editorial

Racism, hatred and melancholic curiosity

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These articles emerged from both David Gadd and Narendra Keval being asked to offer their reflections (by the ‘Political Mind’ section of the British Psychoanalytic Society) on their work on racism some years after their initial publication, and the dialogue between the two. David Gadd co-wrote the book Losing the Race: Thinking Psychosocially about Racially Motivated Crime (Gadd and Dixon, 2011). The book was based on an Economic and Social Research Council funded research project that included interviews with people who had been convicted of racially motivated hate crimes living in ‘the Potteries’, an area located in the West Midlands area of England and often viewed as enduring the distress of post-industrial decline. They adopted a psychoanalytically informed psychosocial approach to understand the entwinement of issues of identity, history and personal trauma in the creation of racist states of mind. Narendra Keval’s (2024) article reflected on his own ideas about the link between melancholia and the forms of racism he encountered as someone from Asian descent brought up in Britain that had been outlined in his book Racist States of Mind: Understanding the Perversion of Curiosity and Concern (Keval, 2016).

Stephen Blumenthal (2024) had also responded to David Gadd’s talk and the three pieces looked like they might form the basis for an interesting meditation on the contemporary scene of racism in post-Brexit Britain. As Stephen Blumenthal observes, we have witnessed many changes over the 20 years since Gadd and Dixon (2011) carried out their interviews. On the one hand we have seen increases in levels of cultural intolerance towards overt racism and yet at the same time ‘it bubbles away beneath the surface’ and if anything globally we can witness ‘greater division’ and strengthening of national boundaries where the ‘the other’ seems more of a threat than ever (Blumenthal, 2024). The significant intervention provided by the various campaigns and responses to the plea to note that ‘Black Lives Matter’ has been another milestone. Thus, we could not ignore the importance of bringing in people who could speak from the lived experience of being black in the UK to join this interchange and reflect back on their own experiences of ‘race’ and racism. We are therefore pleased that Anne Aiyegbusi and Ivan Ward joined in this conversation.

I felt moved to contribute to this conversation about racism and racial hatred, having been privy to the discussions and drafts as the editor of the journal.

These are troubling subjects that I have, for various reasons, had to think hard about. Spending 14 years teaching Psychosocial Studies at the University of East London certainly focused my attention. Such was the student body there; made up
of local East Londoners the vast majority of whom had family roots from all over the world – particularly those from territories formerly colonised by Britain, of course. I often had the experience of being one of few white men, or sometimes the only white person in the room. My initial anxieties and self-consciousness about being not only white but actually being the person with the authority of ‘lecturer’ in the room were quite quickly tempered. I think that there were processes of containment that were enabled within this environment because it was one that had brought us all (staff and students) together to think psychosocially. I wonder, now, if there was a mutual curiosity about ourselves, others and the worlds we lived in. To me this theme of curiosity weaves through this conversation, and yet is a concept that itself needs some thought so that it can serve as a benign rather than destructive force.

It was also true that for me to hear those students’ experiences of ‘race’ and racism brought home that not only was this really important, in ways that are not well understood by those of us with pale skins, but that there were complexities here and there was a crying need for far more nuanced and thoughtful approaches than has often been the case. Tales of racism emanating from ‘white’ people and white institutions, and the highly visceral impact of those experiences, would often be mixed with more positive experiences of other white people and white institutions. Additionally, there were experiences of discrimination and othering that were experienced within, and at the various boundaries surrounding, the culturally heterogeneous communities they lived in. These, also painful, experiences of prejudice might be based on skin colour, background, gender and sexuality.

