
Book Section:
Joseph-Salisbury, R., Connelly, L. orcid.org/0000-0002-9564-9106 and Mondon, A. (2024) An anti-racist scholar-activist ethic: working in service to racial justice. In: Vaughan, A., Braune, J., Tinsley, M. and Mondon, A., (eds.) The ethics of researching the far right: Critical approaches and reflections. Racism, Resistance and Social Change. Manchester University Press. ISBN: 9781526173874.

An antiracist scholar-activist ethic: Working in service to racial justice

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Abstract

Although there has been relatively little written to date about the practice of research on the far right, there is growing recognition that the complex ethical and political challenges researchers face are important subject matters in their own right. This chapter therefore brings together scholarship on antiracist scholar-activism with that on the far right and its mainstreaming to explore how the principle of *working in service* can guide the praxes of those researching race, racism, and antiracism. Centring questions of *social usefulness* and *accountability*, the chapter reflects on how the notion of *working in service to racial justice* offers an orientation that urges us to push back against approaches within far right studies that risk amplifying and legitimising the far right. Instead, working in service to racial justice requires us to place ourselves firmly on the side of communities of resistance and the broader project of antiracism.

Introduction

The practice of research raises a range of urgent ethical considerations, particularly when research focuses on social (in)justice. As argued elsewhere, including across other chapters in this collection, this point is particularly pertinent in relation to ethnicity and racism studies in general, and far right studies specifically. This is the case both for scholarship that (methodologically) engages directly with far-right political groups (Ashe, 2020; Busher, 2020) and scholarship that takes a more expansive approach, seeing the far right as a blurry-edged construct that is intimately connected to what is socially constructed as the mainstream (Brown et al., 2021; Mondon and Winter, 2020). Whilst 'there has been relatively little in the way of detailed discussion about the *practice* of researching the far right' (Ashe et al., 2020: 2), there is growing recognition that the complex ethical and political challenges researchers face are important subject matters.

Taking this as our entry point, this chapter emerges from dialogue between two authors who have researched and written about antiracist scholar-activism (Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly, 2021), and one who researches and writes about the far right and its mainstreaming (Mondon 2013; Mondon and Winter, 2020). While all three write with social justice at the heart of their praxis, their approaches differ in a particularly interesting way: Remi and Laura focus on the perspective of resistance, while Aurelien's work centres on mapping the reactionary context. Emerging from that dialogue, this chapter offers a new lens – an antiracist scholar-activist ethic – for navigating the ethical and political dilemmas of undertaking research on the far right. To do so, it centres the notion of working *in service to racial justice*, suggesting that it offers an anchoring, or orientation, that can guide antiracist scholar-activist scholarship and praxis specifically, and more ethical (research) praxis generally. Elsewhere, Remi and Laura have developed the *in service to racial justice* orientation in relation to working with(in) racially

minoritised communities and/or antiracist movements (Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly, 2021). Their collaboration with Aurelien here offers an opportunity to complicate these arguments by considering what working in service means when the focus is on politics which (and participants who) are diametrically opposed to racial justice.

With that in mind, after setting out the theoretical underpinnings of working in service to racial justice below, the chapter explores questions of *social usefulness* and *accountability* in its examination of the practice of an antiracist scholar-activist ethic. While it is generally true across all disciplines, a key contention of this chapter is that it is crucial for those who research the far right to remain connected and committed to communities of resistance. There can be no neutral stance to this research. This conscious positioning ensures that we, as researchers, work in service to racial justice and remain accountable to those at the sharp end of racism.

Working in service to racial justice

The notion of working in service has featured, notably, in the work of Patricia Hill Collins (2012; 2013), Ambalavaner Sivanandan (2008b; 2019), and Walter Rodney (cited by Osuna, 2017). In her conceptualisation of 'intellectual activism', Collins (2013: ix) refers to 'the myriad ways in which people place the power of their ideas *in service* to social justice'. She distinguishes working *in service to* social justice from working *in support of* social justice. The latter, she argues, 'implies a lack of accountability', whilst the former invokes responsibilities associated with the notion of service itself. Specifically, working in service 'may involve sacrifice' and 'making choices that put one at odds with prevailing academic norms' (Collins, 2013: 43). In this sense, Collins (2013: xii) casts the in service orientation as counter-hegemonic: it rubs against the pressures omnipresent within Higher Education (HE) to 'place our fancy degrees in service to conservative political agendas' and hegemonic power structures more broadly.

