

## **Do Post-Racials Dream of White Sheep?**

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"I'd Rather Hear Both Sides  
Of The Tale  
See, It's Not About Races  
Just Places"

Michael Jackson

### **Introduction**

Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep is a novel by Philip K Dick set in the post-apocalyptic future (initially in 1991 and revised for subsequent editions of the novel to 2020s) where biological life has become rare. The title refers to the possibility of artificial life forms which look and act like humans (androids) and wonders whether acting like a human would mean that androids would also have interior lives like humans, in other words, if androids could dream and, if they could, would their dreams be different from ours? This echoes Wittgenstein's famous observation: "If a lion could talk we could not understand him." How different are postcolonial, ethnically marked minorities from the national majorities of European Union plutocracies is a question that vexes politicians, commentators and academics. The degree of perceived difference between some ethnically marked minorities and national (ethnically unmarked) majority is what constitutes grounds for discussion around tolerance, integration and multiculturalism. A number of academic disciplines and concepts to manage and police the difference between ethnically marked minorities and ethnically unmarked majorities have been developed and deployed.

Discussions about androids and lions may appear to be an odd way to introduce a conceptual guide to a project about the semantics of tolerance but it is precisely because the questions around the category of racism are about the ontology of the social – and because the distinction between epistemology and ontology is heuristic rather intrinsic, the question of knowing and understanding racism cannot be separated from the nature of racism or more accurately our comportment to it. In other words, semantics of tolerance have to be understood, not as superficial or merely ‘rhetorical’ but rather, as constitutive of social relations. The meaning of tolerance and its various national and regional inflexions articulated and institutionalized is one of the key processes which determine the production of contemporary European Union societies. The recent votes in Belgium and France banning the burqa illustrate how the attempt to regulate and govern the distance between ethnically marked and unmarked has a significance which is not merely restricted to the marginalized. Any conceptual inquiry has to take into account its background practices and assumptions of its context, for, it is precisely the context that draws the parameters of what is intelligible. Texts can only appear in a context and the meaning of tolerance cannot be separated from the context in which it is disclosed. This context is not based on an invariant and immutable core that determines its contours, but nor is the context a random amalgamation of elements, rather the context is the crystallization of particular philosophical and political struggles. Thus, an understanding of racism in Western societies has to have a historical dimension.

### **Racism’s Horizons**

Barnor Hesse (2010) argues that the history of racism as problem for Western plutocracies can be understood as in terms of three distinct horizons. The first of these horizons (what he calls the racist horizon) came to the fore from the 1930s to 1970s. During this period the rejection of racism took place in context of explicitly racist regimes and cultures. The early Civil Rights struggle and analogous movements in the colonies were all conditioned to the extent that those overt commitments to racism were in place throughout the Western plutocracies. The second horizon (the anti-racist horizon) can be dated approximately from the 1970s to early 1990s, during this period the question of race and racism was conditioned by advances made by anti-racist struggles which forced Western governments to condemn racism but race continued to structure inequalities and imbalances in power.

Overt commitments to racism were increasingly marginalized and a general consensus began to emerge in Western plutocracies that racism was something to be condemned rather celebrated. Thus the internationalization of the struggle against apartheid leading to isolation of the last overtly racist regime was only made possible within this anti-racist horizon. The third horizon is the post-racial horizon. It is characterized by a sense that we have seen the “end of racism” and its expulsion from the public domain. Elements of this post-racial conceptual horizon can be discerned from the mid-1990s onwards when cultural and commercial celebrations of certain forms of blackness began to emerge. It was not only advertising by global brands such as Benetton, but also secular virtual canonization of Nelson Mandela following his release from Robbin Island, who became an almost unique example of an anti-colonial figure and who was feted globally even by those who not so long ago supported the apartheid regime. It was not just the way in which elite ethnically marked sports personalities came to represent the nation, but it was most of all the election of first black president of the United States which signaled the arrival of the post-racial. The idea of the post-racial haunts Europe’s attempt to re-imagine itself as an ethnically integrated and racially harmonious, and culturally tolerant space, and academic and public policy increasingly positions itself within this post-racial context.

According to Hesse (2010):

*“The meaning of the ‘post-racial’ raises an unsettling challenge for critical theory. As much as the demise of the cold war, or the emergence of neo-liberalism or the immanence of the ‘war against terror’, it is the name of a becoming which requires us to radically question the being of the histories we comfortably thought we knew.”*

The post-racial is announced explicitly or implicitly by reference to a new cultural disposition in which the representation of people of colour is seen as transforming the whiteness hegemonically associated with Europeaness. This splash of colour becomes a metaphor for a landscape no longer polluted by the horrors of racism. Those who see in the post-racial, not the future to come but the present that is already here, paint a picture in which the elimination of racism produces a liberal nirvana- societies in which people can be individuals without imposition of colour-coded cultural constraints. That is, such women and men see ethnic marking in its banal sense, not as a way of life but as a lifestyle that they can pick and mix as a matter of individual whim. The post-racial then works by turning racial logic into mere aesthetic affection, race is after all skin deep and

underneath our black, brown, red or yellow skins it's all pink. The recruitment of ethnically marked representatives for decidedly xenophobic parties and platforms is no longer seen as extraordinary but a confirmation that diversity like democracy and developed economies is a hallmark of what it means to be European.