The sophisticated thinking here has assisted me to make sense of my own disparate thoughts. Narendra Keval (2024) helpfully draws attention to the mercurial nature of racism that makes it so hard to ‘pinpoint objectively’. David Gadd’s (2024) work beautifully illustrates this through his reporting of the way that some of the people that he interviewed could simultaneously seem to exclude many of the traditional targets of British racism from their invective, even while their language still thoroughly, and viciously, ‘othered’ the same. Meanwhile, the most overt and prominent targets for the most visceral and direct racist aggression seemed to be those most newly arrived; fleeing war, poverty and unrest from the Middle East, Turkey and the Balkans. ‘Steve’, for example, had ‘always got on with “black” people’ and indeed could claim that his best friend was black. Meanwhile his aggression and violence was directed towards ‘Kosovans’ (a term he used with little distinction but referencing a wider group who did not fit into the categories of black, Asian or ‘white’, including those who had fled danger and persecution in not only the Balkan wars, but displacement from Iraq, Turkey and Afghanistan. Steve draws attention to two fundamentally important issues here – the significance of the apparent co-existence of racism alongside tolerance and even affection towards individuals, and second also the prominence of people who could be understood as ‘new arrivals’ in the narrations of hatred. Perhaps both of these point towards something important.

Steve is of course evoking the notorious and much mocked phrase ‘some of my best friends are black’, used as an exculpatory prelude to a bluntly racist point (the phrase even has its own Wikipedia page). I have wondered whether, alongside the more obvious disavowal, that the use of the phrase illustrates something quite significant about racism; that people do recognise that it does not really survive within, other than the most fleeting, encounters between individuals where the absurd fantastic elements of racism
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are exposed to the daylight. Perhaps, instead, racism might be better understood as thriving at a group level, or in a more psychosocial space – despite its impact being felt by individuals? Anne Aiyegbusi (2024) reminds us, in her remarkable piece of writing here, not only of the visceral impact, and lifelong scars, of racism but also of the importance of the perspectives on race and racism that have emerged from group analytic traditions. As writers such as Dalal (2002) (and Du Bois [1899] and Fanon [1952] before) make clear, the way that racism works its way through time and culture shaping thoughts and feelings cannot be ignored. Nevertheless, it is also vital to be able to reflect on the very visceral hatred that seems to be so embedded within the biographies and lived experiences that are so vividly documented in David Gadd’s material.

The conversation in these articles has helped me think this through as well as it draws attention to the significance of the triangular relational dimension of what Narendra Keval, evoking the Freudian primal scene, has called the ‘racist scene’. This is such a helpful expansion on some of the psychoanalytic work on racism, which, as Ivan Ward (2024) points to, can be rather ‘black and white’, relying too much on the bi-relational model of splitting and projection: ‘Unwanted (split off) aspects of the white psyche – the dirty self, the rapacious self, the humiliated self and so on – are projected into another group and become the basis for stereotyping, scapegoating, denial and attacking’ (Ward, 2024).

Ivan Ward refers us to Freud’s analysis of the significance of scapegoating to group psychology and the way that it links to processes of loss. Those experiencing loss can avoid some of the pain, and the almost inevitable feelings of ambivalence, by creating ‘demons’ that allow us to ‘project the negative feelings onto the demon allowing us to feel persecuted by our demons’ rather than admit those feelings are within ourselves. Here we see the main and significant theme of melancholia being foregrounded; the experience of loss alongside the disavowal of unwanted feelings. As Ivan notes, the melancholia of race has to be understood as taking place in a complex nexus of relationships. David Gadd’s work illustrates that it is not just the hated object of racism but there is also the third party, the figure of authority who provokes hatred by seeming to favour ‘the other’. A form of parent-sibling dynamic is powerfully evoked; it is not just that they have come over here and stolen our homes and our jobs, but they have been allowed, or encouraged to do so, by those people with authority. It might be the local council allocating housing to the newcomers, or the government schemes that are imagined distributing driving lessons and designer clothes to the hated rivals whilst turning a deaf ear to the needs and plight of the beleaguered locals (Gadd, 2024). In evoking the significance of the sibling relationship we are taken back to Narendra Keval’s interest in the significance of curiosity and concern as embedded in fundamental psychosocial processes. Freud hypothesised that curiosity was a key developmental achievement first evoked in young children as the faced the viscerally felt ontological question of where they come from and who they are (Aronoff, 1962). As Freud noted in his musings on the creativity of Leonardo Davinci, most children pass through a period of curiosity, perhaps beginning around age three:

