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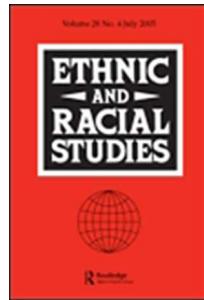
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A note on theorising race and other things

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3 **A Note on Theorising Race and Other Things**
45
6 Sivamohan Valluvan and Nisha Kapoor
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89 **Abstract**
1011 In the spirit of 'furthering debate and reflection' in this response to Theories of Race and Ethnicity we consider
12 here the pertinence of the theme of resistance that occupies particular chapters within the collection and
13 which has been central to key works within the wider race critical scholarship. Yet, when the larger field of
14 contemporary race study is considered, we also note that other contiguous concerns – including capitalism,
15 religion, nation, and war – are key factors in thinking through racism. Here we further elaborate on how future
16 theorisations of race and ethnicity must engage with these domains.
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1819 **Keywords**
2021 Race, Ethnicity, resistance *, Theory, capitalism *, Religion
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2728 Solomos and Murji's *Theories of Race and Ethnicity* (TRE) constitutes a predictably authoritative
29 and timely anthology of contemporary race study. The book traverses a diverse set of issues that
30 have shaped recent debates, particularly in relation to the notion of the postracial. In the spirit of
31 'furthering debate and reflection' (xiii), we consider here a number of chapters and the variety of
32 ways that the different contributors further compelling re-engagements with major strands of
33 social theory that have been historically central to critical race work. But it is specifically Bassel's
34 'Acting "as" and acting "as if"' and St Louis' 'Can race be eradicated?' that we elaborate upon in
35 this response – in order to note how the two chapters recoup the importance of fronting
36 *resistance* within race scholarship. Thinking through resistance has of course been central to most
37 texts canonical to our field. After all, a sophisticated account of racism's resonance at any given
38 time is necessary precisely because it helps us understand both how it is already being resisted
39 and also how it might be better resisted. Yet, when the larger field of contemporary race study is
40 considered, we can also note that other contiguous concerns – including capitalism, religion,
41 nation, and war – are key factors in thinking through race; factors which we believe are either
42 absent or underdeveloped in this collection. In detailing these oversights, our contention is not
43 with the book itself as we appreciate that no collection can be anywhere near comprehensive (2).
44 Rather, we take the occasional shortcomings with this collection's thematic reach as an
45 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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14 First, Bassel recuperates, via her reading of Ranciere, a powerful engagement of a post-
15 structuralist, humanities approach in developing a theory of racial subjectivity and anti-racist
16 resistance alike. There has been a recent steering away from some of the more prominent
17 continental names in critical theory and/or anti-capitalist analysis, notwithstanding the
18 cacophony of race theory which tracks a Foucauldian line. This is unfortunate given how fruitful
19 the works of Althusser, Balibar, Deleuze, Derrida, Kristeva, and Laclau and Mouffe have been
20 for previous conceptualisations of racial formations.ⁱ
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23 Contemporary canons of post-structural and/or critical theory are not however unproblematic,
24 often exercising a significant Eurocentric erasure when trying to fold in issues of race and racism
25 (102-103). This unfortunate truism should not, however, deter an extended engagement with
26 these influential theoretical voices that operate outside of the orthodox, policy-friendly drawing
27 of sociological boundaries. And it is precisely such a turn to a space outside of sociology that
28 proves so effective in Bassel's chapter. Taking Ranciere's category of the 'rupture', Bassel opens
29 up a fascinating ontological gap between subject constitution (racial identities) and political
30 resistance. Her attention to the resistances which materialise from a position of 'not-existing' (98,
31 102) – 'undocumented' women ('sans papiers' [94]) – throws open important and
32 underappreciated political possibilities. Possibilities which take us from the position of 'acting as'
33 to an acting 'as if' – an 'if' which mobilises images of being and 'self-definition' (104) beyond the
34 terms by which the social is otherwise pictured, 'ordered' and distributed' (98). Decisive here is
35 Bassel's ability to address head-on the substantial problems of post-structural critical theory,
36 particularly its often presumptuous desire to erase or disavow particularity – e.g. racial and
37 gender identities as an invalid ground or 'resource' for politics (102-103, 104-105). Bassel
38 resolves this outstanding failing of contemporary critical theory through incorporating an
39 intersectional perspective as based on the work of Hill Collins. What consequently transpires is
40 not only an exciting reinterpretation of Ranciere, but equally, an impressively tight and delicate
41 reading of intersectionality. Particularly interesting here is the ability to bring about an
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intersectional analysis which does not fall foul of an overstated emphasis on the individual (108-109). Instead of drawing attention only to the unique matrices of multiple oppressions and/or privilege that constitute an *individual par excellence*, Bassel offers a novel intersectional emphasis on overlapping figurations of multiple 'identity claims and communities' (109).

