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RACISM

(Lawrence Blum)

History of term "racism"

"Racism" is now the most common term used to condemn behavior in the racial arena of life. It has not always been. The idea of "race" itself, in its modern meaning, goes back at least to the rise of biological classifications of human populations in the 18th century. It was further developed as European colonial projects and slavery, not originally thought to require justification, came to be seen as requiring that their subject populations be viewed as humanly inferior. The "scientific" notion of race eventually became the primary form of such justification.

Accordingly, the "racial" hierarchies we now condemn were for several centuries regarded as proper and right, though there were always individuals who criticized them as violating a common humanity or equality in the sight of God. The notion of "racism" arose in relation to the condemnation of such hierarchies. It was used in the 1930's (in English, French, and German) to characterize and condemn the Nazi philosophy of racial hierarchy; and became more common in the post-WWII period to condemn colonialism (and, retrospectively, slavery) in Africa, Asia, and the Americas. This history means that phenomena such as slavery, colonialism, or segregation became widely condemned, recognizing their racial character, but (until relatively recently) without using the term "racism."

Current usage of "racism"

"Racism" in its current usage never loses a semantic connection with historical systems of racial oppression and the belief systems invoked to rationalize them. "Racism" is virtually always used with condemnatory force, although it can be used analytically or diagnostically, where the condemnation is not the point of the characterization. However, an increasing number of European and US citizens embrace racist ideology (though not always the designation "racist").

In current usage "racism" applies to many different sorts of human categories—beliefs, ideologies, attitudes, feelings, actions, institutions, systems, societies—where the 1930's use was only for ideologies. But that plurality of categories is consistent with seeing some of them as fundamental and others derivative. For example, J.L.A. Garcia sees racial ill-will as fundamental, with racist actions, ideologies, and societies deriving their racism from the ill-will of individuals (Garcia 1996). T. Shelby sees racial ideology as fundamental, and the other forms as deriving from a relationship to the ideology (Shelby 2014).

However, in other respects "racism" no longer retains a uniform meaning in common speech in the West, and perhaps around the world. For example, some use it to mean "taking race into account in one's behavior toward others," that is, violating "color-blindness." Others use it only for treating persons *disrespectfully* or *unequally* due to race, but not for simply taking account of race. Still others deny that its core meaning concerns how individual persons treat others, and reserve it for institutional or systemic arrangements that unjustifiably

subordinate one racial group to another (Blum 2004). So, proffered accounts of racism can no longer appeal simply to shared linguistic usage.

Racial wrongs or ills other than "racism"

One important disagreement regarding accounts of racism is whether "racism" should be seen as a general umbrella term for anything of moral significance that goes wrong in the racial domain; or that there are distinctive kinds of racial ills, not all of which are best characterized as "racism." For example, if a white person keeps confusing two Black male colleagues, one might think "racial insensitivity" or "racial ignorance" more apt characterizations of the fault involved than "racism" because the latter implies a stronger condemnation than the fault involved warrants. But adherents of the "umbrella" view might reply that both characterizations are apt, and that "racial insensitivity" and "racial ignorance" are types of racism. This approach is in line with regarding racial insensitivity as what has come to be called a "microaggression," generally understood to refer to a seemingly minor racial infraction but one that is harmful to its recipient, partly because such infractions are more common than white people tend to recognize, and their cumulative nature contributes to the harm in question.

One consideration relevant for determining how we should use "racism" is pragmatic. Do we best diminish the incidence of racial ills, and help persons engaging in them to take responsibility for them, by calling them "racism", or "racial insensitivity" (Harper and Kling 2022; Blum 2002, chapter 3)? Wherever one comes down on that question, it may still be helpful to recognize the diversity of racial ills by pluralizing the vocabulary we use to name those ills beyond only "racism," as we already do to some extent by speaking of racial insensitivity, racial discrimination, racial stereotyping, racial stigmatization, racial injustice, and so on—even if we also refer to all of them collectively as "racism."

Who gets to say if racism has occurred? The role of experience

Because the accusation of "racism" tends to be so morally charged, there is a tendency to overly focus on the presumed perpetrator—whether they were really racist or morally blameworthy. But how incidents of insult, stereotyping, and stigmatizing affect their targets is of more fundamental importance. Quite frequently, people accused, or who regard themselves as accused, of racism defend themselves by saying they did not intend to harm the target or to "be racist." While intention often matters to the degree of the agent's blameworthiness, it is not necessarily relevant to whether the target was harmed by what they experienced as racial insult or discrimination. The target may be saying "You didn't intend to harm me, but you did anyway." A familiar example of this is a white person intending to compliment an Asian member of their European society by saying "You speak such good English (French, Dutch, etc.)," making the assumption that the person is not native to the society, and thus (inadvertently but still wrongfully) insulting them, since many Asians are native-born in Europe. (Of course, many people who say they do not intend to be racist are lying and simply hope to avoid criticism by denying their actual intent.)