Turning to Sivanandan, under his forty-year directorship, the radical think tank the *Institute of Race Relations* (IRR) adopted more structurally focused understandings of race and racism that were contextualised by imperialism and colonialism (Fekete, 2021; Sivanandan, 2008a).[1] Reorienting the IRR to play an active role in servicing antiracist struggle, Sivanandan retrospectively described his vision in the following way:

> there was a plethora of grassroots, community movements at the time (unlike now, alas) that *we could serve*. If we could not be at the barricades in the fight for racial justice, we could, at least, *be servitors in that cause*. We could do research that spoke to the issues and problems confronting Black communities. We could be *a servicing station*. We could put gas in the tanks of Black and Third World peoples on their way to liberation. That, in any case, was our pious hope (Sivanandan, 2008b: np).

[1] These radical and structurally focused understandings of racism are central to the praxis of antiracist scholar-activism and to the working in service orientation we advance in this chapter.

What Sivanandan articulates here is a radical orientation, premised on the notion of working in service to communities of resistance,[2] rather than to the 'interests of the ruling elite' that the IRR had previously served (Sivanandan, 2008a: 22). Though Sivanandan refers specifically to his work at IRR, the fundamental ideas are resonant for scholar-activists working inside (and outside) the university (Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly, 2021). He points to the importance of both an embeddedness within communities of resistance, and of putting research to use for those communities and for wider struggles for liberation.

With parallels to Sivanandan and Collins, the anti-colonial activist and academic Walter Rodney contended that:

> If we [the petit bourgeois intellectuals] have a role, it has to do with the shift of the initiative into the hands of workers and peasants and then for a change we begin to *serve* those classes. Because mostly we have been serving other classes anyhow. Mostly we have been serving the capitalist class. So for a change, we may begin to *service* the working people, *service* the working class (Rodney cited by Osuna, 2017: 37).

For Rodney, working in service to 'working people', or to communities of resistance in Sivanandan's (2019) terms, constitutes a break from the norm: such praxis is counter hegemonic.

In the context of contemporary HE, this counter-hegemony takes on a particular character. It is antithetical to the dominant norms, values and practices promulgated within what Remi and Laura have termed elsewhere the *neoliberal-imperial-institutionally-racist university* (see Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly, 2021). The *neoliberal* university captures the chilling effects of market logic on higher education; the repositioning of the university as a commodity, education as a service for students to purchase, and universities and academics as service providers who must compete. The *imperial* university points to the way Western universities have been, and continue to be, located within a 'network of state apparatuses of control, discipline, surveillance, carcerality, and violence' (Webb, 2018: 96-7), and the *institutionally racist* university acknowledges how racisms underpin and are reproduced within universities. As the hyphenation denotes, these forces are deeply entangled. Acknowledging this context is important because it draws attention to the difficult institutional conditions within which university-based antiracist scholar-activists operate. It centres the increasingly competitive working environments, governed by a high-stakes metric culture which means that time is increasingly squeezed and compromised. It also points to the presence of control, surveillance (Webb, 2018) and the threat of racist and anti-antiracist *backlash* (Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly, 2021) that impact those who pursue racial justice, particularly minoritised academics. Most importantly, it highlights the oppositional relationship between the dominant logics of the university and the principles of antiracist scholar-activism.

[2] We take this term from Sivanandan to refer to the powerful antiracist collectives and coalitions that were/are driven by the interests of racially minoritised communities, historically under the banner of political blackness (see Sivanandan, 2019; Virdee, 2014).