Bassel's chapter is hereby remarkable on two counts. It actualises a unique and bold synthesis of different theoretical currents (Ranciere and intersectionality) but also, it does so in the interests of both documenting but also enabling further political resistance (in this case, the struggles of undocumented women). The theme of resistance is worn a little lightly in many of the book's other chapters. The majority of contributions outline, quite rightly, the renewed terms by which racism exerts a hold over modernity. But in the course of such analysis, the realities of everyday resistances become only an occasional concern. We welcome therefore Bassel's strong emphasis on already existing resistances and also the future spaces which might facilitate further resistances.

Brett St Louis' intricate reading of the 'post-racial' and 'post-racialism' also picks up on the theme of resistance – resistance in terms of evaluating what it actually entails to go beyond racism. St Louis has already developed a prescient record for unpacking the genealogy of 'post-race' – a genealogy which is double-edged. Post-race is most evidently an ideological conceit which insists on, through utterance alone, announcing liberal democracy's transcendence of race and racism; but post-race is also quite clearly an ideal which has long appealed to many scholars and activists determinedly committed to anti-racism. St Louis traverses hereby a complex set of ideas and traditions, a complexity which is often flattened in extant post-race scholarship (115). All too often it is decreed that post-race only denotes an ideological ruse by the forces of liberal quietism – e.g. the 'profiteers of race' (115) who claim we need not do anything about racism as it has been vanquished or only the residual relic of certain *bad* individuals. What remains unanswered here is what is to be done with the ideals of post-racial humanism which has historically been central, even decisive, to anti-racist critique ('racial eliminativism' [129]). St Louis consequently revisits the history of ideas – spanning Kant and Herder, via Barzun, Montagu, Huxley and Haddon, to Gilroy, Appiah and Mills – in trying to 'reformulate and rescue' (115) alternative terms by which we might work with the post-race ideal whilst simultaneously unpacking its proximity to different formations of both residual and contemporary racisms.

On this score, St Louis (118-120) even manages to passingly invoke a more sympathetic reading 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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16 This final detail is particularly pertinent since it reflects the first thematic area which we felt
17 might have been better profiled across the *TRE* collection. Namely, in order to establish a fuller
18 framework of how racism is reinstated but also resisted in the current moment, it would have
19 been useful to offer a more pronounced overview of themes germane to a political economy
20 approach. Issues of class, labour, and neoliberal subject constitution and governance more
21 broadly are conspicuously marginal in this book. Solomos and Murji themselves note that the
22 first major blossoming of sustained and recognised race scholarship in Europe centred on the
23 CCCS' critical engagement of a Marxist analytic tradition (6, 13). By our reckoning, what was so
24 productive with this line of work was that the multiple scholars involved, not least Hall, could
25 move away from the class reductionism characteristic of Marxist commentary on race, nation
26 and imperialism, but without severing that tie to Marxist analysis altogether. It was precisely the
27 ability to hold the structures of class and political economy in tension with the production and
28 performance of racial discourses that was, we believe, central to the potency of CCCS
29 scholarship. We therefore contend that as contemporary social processes reveal a conjuncture
30 where capital seems poised towards a further shackling of labour (i.e. the advance of
31 neoliberalism in the wake of the 2008 global recession), it is necessary that more of us are able to
32 confront the ways in which racisms become routed through class and neoliberal rationales and
33 processes.
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36 Even by the reckoning of labour alone – which we believe is only one, albeit major, flank of
37 capitalist constitution – the play of race runs rampant. Given the cementing of precarious labour
38 as a class unto themselves, a condition which disproportionately impacts upon those lacking the
39 privileges of whiteness, and also the further public humiliation and material exploitation of low-
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wage migrant workers, it becomes imperative that accounts of racism retain its attentiveness to capitalist conjunctures. There are of course any number of important voices within the field of race and racism who continue to creatively engage the affinity of racism to neoliberal processes – including Virdees' (2014) recent *Racism, Class and the Racialised Outsider*, Gilroy's reading of the 2011 riots, and Redclift's close reading of 'new racisms' and 'new racial subjects' as constituted within neoliberal governance. We would hope therefore that its relative anonymity in *TRE* is not indicative of a more general trend away from such concerns.