In general a person saying they have experienced racism should be believed. Nevertheless, the prioritizing of the target's experience does not mean the target's

characterization of the harm they experience is always entirely accurate. A Black person might wrongly think a white person's bumping into them on the street was racially motivated when the white person did not see them before bumping into them. Indeed one of the general harms of racism is forcing people to color to deal with discerning whether a particular incident is racially motivated or not.

Individual/Interpersonal, institutional/systemic, and socio-cultural racism

An important distinction in types of racism is between racism by an individual toward other specific individuals, and racism that is embodied in institutions or systems. An example of the institutional form is when a school disciplines students of one racial group more than another, for essentially the same infractions (Warnick 2021). An example of the systemic form is that, in the US for example, Blacks have distinctly poorer health outcomes than whites (Center for Disease Control and Prevention 2021).

"Systemic racism" and "institutional racism" are valuable ideas because they remind us of larger racial harms and injustices easily lost sight of if one looks only at individual-to-individual forms of racism. (But the terminology of "institutional" and "systemic" is not always used in a consistent way, and the terms are sometimes used interchangeably.) In the US there has indeed been a tendency for discussions of racism to be overly focused on interpersonal racism.

However, institutions and systems exist only through individuals operating in their roles within them. And individuals can be morally complicit in institutional/systemic injustices even if they are only "doing their job," and harbor no racial animus or prejudice. The individual is responsible for the racial injustices, and thus for figuring out how to rectify or avoid them, through changing institutional policies and practices. There is individual moral agency within institutions and systems, not only in interpersonal racism. (But that agency does not mean that a person who carries out institutionally racist practices is necessarily themself "a racist.")

Another category of racism, "sociocultural racism" (not "cultural racism," discussed below), falls between and mediates between institutional/systemic racism and the individual. Individuals generally derive their racial prejudices and stereotypes from socio-cultural sources, though they are not generally aware of this. Hostility toward Blacks, Mexicans, Asian Americans (on the part of non-members of those groups, not only whites) in the US are lodged in cultural tropes arising from US history, and to some extent from Western history more generally. The deep background is slavery, Segregation, colonial and exploitative relations in the Western hemisphere; and anti-Black tropes that have circulated in the West for centuries (Frederickson 2002). Some recent Western political leaders have also contributed to socio-cultural racism through demonizing immigrant and ethnic minority groups in their societies. Thus, if a prejudicial view of a certain racial group is fairly widespread in a given society, that presence is not simply a contingent convergence of many different individually generated prejudices.

Sociocultural tropes also contribute to institutional and systemic forms, for example when school security personnel operating from common stereotypes treat Black and Latinx students unequally in disciplinary situations. Knowing the sociocultural source helps us reduce racist prejudice in society, for example through formal education, public discussion of racism,

and trying to diminish racial hierarchies that bolster racist ideologies and beliefs. Each individual's responsibility for their own individual racism, in interpersonal, sociocultural, and institutional/systemic forms complements specifically institutional, political, and collective aspects of responsibility for racism (Young 2011).

"Systemic racism"

"Systemic racism" does not provide an *explanation* for the racial injustices it is concerned with, but only notes that they are systematic in character (Matthew 2021). For any broad group-based disparities in the US and other multi-racial societies today, such as Blacks and whites having unequal health outcomes, many factors contribute, and in particular class-related factors do so. In the US, income is an important determinant of the quality of someone's health insurance, which in turn affects how healthy one is. So the explanation of racial differences in health status partly involves class-based factors.

Somewhat ironically, the foregrounding of "racism" as the operative evaluatively-charged element in "systemic racism" tends to mask the role of class-focused *moral* norms—such as that health should not be dependent on income level—that contribute to our sense of the racial injustice involved in the case at hand.

Implicit bias

It is widely recognized that individuals may not be aware of all of the prejudices they carry in their individual psyche. "Implicit bias" and "aversive racism" are concepts expressing this less-than-conscious racism, for example in unconsciously associating a group with a particular negative characteristic or evaluation.

A moral agent's not consciously embracing the prejudicial sentiment does not absolve them of responsibility for trying to mitigate it or inhibit its expression in action once they become aware of it. The awareness may come from others (or themselves, in self-reflection) bringing to their attention that they have engaged in behavior for which unconscious bias is a plausible explanation, or through taking a test, such as the Implicit Attitude Test (IAT), that plausibly claims to reveal implicit bias (Banaji and Greenwald 2016). There are various techniques for effecting such change, for example, dwelling in one's mind on counter-stereotypical or positively-regarded members of groups against which one has the bias, or conscientiously referring to a list of relevant criteria for a hiring to minimize scope for the bias. Forward-looking responsibility for such attempts does not require an assessment of blameworthiness for having the (unconscious) bias (Holroyd).

Can people of color engage in racism?

Can people of color be racist? A familiar definition of "racism," parlayed in some professional or institutional contexts as if it were an official definition, denies this. The definition is that racism means "prejudice + power," where power is understood as institutional or situational power to give effect to one's prejudices and thus to harm the targets of one's prejudices (D'Angelo 2018, 21). Together with the idea that only whites have that institutional power, the definition implies that people of color cannot be racist, they can only be prejudiced.