Before moving on, however, it is worth noting that – despite all of this – we should not mistake the university for a monolith. Rather, it is important to recognise that the university is an assemblage of competing and contradictory forces and visions (la paperson, 2017). If this were not the case, we would surely have to concede that there is no value in antiracist scholar-activists working in the university (which is not to say that we do not sometimes wonder about the extent of this value). With this in mind, as antiracist scholar-activists we must identify, exploit, and grow the pockets of possibility the university presents in order to work in service to communities of resistance and racial justice more broadly.

The field of far right studies is an interesting case study through which to examine how research can serve different (hegemonic and counter-hegemonic) purposes. The field has always been a disproportionately popular one, particularly within political science. While many scholars generally have as a starting point a negative, even antagonistic, view of their topic of study, the scientification and datafication of the social sciences have promoted an increasingly detached approach and strengthened the grip of 'white logics' (see Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva, 2008). Claims of objectivity and neutrality, core to positivist approaches, have at times served to replace the urgency of studying the far right to actively counter it, with simply studying the far right in an apparently apolitical manner. Worse still, at times, this has led to the legitimisation of the far right by using euphemistic descriptors to avoid terminologies considered 'too political' and 'loaded'.

As discussed in other chapters of this book, the politics of naming are key and yet often ignored. The increasing ubiquity of the term 'populism' in the field is a tribute to this. Although the concept itself is not new and has helped with understanding American and Russian movements in the late 19th century and left-wing movements in Latin America at the turn of the 21st century, it has increasingly been applied to the resurgent, reconstructed far right movements in the 2000s. While the concept has shed light on some of the discursive strategies employed by far-right actors to claim an apparent democratic legitimacy, it has often become a substitute for other more stigmatising but also more appropriate and better-defined terms such as extreme right, racist or even fascist right. Instead, in a strange effort to appease complaints emanating from the far right, many scholars have taken them at their word and adopted a descriptor far right actors have themselves been pushing for. The shift away from more stigmatising denominators has been facilitated by the belief in a 'post-racial' society (Lentin, 2016), which has created conditions whereby being accused of racism comes to be of greater concern than racism itself. In a 'post-racial' society, understandings of racism are also 'frozen' or limited to their most illiberal articulations, rather than being understood as an evolving ideology still core to far right (and often mainstream) politics (see Lentin, 2020; Mondon and Winter, 2020). The avoidance of terms and topics considered overly political, such as racism, is directly linked to academics increasingly seeing themselves as detached actors rather than intimately and unavoidably embedded in the politics they research. In a racially unjust society, such pretensions can lead researchers to work in service to the status quo by not only accepting but strengthening hegemonic discourses which conceal or euphemise structures of oppression and even legitimise reaction.

What working in service means in practice

In practice, the notion of working in service to racial justice is particularly helpful in addressing some of the issues set out above. It can engender an antiracist scholar-activist research ethic in several ways, for example, by raising questions about *social usefulness* and *accountability.* Here, each is explored in turn, thinking both about how they pertain to antiracist scholarship generally and to far right research specifically.

Social usefulness

Considerations of usefulness – the extent to which our work is useful beyond academia – are far from novel. In the UK context, such considerations are even institutionalised through the Research Excellence Framework (REF) Impact agenda, albeit in a limiting and reductive form. The notion of working in service to racial justice, however, implores us to think about usefulness in a particular way. The key question becomes, to what or to whom is our work useful? Through this frame, our praxis can be considered useful not if it serves the interests of the status quo (and/or the far right), but if it empowers communities of resistance and bolsters antiracism. There are echoes here of what Richard Johnson (1993: 19), writing on radical education, describes as *really useful knowledge.* As Johnson puts it, not usefulness as 'a tool of social reproduction and a guardian of the status quo' but a usefulness that 'demands changes by unveiling the causes of exploitation and tracing its origins within the ruling ideology.'