[T]he curiosity of children of this age does not awaken spontaneously, but is aroused by the impression made by some important event – by the actual birth of a little brother or sister, or by the fear of it based on external experiences – in which the child receives a threat to his selfish interests. Researches are directed
to the question of where babies come from, exactly as if the child were looking for ways and means to avert so undesired an event. (Freud, 1910: 78)

To Freud, these stirrings of curiosity are likely to themselves be repressed to avoid the troubling conclusions of such research. How curiosity can then re-emerge and be nurtured becomes a considerable developmental challenge. A secure sense of self, nurtured in a good enough environment, can perhaps cultivate more benign forms of curiosity where anxiety about rivalry and threat is balanced by a willingness to understand and relate. Without the secure base, curiosity can be a more fearful force. The people that Gadd and colleagues interviewed had indeed experienced losses and felt let down. That they experienced this within a triangular dynamic between those assumed to hold power and authority and the usurpers who apparently benefit from the incontinent parental passions is vividly apparent in Gadd’s material.

Anne Aiyegbusi’s work importantly draws us back to recall how curiosity belongs within an uncomfortable and existential dynamic. It can be, when it is part of a consensual relationship, a benign dynamic through which we can understand ourselves and others better. It can also be a hurtful, one-sided and aggressive move to expose and dissect ‘the other’.

This dynamic of a melancholic failure to properly mourn the infallibility of the parent (and of authority) seems such an important dimension of the contemporary political scene to grasp. The huge problem we face is the willingness of those in our political culture who seem to revel in stirring the hateful elements of this dynamic. We have witnessed the Conservative government (in power from May 2010 until July 2024) join and amplify the rhetoric of other right-wing parties apparently happy to not only demonise immigrants and those who seek asylum but also those who seem to side with, or enable and strengthen, the hated newcomers. The vilification of the ‘metropolitan elites’, the ‘wokerati’, ‘lefty lawyers’ or ‘do-gooders’ as they stand accused of scornfully favouring immigrants over the forgotten white population has surely been the significant dynamic of our times.

In a speech given to the Conservative Party conference in October 2023, Suella Braverman, as Home Secretary,1 focused almost entirely on the problem of mass immigration and defended that focus, and the tough measures her government were adopting. She talked about the ‘luxury beliefs’ held by members of the elites, arguing that they ‘have money. They have status. They have loud voices’. She went on to describe how “The luxury beliefs brigade” sit in their ivory towers telling ordinary people that they are morally deficient because they dare to get upset about the impact of illegal migration, net zero, or habitual criminals’. She then went on to argue that ‘The luxury beliefs brigade’ were already in charge:

We see it in parts of Whitehall, in museums and galleries, in the police, and even in leading companies in the City. Under the banner of diversity, equity, and inclusion, official policies have been embedded that distort the whole purpose of these institutions. Highly controversial ideas are presented to workforces and the public as if they are motherhood and apple pie.

Whilst there is a extraordinary level of irony here – this is a British Home Secretary, considered to be one of the very highest offices of state, appointed by a prime minister
who is one of the wealthiest people in Britain; the tactic of inviting hatred and fear to be directed not only towards migrants, but simultaneously towards ‘the elites’ is not just the tactic of one errant Home Secretary but has become typical – an everyday argument. It became the motif of the Brexit campaign and is held across far-right groups across Europe and North America.

It is worth recalling the fate of Enoch Powell – whose hateful speech in 1968 is still painfully recalled by Anne Aiyegbusi. Within two days of this speech, he was sacked from his position in Edward Heath’s shadow cabinet. The dramatic differences here should concern us and provoke some curiosity.

Freud’s hypothesis about the developmental role of curiosity offers us creative insight into the triangular psychosocial dynamics of racism. Curiosity about one’s own and others’ origins can help foster a deeper understanding of ourselves. However, when distorted by malign societal forces, curiosity can become a tool for objectifying others and reinforcing divisions. This dynamic is evident in contemporary political discourse, where right-wing rhetoric often demonizes immigrants and those perceived as supporting them. The thoughtful and heartfelt pieces that follow here provide a welcome opportunity for reflection and a chance for us to develop a benign form of curiosity.

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https://www.ukpol.co.uk/suella-braverman-2023-speech-to-conservative-party-conference/.

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