Though as mentioned earlier the definition cannot be rejected for violating common usage, it is very problematic. First, although in an overall way, whites have the predominant power in society in European nations and the US, Blacks or other racial minorities have institutional power in various companies, agencies, and organizations, and so have the power to harm white or other non-white persons.

More important, the definition by implication casts "prejudice" as not of great moral concern. (So this definition would reject the earlier suggestion that "racism" is an umbrella term encompassing the various forms of racial wrongfulness, including racial prejudice, under it.) This view is not plausible for interpersonal situations, where prejudices, stereotyping, bias, disrespect, and so on, can be very hurtful or damaging even where the perpetrator and target are people of color, or where the target is a white person.

Moral asymmetries in racism

Nevertheless, the "prejudice + power" definition does pick up on something important about racism. Although someone of any race may be an agent or target of racial prejudice, racial ills are fundamentally morally asymmetrical. When a Black person is discriminated against by a white, it both contributes to the subordination of Blacks as group and also carries (to the target and to others aware of the act, especially other members of the target group) social meanings of subordination, insult, and humiliation that are not carried when a white person is discriminated against by a Black person, even though the latter act is wrongful race-based disrespect, discrimination, or insult. The asymmetries are reflected in the very different moral charge involved in differing ethnic or race-based slurs—"honky" (for white people, in the US), "mick (for Irish people)", and the slur now conventionally referred to as "the N-word." That uttering the latter term is highly stigmatized in public and private settings, especially as used by non-Blacks, testifies to the asymmetric evaluative charge and insult attached to it in comparison to the otherwise analogous terms for whites and white ethnic groups.

The asymmetry is partly that *institutional* racism virtually never takes the form of subordination of white people. But it is also that individual instances of *interpersonal* racism are morally asymmetrical, because they take place in a sociohistorical context shaped by systemic and institutional racism.

"cultural racism"

A more recent entrant in the racism lexicon is "cultural racism." This has been and can be used to name several quite distinct phenomena. One (also referred to [especially in France] as "neo-racism" [Balibar 1991] and [especially in the UK] "new racism" [Rattansi 2020, 69-72)—and used most prominently against Muslims—claims that the cultures of prominent immigrant groups (generally from the former colonies of the countries in question) are incompatible with (but not necessarily inferior to) the dominant, and white, cultures of the nations in question; and this is given as a reason for those nations to limit immigration from those countries. Cultural racism in this sense also prompts hostility and prejudice against members of those groups already present in the society in question. It is referred to as "racism," rather than (only) cultural or religious prejudice, partly because the groups in question are seen as phenotypically distinct (as Arabs and South Asians) from the white majority population (Modood 2001;

Rattansi 2020); partly because the negative cultural characteristics attributed to the groups are viewed as almost immutable and inherent in the groups, analogously to traditional biologically-based racism, and thereby misusing the concept of "culture" (McCarthy 2009; Rattansi 2020, 78f); and partly because neo-racism is used to exclude and subordinate (Blum 2020). This "Islamophobia" ("Muslimphobia" would be more accurate for the sentiment intended, as its target is more Muslim people than just the religion itself) is very similar to traditional anti-Semitism (anti-Jewish prejudice). In both cases a religious/cultural group is being viewed racially and in that sense "racialized." (But a devaluing of cultures themselves, apart from the persons embodying those cultures, while objectionable, is not helpfully referred to as "racism," as some definitions of "racism" do [Blackwell 1993, 538-541] [See Rattansi 2020]). Nor should the attribution of a negative cultural characteristic that is conceived of (in line with the accurate understanding of "cultural") as open to change (Blum 2023).]

A very different notion of "cultural racism" (more common in the US) is when a negative cultural characteristic is attributed to a group standardly understood as a racial group, for example, African Americans allegedly embracing a culture of anti-intellectualism that hinders African American students from doing well in school (McWhorter 2001). Both these notions of cultural racism are plausibly regarded as attempts to avoid the opprobrium now attaching to expressions of traditional, biologically-based, racism, while still supporting exclusion and inferiorization of the same groups.

A third, distinct, notion, familiar in historical colonial (including settler colonial) contexts, is when colonized groups were viewed as having a pervasive cultural deficiency, such as being "savage" or "barbarian," that was taken to justify colonial domination, partly on the grounds that such domination would, over time, lift the colonized peoples out of that deficiency. As Frederickson points out, this rationale differs from the more standardly racist rationale for slavery, that the subject population in question was inherently, biologically, inferior or defective, so their subjection should be permanent (Frederickson 2002).

Racism and group-differentiated racisms

Racism takes different forms in different geographical and historical settings. Slavery differs from race-based immigration restriction, and both differ from being driven from one's homelands by colonists. Such differences affect the overall way racism has played, and plays, out for different racialized populations, including the groups' current experiences and situations in post-slavery and post-colonial contexts. The recent articulation of "anti-Blackness" is one form of recognition of such group-differentiated racisms, although in some versions, it tends to go further and say that the form of anti-Black cultural devaluing is distinctly more damaging than that the analogous cultural devaluation other ethnic or racial group (Wilderson 2020).

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