In research with 29 antiracist scholar-activists, Remi and Laura found that a sense of urgency was often at the heart of considerations of social usefulness – that is to say, a sense of urgency regarding what is at stake in a given socio-political context necessitates socially useful work (Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly, 2021). This has resonance for those researching the far right since, as Aurelien has noted elsewhere (Mondon and Winter, 2020), there is an urgency to the threat posed not only by the growing influence of the far right themselves but also the way in which they are increasingly being constructed as legitimate actors. This is aided in part – either consciously or unconsciously – by some research on the far right and through their media portrayal and platforming. For antiracists, the threat posed by the far right presents an imperative to engage in work that helps us understand but also undermines or counters that threat, while ensuring that doing so does not amplify or legitimise such politics. For those for whom this means engaging directly with the far right, and particularly those who engage members of the far right as research participants, the pertinent question has to be: to what extent can an engagement with the far right serve, or be socially useful to, communities of resistance and racial justice? Whilst it might well be the case that serving racial justice can involve 'dialogues with one's enemies as well as one's allies' (Back, 2002: 23; Ashe, 2020),[3] holding steadfast to that notion of (antiracist) service – whilst remaining reflexive about the potential benefits and (unintended) harms of our work (Joseph-Salisbury, 2018) – can help guide

[3] Important though this may be, there may be questions to be asked in the far right studies field, with regard to how much energy is spent talking to the far right in comparison to how much time is spent talking to those minoritised communities negatively affected by the far right.

scholars through the ethical quagmire of research that engages the far right. As Ashe et al (2020: 3) note, this question is not easily answered:

> Researchers of the far right [also] often find themselves grappling, struggling even, with questions about whether their own research practices might even be fuelling the very problems that they set out to understand and address.

It is therefore when a commitment to racial justice is not foregrounded or considered, or when the threat posed by far-right politics (particularly to those at the sharp end of such politics) is either euphemised or hyped to fit mainstream narratives, that research on the far right can perhaps become dangerous or harmful.

Thinking more generally about the relationship between research, researchers, and the far right, questions of usefulness should also lead us to give due consideration to how our work might be used, and by whom. Research on the far right that does not make clear that it stands against the far right risks euphemising the dangers such politics pose and/or serves to legitimise them, even if unwillingly. For example, research on the 'left behind' and 'white working class' has often served to legitimise the far right as if far right actors speak on behalf of 'the people' (Begum et al 2021; Bhambra 2017). At times, such research has been used by far-right parties and actors themselves in their own propaganda. This has often been based on a skewed, uncritical or biased reading of data, with that data generally pointing to a much more nuanced picture as to where support comes from. For example, while Trumpism and Brexit were often touted as (white) working class revolts, it has been empirically demonstrated that support for these politics predominantly came from wealthier sections of the population (Mondon and Winter 2018; Dorling 2016). This should not have surprised us as both these movements served the interests of the wealthy first and foremost. Linking such politics to the 'left behind' is not only simplistic (at best) or inaccurate empirically, but also lends a veneer of democratic legitimacy to politics which are innately elitist and sit squarely against working class interests and solidarity by seeking to divide rather than unify. Ultimately, therefore, scholars need to ask themselves whose interests their work serve – the far right or antiracist communities of resistance.

Accountability

In considering the usefulness of our work through the lens of working in service to racial justice, accountability becomes another important consideration. Accountability is a central principle in the research ethics processes of universities, with researchers encouraged to reflect on their obligations to research participants and other key stakeholders. Even neoliberal tools such as the REF Impact agenda and universities promotion of 'knowledge exchange' and 'public engagement' can – at least at first glance – promote accountability to wider publics. Yet, in these institutionalised forms, accountability can be limited and superficial. Too often researchers' relationships with the communities that they research are short-term and extractive (Smith, 2018), leading many from dispossessed and/or marginalised communities to be distrustful of researchers and universities more broadly. An *in service to racial justice* orientation, in stark contrast, encourages forms of accountability that are both inherently tied

to a deep embeddedness in communities of resistance and are counter-hegemonic in nature. Whilst these forms may overlap for brief moments with those promoted by the Impact agenda, the nature and extent of accountability are incomparable.

