

Bursting the liberal bubble: Racism in the era of Brexit and Trump

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Recent political developments have revived discussions on racism. But did we ever see the 'end of racism'? Drawing on extensive research on the historical articulations of racism across Europe, [Katy Sian](#) explains how in the post-racial society, debates on anti-racism became invisible. This confusion allowed racism to grow unchecked.



Post-racialism and anti-racism

Between 2010 and 2013, when myself and colleagues at the University of Leeds were [exploring](#) the semantics of racism and anti-racism across Europe, there was a growing sense that racism was a problem that had been more or less resolved. In the UK, this enunciation of the post-racial came with a subjective definition in the Stephen Lawrence enquiry and the Macpherson report. Through the definition that a racist incident referred 'to any incident that was perceived to be racist by the victim or any other person', white people paradoxically came to represent [the largest group of victims](#) of racial violence. This counterintuitive conclusion [reflected](#) how the shift in the definition of racism removed the structural dimensions of power and, as a consequence, racism became fungible.

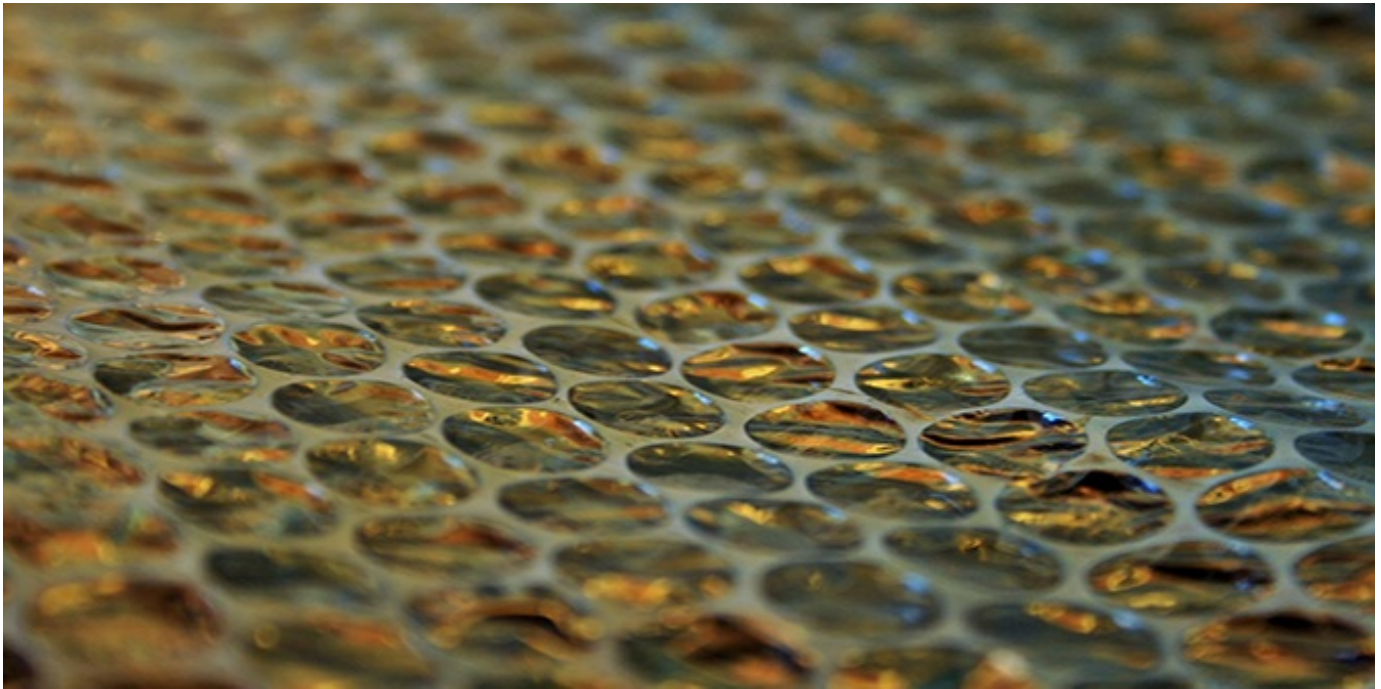
Another expression of the post-racial was to be found in the New Labour idea that Britain had become a multiracial society. In this narrative, racism was seen to be trivial and its occurrence marginal or exceptional. In terms of policy developments, we also documented the diluting of anti-racist politics with the implementation of an umbrella of human rights organizations flushing out the 'R-word' once and for all. All these developments transformed anti-racism into post-racialism, the arrival of which was signalled not just through the way in which ethnically marked sports personalities came to represent the nation, but most of all with the election of the first black president of the US.