Many who are suspicious of the claims made for the post-racial in the present quite properly point to the way in which deep structures of racialized injustice continues to persist. In this view the post racial simply does not exist, it is a chimera, an illusion manufactured by the wicked for the foolish. A black president, third world rock stars, and all the ethnic food you can eat does not change the violent hierarchies that remain in place grinding away at the souls of the dispossessed. Everybody knows the depressing statistics that continue show that even in an economic recession the wages of whiteness get paid out in time. To those who believe that racism is alive and well, the talk of post-racial is either ironic or disingenuous as for them, the post-racial means not the displacement of the racialized order but its continuation by other means (as the American comedian Larry Wilmore quipped that Obama may be post-racial but the rest of America isn't). The post-racial arises not through the elimination of racism, but through a discursive re-configuration which makes it increasingly difficult to locate racism in Western societies except historically or exceptionally. The constitutive character of the racialized governmentality in the formation of the European state is elided. This is despite the way in which a general convergence within the critical race literature around the genealogy of racism and its contemporaneous origins within early modern states has emerged. There remains a miss-match, in that the literature on racialized governmentality has made very little impact on public policy. The conceptualizations of race and racism thus tend to remain immune from discussions within the field of critical race theory. As a consequence important insights that could inform debates about tolerance are lost as 'colonial solutions to postcolonial problems' are continually sought: as the post-racial displaces the possibility of the decolonial.

Conventional accounts of racism which see it as a system of beliefs either as a form of ideological falsification (which in the classic Marxian formulation racism disguises and divides the true interests of social agents), or conviction that guides individual attitudes and behavior, that is, racism is what happens inside individual heads, remains the most influential account informing public policy and commentary. This is not perhaps that surprising since such an understanding of racism chimes in with hegemonic

accounts of liberalism. By liberalism I mean not a specific political orientation but rather a philosophical compartment. Liberals are those who believe societies are basically an aggregation of individuals and that 'truth' can be grasped by rational speech. A liberal conception of racism has epistemological, methodological, and sociological effects. By focusing on racism as something to be found in the mind of racists, it makes it difficult to understand a world in which there could be racism without self-ascribed racists. By connecting the existence of racism to racists (whether through delusion, occultation, or ignorance), the solution to racism is individual reform rather than social transformation. This liberal perspective on racism tends to reject the idea that that racism has any structural effects. As a consequence, apart from sporadic attention on institutional racism –produced by political mobilization e.g. the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry- racism is considered to be present in institutions only to the extent one can identify the racists

## **The Immigrant Imaginary**

The history of 'race relations' in the United Kingdom has been and continues to be refracted through the prism of the immigrant imaginary. The tropes of the immigrant imaginary are hegemonic in the production of opinion and analysis about the postcolonial ethnically marked populations of Europe. The difference between ethnically marked minority and national majority groups continues to be presented as an unproblematic distinction between host and immigrant, this distinction continues to be seen as having a natural progression in which the host would assimilate the immigrant; and this process continues to be analysed in terms of demographic stages ('generations').

The consequences for the rhetoric of tolerance and multiculturalism are that these debates are for the most part still contained within the framework of a fifty-year-old repertoire of 'race relations' policy. This policy is organized around two poles: on the hand there is a strategy that emphasizes a one sided (often) openly coercive integration in which the 'immigrants' have to adapt to the majoritarian society vision of itself without any commitment for 'hosts' to adapt to the presence of the 'immigrants'. On other hand is the pole in which relations between ethnically marked minorities and the national majority are articulated with the appearance of a more dialogic vision of the integration process. In this strategy there is a sense in which the ethnically marked and the national

majority communities are partners (not necessarily equal partners) in conversations that sets out to produce a new sense of community and nation (Sayyid, 2005). Both strategies of one-way integration and two-way integration continue to rely on the logic of coloniality in the postcolonial context.

Advocates for the elimination of racism are faced with a public policy environment in which the post-racial horizon seems to have taken hold. This can be seen in the British context with two key developments. Firstly, there is the gradual absorption of the struggle against racism into a more generalized antipathy towards discriminations based on age, disability, gender, race, religion or belief, sexual orientation or transgender status. This shift is both rhetorical in that racism is considered to be similar to other forms of social exclusion, its only unique feature being that it affects a distinct group of people (in other words, it affects only ethnically marked minorities) and also institutional, for example in nearly all public organizations a distinct office to combat racism has disappeared and functions are absorbed into a human resources department. This shift was consolidated in 2006 with the Single Equalities Act replacement of The Commission for Racial Equality with Equalities and Human Rights Commission. This new umbrella body brought various organizations such as the Disability Rights Commission, Equal Opportunities Commission and the Commission for Racial Equality under its ambit.