The contemporary historical moment is indeed likely to be recalled in terms of global capitalism's great leap forward (i.e. bringing a formal end to the welfare-state compromise). This characterisation is perhaps only rivalled in scope by the increased focus of governance and crises-making on the figure of the Muslim. Any number of alarmist discourses in the Western world – be it the renewed belligerence of secular modernity's cheerleaders, the putative 'failure of multiculturalism', the resurgence of integrationism, the rationalisation of anti-welfare policies, or the making of contemporary war – all place a heavy premium on the demotic representation of Muslims. This reality does of course invite a need to re-read race and racism by how it is mapped along taxonomies of religion and/or against ideals of secular modernity. Such a challenge has been constructively met by a variety of contemporary researchers (Alexander 2013; Assad, 2003; Kundnani 2014, Mirza, 2013; Meer, 2015; Modood, 2009; Sayyid, 2003). But there is, surprisingly, no sustained reference to any such analytic and political terrain in *TRE*.

It is of course clear that the question of how to analytically contend with as well as resist anti-Muslim racism reveals no easy answers. But it is precisely because of this slippery complexity that it would have been interesting to see at least a couple of contributions address at length these questions. The processes encompassed by anti-Muslim racism do of course echo other recent formations of European racism – see for instance the familiarity of the tropes apparent in contemporary moral panics regarding 'grooming' to those foregrounded during the making of the UK mugging-crisis of the 1970s and 1980s. It also echoes longer colonial formations of governance, particularly as they were actualised across Asia/North Africa – see discourses of Orientalism and/or Hegelian ontologies of the racial other's religious delinquency. But anti-Muslim racism's contemporary prominence also reveals certain estrangements from recent understandings of racism, profiling a set of concerns and reckonings which were not particularly urgent in the recent past. For instance, how substantially does a racism nominally premised on a category of religion necessitate a recalibration of the tools ordinarily employed by the 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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One section which did pick up on certain issues pertaining to the exclusions of Muslims was Wing's discussion, in her chapter about 'Critical Race Feminism', of the War on Terror as it relates to gender and race. We certainly agree that the relevance of war's contemporary presence is central to an analysis of today's renewed racisms. Particularly so from within an Anglophone context, which is where the *TRE* collection is largely situated, given the US and UK governments' championing of the post-2001 wars which so dramatically intensified already existing anti-Muslim colonial legacies. Indeed, the question and scale of contemporary war does perhaps necessitate its own theoretical contemplation. Indicative inheritances for the development of any such theoretical body might include Fanon, Schmitt, Virilo, Agamben and more recently, Chamayou. These are significant traditions which might help us understand the modern state as a war-state and that the figurations of race and racism respond to, as much as anything else, the exigencies of a state's war-position. Certain recent works which ably focus on the nexus of racism to war include Gilroy's (2006) contemplation of multiculture 'in times of war', closely followed by Robbin's (2012) treatment of cosmopolitanism within the context of 'perpetual war'. But it is perhaps the area of critical race/postcolonial feminism, surveyed in *TRE* by Wing, which has been the most effective in shepherding any such co-articulated reading of racism and war. Wing (167-171) draws attention here to the War on Terror as a key mediator 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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22 It is however the case that the *TRE* collection might have been even bolder in calling for
23 renewed theoretical resolution of how race and racism sits within contemporary nationalist drifts.
24 It remains a well-established interpretation that categories of race (and to a lesser extent
25 ethnicity) emerged in line with the categories of nation-state. These were the simultaneously
26 articulated modalities of European and colonial modernity. It is hereby important that we remain
27 conceptually alert to how rationales of race and ethnicity (what Gilroy calls ‘raciology’ and ‘ethnic
28 absolutism’ [1993]) are always contiguous to the narrations of nation active at a given moment in
29 time and space. It is after all abundantly clear that nationalism has found its legitimacy and allure
30 enhanced by globalisation, contrary to the optimistic, nigh evangelical, readings of globalisation
31 when it was first named thus. The surge of populist nationalist parties in remaking the electoral
32 landscape across Western Europe would suggest that the field of race and ethnicity ought to
33 assertively position itself as the most obvious site at which to account for and resist such
34 processes. Failure to do so would constitute a quite disappointing instance of our field’s self-
35 marginalisation. We consequently hope that even more sustained work will emerge, building on
36 some of the directions proposed by Fassin, which explicitly interrogates the newly made joint
37 formations of racism and nationalism.
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48 If we are to take seriously the notion that one of the key purposes of race scholarship is to
49 inform and shed light on processes of resistance, it is imperative that the scholarship also
50 remains attentive to the intricacies of key political, social, economic and cultural shifts which
51 shape how racisms become reproduced. This collection draws from this tradition in a number of
52 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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17 ⁱ A notable exception is Saldanha (2006), briefly mentioned in *TRE* on p.270 and p.276, and his fascinating
18 purposing of a Deleuzean 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 ⁱⁱ Fassin 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.