance – resistance in terms of evaluating what it actually entails to go beyond
24 racism. St Louis has already developed a prescient record for unpacking the genealogy of 'post-
25 race' – a genealogy which is double-edged. Post-race is most evidently an ideological conceit
26 which insists on, through utterance alone, announcing liberal democracy's transcendence of race
27 and racism; but post-race is also quite clearly an ideal which has long appealed to many scholars
28 and activists determinedly committed to anti-racism. St Louis traverses hereby a complex set of
29 ideas and traditions, a complexity which is often flattened in extant post-race scholarship (115).
30 All too often it is decreed that post-race only denotes an ideological ruse by the forces of liberal
31 quietism – e.g. the 'profiteers of race' (115) who claim we need not do anything about racism as
32 it has been vanquished or only the residual relic of certain *bad* individuals. What remains
33 unanswered here is what is to be done with the ideals of post-racial humanism which has
34 historically been central, even decisive, to anti-racist critique ('racial eliminativism' [129]). St
35 Louis consequently revisits the history of ideas – spanning Kant and Herder, via Barzun,
36 Montagu, Huxley and Haddon, to Gilroy, Appiah and Mills – in trying to 'reformulate and
37 rescue' (115) alternative terms by which we might work with the post-race ideal whilst
38 simultaneously unpacking its proximity to different formations of both residual and
39 contemporary racisms.
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56 On this score, St Louis (118-120) even manages to passingly invoke a more sympathetic reading
57 of Wilson's (1978) notorious *The Declining Significance of Race*. This provocative and often clumsy
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3 work sought to stress the increased role of class in determining inequality, but has been since
4 recruited for the purposes of liberal nationalism and anti-anti-racist demagoguery (D'Souza
5 (1995), M. Mirza (2010), Sewell [2010]). At first glance, given this above capture, it seems futile
6 to engage Wilson's argument. But what St Louis actualises, much like Bassel, is a patient
7 engagement of an influential theoretical position, warts and all. This analytic care salvages the
8 complexity required to theorise the contemporary moment and by implication, to theorise anti-
9 racism itself. Though Wilson's work remains highly problematic, as St Louis makes very clear,
10 what becomes also abundantly apparent in St Louis' piece is that we must remain attentive to the
11 complexities of anti-racist resistance and that this struggle does not allow for any easy,
12 readymade political locations – e.g. what do we do with race and/or is it feasible to realise an
13 analysis of racism without class.
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22 This final detail is particularly pertinent since it reflects the first thematic area which we felt
23 might have been better profiled across the *TRE* collection. Namely, in order to establish a fuller
24 framework of how racism is reinstated but also resisted in the current moment, it would have
25 been useful to offer a more pronounced overview of themes germane to a political economy
26 approach. Issues of class, labour, and neoliberal subject constitution and governance more
27 broadly are conspicuously marginal in this book. Solomos and Murji themselves note that the
28 first major blossoming of sustained and recognised race scholarship in Europe centred on the
29 CCCS' critical engagement of a Marxist analytic tradition (6, 13). By our reckoning, what was so
30 productive with this line of work was that the multiple scholars involved, not least Hall, could
31 move away from the class reductionism characteristic of Marxist commentary on race, nation
32 and imperialism, but without severing that tie to Marxist analysis altogether. It was precisely the
33 ability to hold the structures of class and political economy in tension with the production and
34 performance of racial discourses that was, we believe, central to the potency of CCCS
35 scholarship. We therefore contend that as contemporary social processes reveal a conjuncture
36 where capital seems poised towards a further shackling of labour (i.e. the advance of
37 neoliberalism in the wake of the 2008 global recession), it is necessary that more of us are able to
38 confront the ways in which racisms become routed through class and neoliberal rationales and
39 processes.
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52 Even by the reckoning of labour alone – which we believe is only one, albeit major, flank of
53 capitalist constitution – the play of race runs rampant. Given the cementing of precarious labour
54 as a class unto themselves, a condition which disproportionately impacts upon those lacking the
55 privileges of whiteness, and also the further public humiliation and material exploitation of low-
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3 wage migrant workers, it becomes imperative that accounts of racism retain its attentiveness to
4 capitalist conjunctures. There are of course any number of important voices within the field of
5 race and racism who continue to creatively engage the affinity of racism to neoliberal processes –
6 including Virdees' (2014) recent *Racism, Class and the Racialised Outsider*, Gilroy's reading of the
7 2011 riots, and Redclift's close reading of 'new racisms' and 'new racial subjects' as constituted
8 within neoliberal governance. We would hope therefore that its relative anonymity in *TRE* is not
9 indicative of a more general trend away from such concerns.
