Solidarity, community and the political economy of hurt

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Abstract

This paper considers whether anti-racist activists we can form a community of solidarity. Critiquing the issue of 'whiteness', I consider whether such a community reflects or actually confronts the structures of a political economy of whiteness. Using both academic literature and narrative research I reflect on my own experiences of racism and hurt. These emotional and important issues are then intertwined within the political economy of whiteness.

In the previous article, Dinesh Wadiwel challenges us to reflect on the issue of solidarity in anti-racist politics. He does this by discussing the complications of forming short-term solidarity groups and asks us to consider who benefits and who loses from these alliances. In so doing, he presents a political economy of solidarity. The political economy of solidarity that Dinesh described functions like any other economic transaction insofar as it involves parties in varying positions of power with a series of shared disadvantages and advantages – and those who benefit the most are largely the ones better positioned along the hierarchy.

I would like to extend this concept of 'political economy' to the subjective concepts of pain, suffering and particularly hurt – shared emotions that result from acts of racism. I want to consider whether some acts of racism can be considered more hurtful than others: in this way, we can consider racism as a currency, and hurt as the unit of value. Further, I am interested in interrogating who has the right to claim a racial hurt. Do we all experience this, and if so, are my feelings of hurt more or less relevant than those who are

[1] This article is an extension of a previous paper written with Dinesh Wadiwel titled "Racists like us", and sources some additional ideas from a conference panel including Dinesh and Kiran Grewal. I would also like to acknowledge an unpublished essay by Amy Tyler on 'security' that helped me concretise these ideas as well as the anonymous reviewers for their engagement.

Others to me? This question leads me to the objective of this article, which is to consider whether we can form a community as anti-racist activists in solidarity? If so, does this community reflect or actually confront the structures of a political economy of whiteness. This article aims to discuss some of these issues from the perspective of my own experiences of racism and hurt, and intertwine these within the political economy of whiteness.

Like Dinesh, I too would like to present something of a disclaimer and also introduction to this controversial topic. I am a tall, fair, male who has been lucky enough to gain the benefits of an education at under-graduate and post-graduate levels. My ethnic background, which is not always evident, is Greek-Australian, with my parents migrating to Sydney in the early 1960s. Despite some set backs – including cancer when I was nine years old – I have been successful at various amateur sports including rugby. As a result, I have a solid build (I hazard to use the word athletic because of the less than accurate image that this may present).

I take this time to describe my physical appearance because when we discuss the issue of racism, it is the confusion between physical appearances and 'naturally' inherited social traits that is the issue. In other words, we look at someone and assume that they will be lazy, good at math, disrespectful to women, violent, cunning and so on, based on their skin colour, eye shape, hair and so on. This, however, is not just a matter of individual discrimination but often takes the form of systemic social discrimination and assumptions: from job interviews to the possible meeting with new friends. It also occurs when we make pre-conceived judgements based on names or places of birth – not just physical appearance.

Turning to the aims of the article then, I would like to begin by considering whether my encounters with racism – as an almost white man – are comparable to that experienced by others less white than me? Can I attend a whiteness conference and make claims of hurt or are these merely dismissed as the whining of some middle-class white boy? To answer these questions, we need to consider whether my hurt is less authentic because of my skin

tone. To ask such questions means that we are designating a political economy of hurt – something I will turn to now.

The commodity of being white: I will have some of that

When I was growing up as a Greek boy in the eastern (beach) suburbs of Sydney, there was a clear hierarchy of whiteness. The 'Australian surfie kids' sat comfortably on top of that hierarchy and the rest of us – the Greeks, Lebanese, Italians, Asians, Indians, Pakistanis and so on – fought to climb this scale. There were things you could do to fit in: play the right sports, never speak in your 'home' language, anglicise your name (how else do you get James from Dimitri?) or ride a skateboard. Most importantly, however, you had to distance yourself from others who were not as white as you and join in the mocking. That is, you had to acknowledge the scale of whiteness and in doing so deny your own hurt by laughing at *their* accent or by the fact that *they* go to Greek school. Even as a child, then, I was unknowingly participating in a political economy of whiteness. The irony being that we bought into this economy because we did not want to be different and in so doing confirmed the thesis of Hannah Arendt (1959) who argued that conformity is at the very basis of a heterogenous populous.