Embeddedness in communities of resistance is a fundamental principle that guides the praxes of antiracist scholar-activism. As Rodney (2019) urged, we should spend time outside of our university campuses doing work *with* and *within* – rather than *on* – those engaged in antiracist resistance. We should sit down with, listen to, and learn from one another to co-produce theory and action that is useful to movements for racial justice. This embeddedness fosters opportunities for direct forms of accountability, including providing spaces in which non-academic activists can challenge scholar-activists when their work does not benefit their community or the wider antiracist movement, a process which in turn encourages meaningful reflexivity. This can serve as an important corrective to ensure that our scholarship and praxes 'stay connected to and informed by struggle' (Osuna, 2017: 36). Whilst some (particularly racially minoritised) scholar-activists may be accountable to communities that they have grown up in, for others embeddedness in communities of resistance is something that must be more deliberately cultivated, with sensitivity and patience. Building enduring and trusting relationships can require a significant time investment and thus bristles against pressures omnipresent within HE to be productive – that is, to use time 'wisely' within a metric culture that promotes 'ticking the boxes' and moving on. In this regard, forms of accountability deriving from embeddedness in communities of resistance are counter-hegemonic in nature.

Of course, how we understand embeddedness and its relationship with accountability will change in relation to different methodologies and research foci. Indeed, embeddedness as it is conceived here can help to ensure accountability to communities of resistance with whom we share values, but how can we ensure our work remains accountable to antiracist movements when our research is with those who hold competing values to our own? How can research undertaken with members of the far right maintain a commitment to working in service to racial justice? We would suggest here that even (or perhaps especially) for those who research far right groups, there is a need to remain connected to, and embedded in, communities of resistance. Such grounding enables us as researchers to constantly keep in mind what it means to work in service to racial justice and can ensure that we remain accountable to those at the sharp end of racism. This is a particularly pressing issue for those researching the far right, as research has too often failed to engage with those of the sharp end of such politics, focusing instead on the perpetrators, at times giving them undue space.

In this particular context, and not to diminish the importance of striving for direct accountability, it may also be generative to think about accountability to *imagined communities of resistance* (Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly, 2021). The diversity of work within far right and antiracist studies necessitates a broader conceptualisation of accountability that extends beyond those with whom we have direct contact. It is in this vein that Busher (2021: 280) talks of employing an 'acid test' that considers how they would feel if they were reading their work out 'in a room in which a significant minority of the audience were… people who have experienced fear or anxiety as a result of the actions of EDL activists.' This accountability to an imagined

community is essential. Whilst it requires some careful balancing alongside a 'scholarly ethics of fairness' (Blee, 2007: 125) in representing far right participants, ultimately, we must remember 'whose side we are on' (Becker, 1967: 23). This requires a move away from flawed notions of neutrality and objectivity in research which imply that a researchers must remain 'in the middle', as if this middle ground was not a political construction itself. An expanded notion of community in *imagined communities of resistance* also attends to a particular challenge for those engaged in far right studies whereby directly engaging affected communities in research about the far right (in order to be accountable) could risk their (re)traumatisation. Lastly, this idea can better enable us to adopt an internationalist accountability that ties liberation struggles in the UK to those around the world. In this sense, accountability should not only be tied to the communities of resistance in which we organise, but to the wider project of racial justice.

Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates that the notion of *working in service to racial justice* provides an anchoring, or orientation, that can guide antiracist scholar-activists through ethically difficult terrains. This orientation implores reflexive researchers to ask a range of questions about their praxes, including those centred in this chapter around social usefulness and accountability. In terms of social usefulness, we might ask ourselves to whom is our work useful and how, as well as how might our work be (mis)used? We might also think about who we are accountable to and in what ways, and how our accountability might extend beyond those with whom we have direct contact. Although the in service to racial justice principle should be generative for all antiracist scholars and particularly scholar-activists, this chapter pays particular attention to the implications the orientation has for those that research the far right. Though typically under-considered, such research is fraught with ethical difficulties and tensions, and this chapter is intended to offer a new lens through which to approach these challenges. More so, it urges researchers to push back against approaches within far right studies that risk amplifying and legitimising the far right by placing ourselves firmly on the side of communities of resistance and racial justice more broadly.

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