

# Critical philosophy of race: here and now

5–6 June 2014, Senate House, University of London

Conceived as a political intervention into British philosophy, the aim of the ‘Critical Philosophy of Race: Here and Now’ conference was to bring about a confrontation between debates in the critical philosophy of race (CPR) and the analytic philosophical tradition, which has thus far, in the UK, taken very little notice of race. (The last UK conference on philosophy and race, organized by *Radical Philosophy* in 1998, sixteen years ago – leading to the special issue *RP* 95, May/June 1999 – was coincidentally held at the same venue.) One of the aims of the conference – very well attended by philosophers, historians, political theorists and postgraduates from various disciplines – was to focus specifically on what British philosophers are contributing to a field that has flourished in the USA. But the organizer also claimed that this conference would subject the philosophical tradition to some pitiless scrutiny, and was particularly for those ‘analytic’ philosophers who think philosophy can be done from the armchair without getting their hands dirty by grappling with the problem of racial injustice in Britain. To firmly establish the critical philosophy of race in analytic philosophy in Britain is certainly an ambitious aim, but it is closer to being achieved as a result of this event.

Among the invited speakers were academics who had been working in the critical philosophy of race for some time, but only after having left Britain. Is this one indication that philosophy departments in Britain have a narrow conception of philosophy, or is it rather that philosophy is ‘done’ differently in the USA? Although the continental tradition has hardly shrouded itself in glory in this respect, analytic philosophy in the UK has neglected these issues almost entirely (with the exception of some feminist philosophers). Perhaps the lack of emphasis on the history of philosophy in the analytic tradition and its lack of interest in the history of concepts mitigates against its being able to interrogate the history of racial

injustice and its philosophical underpinnings. But, as the conference organizer claimed, it is also the result of a certain narrow conception of what philosophy is. On the whole, analytic philosophy has tended, for example, to avoid the questions concerning ‘lived experience’ that were so important to some major critical philosophers of race, such as Fanon. And it cannot be denied that the gatekeepers of this narrow conception of philosophy, keen to keep the discipline to themselves, have mainly been middle-class men racialized as white. Within this constricted approach a narrative filled with prejudice has been circulated since at least the 1780s. Indeed, it was Kant and Hegel (often considered ‘continental philosophers’) who helped shape the dogmatic and Eurocentric view that philosophy proper was exclusive to the West/Europe, confining Africa and Asia to the margins of history and humanity. Nevertheless, it seems as though the solid boundaries that exist between analytic and continental philosophy can become more fluid where issues in critical philosophy of race are concerned.

Onora O’Neill opened the conference with a short talk about the legislation that deals – insufficiently – with discrimination. The central point of her talk was to stress that philosophers had a fundamental role to play when it came to policymaking: this was to be found in ‘paying due regard’ to policies. Admittedly, this was an ambiguous term that needed more explanation. Nevertheless, if ‘paying due regard’ means that philosophers can help bring greater clarity to policies and decision-making in a way that is critical and constructive, then certainly it is something that philosophers need to take on board. The theme was echoed at the end of the conference, when Omar Khan (of the Runnymede Trust) argued for preferential policies/affirmative action as a necessary part of the work of reparation. As racism is a group-based harm that affects every member of the group, so do

preferential policies that help individual members of a minority group help the group at large. Khan looked to the future of critical philosophy of race as a discipline in Britain, but also stressed that philosophers could have a significant role to play in helping and shaping policymaking in Britain, especially when it comes to race equality policy.

This first full paper of the conference was given by Robert Bernasconi, whose pioneering work has done much to help a generation of graduates wanting to work on the issues of racism and Eurocentrism in the formation of the philosophical canon. His paper offered a surprising new addition to CPR, especially for philosophers in Britain. Bernasconi proposed that aspects of the work of Michael and Ann Dummett ought to be central to the canon of CPR. While Michael Dummett's name is well known in the analytic tradition, his work with Ann Dummett on anti-racism is largely ignored. Bernasconi argued that British philosophers should pay attention to the Dummetts' important work on institutional racism and on the politics of language and immigration. Drawing from published and unpublished manuscripts, Bernasconi showed that the Dummetts believed that racism was not something that could be tackled via debate alone. This is also why they steered away from a single definition of racism: they realized that racism was an oppressive system that constantly changed its form. In other words, to try to pin down a single definition of racism would be to misunderstand it. What Bernasconi stressed, then, and advocated, was the Dummetts' view that when speaking about racism, context not definitions is important.