Though we may have ignorantly supported and contributed to this political economy, it exists on a much larger scale and one that is deliberately implemented in both the national and international spheres. To make this point, I would like to briefly turn to the issue of security. In *Empire*, Hardt and Negri (2004) identify two forms of security. While the first form emerges through cooperation, the other is a notion of abstract enemies that serve to legitimise violence and restrict freedoms: this is the Other we must fear. This later position is analogous to Neocleous' arguments that security involves a "specification of fear" to establish a state of insecurity which brings about calls for greater security (2001, p. 12). This creates the social anxiety that Walter Benjamin (1940) describes as a 'state of emergency'. Issues of security have flowed into society with post-September 11 policies such as racial profiling and the introduction of the anti-terrorism

legislation[2], and adopted in Australia with the military intervention to 'assist' Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory.

Anthony Burke (2007) takes this understanding of security even further when he highlights how such a socially porous analysis of security is found in the very concepts of progress, modernity, freedom and even cultural identity. For Burke, the imperative of security is now at the core of all decision-making and calls for security are used to affirm the nation-state, the value of exclusive citizenship and the importance of sovereignty: a theme that extends Burke's (2001) earlier work linking citizenship to whiteness. For example, Australia's focus on 'business migrants' who are sourced mainly from Asia highlights how the price of security for the potential citizen ranges depending on the whiteness of the body: that is, whiteness and capital become interlinked as you can buy your way up the whiteness ladder. But even then, you must continue to prove your worth for your position is never guaranteed.[3] The neo-liberal project is not colour blind after all.

Burke's work also allows us to critically engage with the very issue of 'whiteness studies': a recently established academic area that many, including myself, wrestle with. I do believe, however, that we need to see the racial aspect of whiteness giving way to a more sociological understanding of 'whiteness' as a dynamic. In this way, whiteness changes over time. For example, commercial East Asian urbanites, once considered part of the Yellow Peril, have only very recently been admitted to the category of 'white bodied' through their business acumen. This does not mean that they are totally accepted, but if they can 'buy' their way in, they are further up the whiteness scale.

[2] For a chronology of Legislative and other legal developments from 11 September 2001 – December 2007 see the Australian Parliament House website: http://www.aph.gov.au/library/intguide/law/terrorism.htm.

[3] It also exists in low-income nations – from the 'whiteness creams' that have become so prevalent in a number of African nations, to the ability to bypass security checks in South America, the more white you are, the higher up the chain you are. In this way, I can wander into a five star hotel in Colombia and not be questioned because I am whiter than the average Colombian: a clear foreigner, who can obviously afford the hotel, so let me in.

It may sound somewhat absurd to compare the right to migrate to Australia via our 'business migrant' scheme to schoolyard bully tactics and taunting, but it is important to recognise that the naturalisation of the political economy of whiteness can begin on a micro scale which makes its parallel on the macro level appear normal. In this way, then, we can imagine whiteness like any other tradable commodity.

I have no idea who I have hurt as I have traded in this political economy – a trade that has seen me attempt to climb my way along the scale of whiteness. I am, however, beginning to acknowledge that I have experienced hurt as well as produced it on the others I mocked. This has ranged from the taunting and being spat on at school – I was a 'wog boy' after all – to my peers at university mocking my writing and inability to express myself. Discussing these issues is neither about making myself feel better nor about making this a confessional for therapy. Like Michael Ondaajte's (1991) central character in the *English Patient*, I do believe that such experiences leave marks and scars on our biographies much like the contours of a cartographical map. The hurt I have experienced has marked me in many ways that are neither relevant nor important for this article. I neither seek your sympathy or your understanding: but neither do I expect you to dismiss it because I am a (almost) white boy. I am also not trying to claim authenticity and establish my credentials as an anti-racist activist based on the extent of my hurt.

Rather, I write this article with a level of critical reflection that enables me to express empathy with others who may have experienced racism in more brutal forms than I could ever imagine. It also means that I can see other's who may have never experienced racism empathise with me. I raise these issues in an attempt to make visible the political economy of whiteness and in so doing, confront it as well as the consequences of this hierarchy.