The second key development in the British case which shows how the post-racial horizon impacts upon 'race relations' can be seen with the reconfiguration of racism through the abandonment of 'race' as an explicit ontology of the social. This can be seen in the phenomenon of an Islamophobic street movement which parades its ethnic diversity while maintaining its antagonism towards Muslims. The English Defense League is keen to not be seen as a racist movement, resorting to two rhetorical devices: the rejection that religious discrimination is racial discrimination – specifically Islam is seen as a religion not a race – thus antipathy towards Muslims cannot be racial, and secondly, the use of ethnically marked members to signal its post-racial character. This mix of decidedly anti-Muslim sentiments allied to an overt and ostentatious commitment to racial diversity is the hallmark of the post-racial in Britain. The complex relationship between racism and Islamophobia points to ways in which the semantics of tolerance has moved from an idea of racism directed at certain kinds of post-colonial bodies to a picture in which these bodies are marked out in very different ways and signals so-called

cultural rather than biological determinations (Modood, 2007).

Islamophobia as a conceptual category (re-) emerges with The Runnymede Trust Report in 1997. This report was based on the ways in which it was felt by its authors that anti-racism provisions of British legislation were adequate for safe-guarding Muslims from discrimination. This was because in Britain, apart from members of the Jewish and Sikh faith, other faith communities were considered to be 'races' and thus not protected from discrimination by law. Therefore, if employers discriminated not the basis of 'colour' but because someone was a Muslim, e.g. refusing to hire a Muslim because they assumed that they would demand time to pray, halal food etc would impact upon their capacity to do their job, they could not be prosecuted. The circulation of the concept of Islamophobia, however, is also a sign of the way in which a Muslim political subjectivity has begun to shape the semantics of tolerance. For the Muslim other becomes the litmus test for the idea of a tolerant society. For the articulation of Muslims as the incarnation of intolerance allows intolerance against their presence to be seen as a defense of tolerance itself.

The category of Islamophobia (like the category of racism before it) remains contested. Its critics deny its value asserting that it describes a phenomenon that does not exist. The opprobrium that racism solicits in the post-racial public domain, is not shared with Islamophobia. It is possible to be Islamophobic and post-racial at the same time. The limits of the post-racial however, can be seen by the way it is articulated alongside liberalism, in other words it appears to be impossible to be post-racial without being liberal.

If liberalism and racism are not necessarily antagonistic towards each other, there is no reason why a post-racial world should be identical to a liberal conception of society itself. The post-racial would not need to confirm the liberalism, but can we imagine a post-racial future without liberalism? In other words, can we imagine a post-racial context not just culturally but politically, that is, a post-racial society that has a relationship to the hegemonic culture which is not mainly mimetic? The political is defined by the process of constituting subjects (hence one of its key features is the way in which rules are being made in environments without rules, a situation in which the distinction between friends and enemies emerges – because it cannot be incorporated into a game in which

opponents play-out their differences). A post-racial political then would require the construction of a collective subjectivity no longer framed by the logic of racialized governmentality. A construction of a post-racial subject position would require the decolonization of not only our words and deeds but ultimately of our dreams. The idea of decolonizing dreams would to some evoke the scent of totalitarian thought police enforcing so-called “political correctness”. The decolonization of dreams is only necessary because there was a colonization of dreams. In other words a post-racial society which does not recognize the depth and strength of the racial cannot eradicate racism but only affirm it through another register.

## **Conclusion**

Racism in its various forms is a historical phenomenon not something that is hard-wired into humans. The imposition of the colonial framing had effect of making the divide between Western and Non-Western more significant than most other social cleavages of the time. A post-racial planet would be one in which the distinction between West and Non-West had been abandoned: therefore, it follows that there can be no post-racial without a radical and deep decolonization. The task of creating a decolonial subject is a matter of a political struggle, it is not something that is given by history or already here in the celebration of rainbow cultures. The post-racial which is content with questions of cultural representation without engaging with the way in which representation cannot be separated from political construction will be inadequate to the task of moving beyond the racial ordering of the world that began in the long sixteenth century. The absence of the decolonial question from current strategies of ameliorating ‘race relations’ in the European repertoire of public policies points the to cul de sac these policies have reached. In countries like Britain, France and the Netherlands where the experience of large scale settlement of ex-colonial populations is stretched to almost fifty years, it is amazing to think that ‘race relations’ has failed to deliver justice and ethnically marked populations continue to be under-represented in key indicators of prosperity and well-being. Of course, the picture is more complex than this with various groups among the ethnically marked doing better than other groups. It is however, important to note that the persistence of racism cannot be so easily dismissed.

This raises important questions for how strategies for the elimination of racism or its



reduction can develop. Clearly the previous policies have not been as successful as it has been hoped and partly, this was due to the way in which the question of race/racism was conceptualized too narrowly. Racism was seen as something that only affects ethnic minorities, it was seen as a marginal and exceptional problem, it was not seen as being intimately linked with processes of national formation and maintenance and thus, its elimination would require not only the development of a new etiquette but rather structural reforms that would re-narrate the nation itself. The articulation of the post-racial hinders the development of strategies to eradicate racism, but it also, points to the new context in which the semantics of tolerance takes place. The challenge is to re-think the categories of racism and their deployment in the post-racial context.

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