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15 The contemporary historical moment is indeed likely to be recalled in terms of global capitalism's
16 great leap forward (i.e. bringing a formal end to the welfare-state compromise). This
17 characterisation is perhaps only rivalled in scope by the increased focus of governance and
18 crises-making on the figure of the Muslim. Any number of alarmist discourses in the Western
19 world – be it the renewed belligerence of secular modernity's cheerleaders, the putative 'failure of
20 multiculturalism', the resurgence of integrationism, the rationalisation of anti-welfare policies, or
21 the making of contemporary war – all place a heavy premium on the demotic representation of
22 Muslims. This reality does of course invite a need to re-read race and racism by how it is mapped
23 along taxonomies of religion and/or against ideals of secular modernity. Such a challenge has
24 been constructively met by a variety of contemporary researchers (Alexander 2013; Assad, 2003;
25 Kundnani 2014, Mirza, 2013; Meer, 2015; Modood, 2009; Sayyid, 2003). But there is,
26 surprisingly, no sustained reference to any such analytic and political terrain in *TRE*.
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36 It is of course clear that the question of how to analytically contend with as well as resist anti-
37 Muslim racism reveals no easy answers. But it is precisely because of this slippery complexity that
38 it would have been interesting to see at a least a couple of contributions address at length these
39 questions. The processes encompassed by anti-Muslim racism do of course echo other recent
40 formations of European racism – see for instance the familiarity of the tropes apparent in
41 contemporary moral panics regarding 'grooming' to those foregrounded during the making of
42 the UK mugging-crisis of the 1970s and 1980s. It also echoes longer colonial formations of
43 governance, particularly as they were actualised across Asia/North Africa – see discourses of
44 Orientalism and/or Hegelian ontologies of the racial other's religious delinquency. But anti-
45 Muslim racism's contemporary prominence also reveals certain estrangements from recent
46 understandings of racism, profiling a set of concerns and reckonings which were not particularly
47 urgent in the recent past. For instance, how substantially does a racism nominally premised on a
48 category of religion necessitate a recalibration of the tools ordinarily employed by the
49 sociological field of race and ethnicity? Does a historical comparative method of anti-Semitism
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3 and anti-Muslim racism, an approach prominent in recent public output, perhaps mystify and
4 obscure more than it illuminates? Should we instead take heed of Goldberg's (251) important
5 counsel in *TRE*'s final chapter that racisms, always in the plural, can only be properly scrutinised
6 if seen through a 'relational' method. More prosaically, what do we make of secularism? How do
7 we develop a strong critique of secular individualism but without foregrounding the voices of
8 regressive, religious conservatism? How do we account for political resistance which finds
9 primary affective and conceptual succour within the formations of postcolonial religion? What
10 does sociology make of the not insignificant matter that is the 'transcendent' (i.e. God/Faith), a
11 theme that has too often been met with embarrassment by sociologists of various vintages. We
12 believe strongly that these and other questions are about racisms, writ large. Hence, our opting
13 for the term 'anti-Muslim racism' as opposed to Islamophobia – a term which bears too much
14 homage to the precepts of social psychology and also latently endorses a clash of civilization,
15 conflict determinism. But if this is indeed a question of racism, it is disappointing that a
16 collection which sets out to survey the *contemporary* field of race and ethnicity, and to do so in a
17 manner which addresses 'current political and civil society debates' (4), does not give it more, if
18 not central, prominence.