The end of racism?

So, the post-racial has been characterized by a sense that we have seen the 'end of racism'. But those suspicious of claims about the post-racial often point to the way in which deep structures of racialised injustice continue to persist. In this view, the post-racial is simply a fantasy. In other words, the celebration of the post-racial through the prism of a black American president and the ubiquity of ethnic food, fashion, and music does not alter embedded systems and practices of racial oppression. (Everybody knows that even in an economic recession the wages of whiteness get paid out.)

Conventional accounts of racism – those which see racism as a *conviction* guiding individual attitudes – remain the most influential, informing public and political commentary. This is not all that surprising since such an understanding of racism goes hand in hand with dominant accounts of liberalism: by liberalism we mean not a specific political orientation, but rather a philosophical posturing. Liberals are those who believe societies are an aggregation of individuals and reason as the only means of acquiring fundamental 'truths'.

By connecting the existence of racism to racists (whether through delusion, or ignorance), the elimination of racism is predicated on a methodological individualism that excludes the possibility of political and social reform. In this view, racism can be added to a list of cruelties that the West has effectively dealt with by demonstrating its capacity for reform and progress. Such liberal ontology has depoliticized the struggle for racial justice.



The re-racialisation of European politics

We stated in our research that poor implementation of law reflected the lack of political will, and warned of the active re-racialisation of European politics. We also suggested that a renewed debate on the role of neoliberalism in contemporary forms of European racialisation would provide an important dimension in developing analyses on policy and practice. Neoliberalism has bound individuals into political projects which carry through a range of techniques of governance and managerialism involving securitisation, military occupation, penalising the poor and creating 'infertainment'.

This toxic mix has been the bubbling lava beneath an imagined, glossy surface of racial harmony. The far right, the neocons, and many well-intentioned liberals, all had a part to play in the new political eruption we now face. A post-racial society that fails to recognize the depth of the racial cannot eradicate racism, but only [affirm it through another register](#); that register has come through Brexit and Donald Trump.

Liberal tears and tantrums in our current climate suggest that some have the memory of a goldfish, or have simply been sleeping comfortably under a warm cover of privilege. The demand for the returning of the white nation from its multicultural sojourns is presented as a new development, but in many ways it is an established trope of racist discourse, which marks the nation as being constitutively white, and all others as intruders.

The events which burst the post-racial liberal bubble and brought them crashing down to reality, lies in the fact that the votes around Brexit and Trump exposed the ugly nature of racism, and we know how traumatic this can be for many liberals. As [Sayyid](#) notes, many liberals who were repelled by Nazi racial policies were simultaneously on many occasions endorsing similar forms of governance out in the colonies. The same liberals supported drone assassinations under Obama because he is more appealing than Trump.

Similarly, claims for the EU as being a bastion of the liberal order are undermined by a history (and a present) of inhumane treatment of refugees by many of its member states. Before Brexit and Trump, these practices were easier to swallow for many liberals who, beneath it all, have never been able to give up their privilege. Over the years many have enabled the paving for a way in which white supremacy has gone unchecked. It was only through collective anti-racist movements that white entitlement could be profoundly challenged and contained, but as we have seen, through the steady sell of the post-racial, alongside external neoliberal forces, 'people got used to anything.'

Note: The above draws on a paper presented to the ASEN Seminar Series at the LSE, and is based upon research generated from the TOLERACE project (2010-2013, University of Leeds). Findings were published in the book *Racism, Governance, and Public Policy* and a shorter blog on the topic for Runnymede Trust is also available [here](#).

About the Author

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