Meena Dhanda spoke about legal protections against the inequalities of the caste system, and why there had been a delay in implementing them. Drawing on the work of B.R. Ambedkar, Dhanda argued that caste discrimination has systemic roots: it is a system of institutional inequality. People who call for legal protections against caste inequalities are usually able to recognize this. However, Dhanda examined the claims of certain 'anti-legislation' Hindu groups who argue that caste inequalities no longer exist. She welcomed the legal protection, and indeed it would be hard to argue against this. Nevertheless, legal protection against caste discrimination seems to be merely a consolation prize. Can the deep-rooted dogma of caste discrimination be solved with legislation? Or was Ambedkhar right that endogamy is necessary to break the caste system? Perhaps this is what Indians need to dwell on.

Brian Klug examined the linguistics, or 'language tricks', of racially offensive statements, with special attention to anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. Klug offered an insight into the 'general logic' of these two phenomena, which are, according to him, analogous, or which have what Wittgenstein would call a 'family resemblance', both operating according to a 'logic of Othering'. Gabriella Beckles-Raymond argued that while the dominant media representation of the mixed-race woman suggests that there is racial harmony in Britain, this 'masquerade' actually obscures inequalities and social injustices. According to Beckles-Raymond, as long as the mixed-race woman's image is not the face of politics, science and technology, business and industry or academia, then, the masquerades that emphasize racial harmony in Britain should be scrutinized – although how these would not also be part of the masquerade was not explained. Annabelle Lever was also concerned with issues of representation. Lever argued that all-white juries in Britain were an obvious sign of the injustice of the legal system. And while it is not clear whether a multiracial jury would improve the quality of jury decisions, it would help to break the white monopoly on the 'face' of justice in Britain.

In a similar vein, Nicholas Kwesi Tsri provided a genealogy of the term 'black' through an explorative literature review, showing that the term is mostly used in a negative way. From Classical Antiquity and the Bible to modern texts, the term 'black' symbolizes 'sin' and 'evil'. For Tsri, as long as this symbolic use of 'black' continues, the categorical use will be degraded. Accordingly, Tsri then argued that the term 'black' should be replaced with 'African'. But this is a worrying conclusion, because if we focus narrowly on the linguistic, symbolic use of the term of 'black' we lose the ability to discriminate between contexts of use (not to mention that not all self-identified 'black' people are 'African'). And is it a given that the term 'African' does not or will not refer to a degraded, excluded people? Does the same logic that degrades those labelled as 'black' not also operate in relation to the 'African'?

The talk by Nathaniel Adam Tobias Coleman, the organizer of the conference, was much anticipated, and for good reason. He showed that, although the critical philosophy of race has flourished in the USA, there is evidence that the origin of the discourse was in Britain, with William Wilberforce. Wilberforce is of course acknowledged as a prominent abolitionist, but his published works, in which he outlines his social and political views and goals, have been

largely neglected. Tobias Coleman challenged the new vision for the UK national curriculum dictated by Michael Gove, former secretary of state for education. In Gove's new curriculum children's knowledge of Wilberforce will be restricted to mere biographical facts, ignoring his critique of the moral degradation of white domination over people racialized as black, found in many of his works including *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious Systems of Professed Christians: In the Higher and Middle Classes, Contrasted with Real Christianity*.

So, did the conference achieve its aim? There is no doubt that it was a milestone in British philosophy, albeit one that marks only the first step in a long journey. Students and teachers of philosophy may not want to believe that racism is part and parcel of the Western philosophical tradition, but when African and Asian traditions are consigned to the margins of history, and the people 'doing' philosophy still tend to belong to the white middle and 'upper' classes, how much longer can this naive view

last? Paraphrasing Ann Dummett (from *A Portrait of English Racism*), Bernasconi claimed that to combat institutional racism one needed institutional change. This means that we need to think, among other things, about how philosophy departments should be transformed. The radical changes that are necessary require a fundamental revision of the philosophical canon to include key texts from African and Asian philosophies. Departments and individuals responsible for setting curriculums need to reflect on the mode of that inclusion. Philosophy in Britain, then, has two choices: either it will accept African/Asian philosophies as philosophy, or it will continue to ignore, repress and exclude these ideas, which will help it to remain silent on issues of racial marginalization and injustice in academia and society more generally. To become more inclusive, philosophy must also become, to some degree, interdisciplinary: it needs to draw from disciplines including history, art, religion, science and politics if it is to flourish.

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