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20 One section which did pick up on certain issues pertaining to the exclusions of Muslims was
21 Wing's discussion, in her chapter about 'Critical Race Feminism', of the War on Terror as it
22 relates to gender and race. We certainly agree that the relevance of war's contemporary presence
23 is central to an analysis of today's renewed racisms. Particularly so from within an Anglophone
24 context, which is where the *TRE* collection is largely situated, given the US and UK
25 governments' championing of the post-2001 wars which so dramatically intensified already
26 existing anti-Muslim colonial legacies. Indeed, the question and scale of contemporary war does
27 perhaps necessitate its own theoretical contemplation. Indicative inheritances for the
28 development of any such theoretical body might include Fanon, Schmitt, Virilo, Agamben and
29 more recently, Chamayou. These are significant traditions which might help us understand the
30 modern state as a war-state and that the figurations of race and racism respond to, as much as
31 anything else, the exigencies of a state's war-position. Certain recent works which ably focus on
32 the nexus of racism to war include Gilroy's (2006) contemplation of multiculturalism 'in times of
33 war', closely followed by Robbin's (2012) treatment of cosmopolitanism within the context of
34 'perpetual war'. But it is perhaps the area of critical race/postcolonial feminism, surveyed in *TRE*
35 by Wing, which has been the most effective in shepherding any such co-articulated reading of
36 racism and war. Wing (167-171) draws attention here to the War on Terror as a key mediator
37 which analyses of contemporary racisms must account for. The very immediacy and compelling
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3 empirical detail of this brief section suggests that such considerations of war warrant even more
4 sustained attention, allowing for its own theoretical strand within the sociology of race and
5 racism.
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9 Closely related, the topic of nationalism has been granted due attention by many scholars of
10 racism – be it via concerns about citizenship, borders, belonging, the far-right, xenophobia, or
11 the rise of ‘values’, civic nationalism. This theme is picked up in *TRE* though Fassin’s reading of
12 French nationalism’s representational coordinates – with particular emphasis on how whiteness
13 is positioned and ‘permeates’ (248) this nationalist revival. This thoroughly entertaining chapter
14 (Fassin recovers a cultural studies flair for popular culture and its ideological resonances) offers a
15 number of useful reminders regarding how nationalism has been remade in contemporary
16 contexts, noting the important continuities and affinities across Europe as a whole (242, 248).ⁱⁱ
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23 It is however the case that the *TRE* collection might have been even bolder in calling for
24 renewed theoretical resolution of how race and racism sits within contemporary nationalist drifts.
25 It remains a well-established interpretation that categories of race (and to a lesser extent
26 ethnicity) emerged in line with the categories of nation-state. These were the simultaneously
27 articulated modalities of European and colonial modernity. It is hereby important that we remain
28 conceptually alert to how rationales of race and ethnicity (what Gilroy calls ‘raciology’ and ‘ethnic
29 absolutism’ [1993]) are always contiguous to the narrations of nation active at a given moment in
30 time and space. It is after all abundantly clear that nationalism has found its legitimacy and allure
31 enhanced by globalisation, contrary to the optimistic, high evangelical, readings of globalisation
32 when it was first named thus. The surge of populist nationalist parties in remaking the electoral
33 landscape across Western Europe would suggest that the field of race and ethnicity ought to
34 assertively position itself as the most obvious site at which to account for and resist such
35 processes. Failure to do so would constitute a quite disappointing instance of our field’s self-
36 marginalisation. We consequently hope that even more sustained work will emerge, building on
37 some of the directions proposed by Fassin, which explicitly interrogates the newly made joint
38 formations of racism and nationalism.
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50 If we are to take seriously the notion that one of the key purposes of race scholarship is to
51 inform and shed light on processes of resistance, it is imperative that the scholarship also
52 remains attentive to the intricacies of key political, social, economic and cultural shifts which
53 shape how racisms become reproduced. This collection draws from this tradition in a number of
54 effective ways. But it is our argument that its potential for intervention could have been further
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3 enhanced though conceptual development of some of these important domains through which
4 racism plays out in the contemporary – domains such as class, religion, war, and nation.
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ⁱ A notable exception is Saldanha (2006), briefly mentioned in *TRE* on p.270 and p.276, and his fascinating
18 purposing of a Deleuzian repertoire, with particular emphasis on notions of embodied material cultures, in order to
19 develop his race as ‘machine assemblages’ approach. Saldanha offers, via Deleuze, a singularly unique understanding
20 of how race becomes ascribed, embodied, signified, performed, and normatively governed and/or disrupted.

21 ⁱⁱFassin also does particular well to conclude with a discussion of the sexual representational regimes which cement
22 the fault-lines of national belonging (246-248) – a discussion strongly evocative of Puar, Butler and Scott’s seminal
23 writings on the subject.
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