Hurt, solidarity and community

The question then, is how we move forward – working in solidarity – without perpetuating the systems that we are confronting? How do we work together if I may never understand your hurt and you may never understand mine – no matter how much

we attempt to empathise? Is it possible for anti-racist activists not to fall in the trap of judging each other's experiences? To find an answer to these dilemmas I turn to ongoing debates about the meaning and operation of 'community'.

The concept of community is one that may never be given a definitive definition, for as community development worker Jeremy Brent (2004) notes, community is something that we want but never seem to arrive at. Community is called for whenever social problems are experienced "like a roof under which we shelter in heavy rain, like a fireplace which we warm our hands on a frosty day" (Bauman 2001, p. 1). We envision a community, then, through a longing for stability and warmth, being a shelter from the harsh elements. This longing, however, can be a double-edged sword, for as Brent (2004) points out, a community can produce cooperation and mutuality but it can also be divisive and create further conflict. While community is something that does not have a concrete manifestation, the longing for it has a real impact on the way citizens interact. Longing, then, has an affective element, like hurt does.

The orthodox conceptualisation of community is one that largely refers to the 'communitarian' or 'libertarian' school of thought. This sees community as an ideal that is created in an unproblematic, uncontested and 'natural' way through affiliations and recognition of people 'like us' (ibid). That is, community is established through social formations that arise from mutual beliefs, understandings and practices that confirm and extend a stable sense of identity and subjectivity (Taylor 1994, p. 25). This is a position that relies on forming communities based on a sense of recognition of each other's experience.

From this perspective, we can see how a potential 'natural' community can emerge from those with a shared experience of hurt. That is, because you have felt hurt, and I have felt hurt, we should recognise in each other a shared experience that allows us to form some sort of 'natural and uncontested' community. In this way, we come to understand and accept each other – we can work together, fighting against those who would institute hurt.

I believe, however, that the limitations that emerge when relying on 'natural' community formation, rather than resulting in the desired harmony, can often lead to exclusion, and possibly betrayal. I believe this occurs for two main reasons.

The first of these is based around the processes of recognition that implicitly establishes an inside for those with 'authenticity' – and an outside for 'others' (Cornell 1992). In the case of racism, those with the greatest hurt can claim to be an exclusive group based on their distance from whiteness: they become the 'gatekeepers' who refuse to allow others the same status. From this perspective, we reflect the political economy of hurt because each hurt is assessed in some normative way – and accepted or rejected – depending on the criteria established: it is the same scale of whiteness, just assessed a different way.

The next insight extends the above as it relates to the homogenisation of hurt that can occur in the formation of 'natural' communities based on recognition. This homogenisation occurs through the 'natural' process embedded within the very formation of these types of communities (Oliver 2001): the inside group becomes the inside because in the political economy of whiteness they are the ones most discriminated against – the ones furthest away from the top end of the whiteness scale. This inside group, then, accepts their right to feel the most authentic hurt and consequently judges the extent of hurt of those on the outside. The process of homogenisation occurs when those on the outside – who want to be on the inside – attempt to efface their different experiences of hurt in order to be recognised by those on the inside. This is obviously not possible and thus, recognition remains incomplete. Moreover, the hurt of the anti-racist who is almost white or those considered in privileged positions is never truly authentic because it is not the same as it is for an underprivileged.

The paradox of the 'natural' community, then, is that it is likely to use the same hierarchy of whiteness as those that would discriminate against them. This occurs because the recognition of hurt is one that remains defined by the political economy of whiteness and thus the authenticity of hurt. The very scale, then, judges the extent of possible affiliation, that we are trying to confront – the very scale that is causing the hurt. In other words, we

need to a avoid forming communities based on a hierarchy of hurt for this is both constituted by and reflective of the political economy of whiteness. Because in doing so we are making claims in the very language that this political economy establishes, and thus we not only embody it but also reflect its structures. This is not to argue that all hurt is equal or equally unjust: just that the language to claim hurt reflects what we are attempting to overcome.

Do we really want to work together? Creating desire and 'community'

Extending the work of Rosalyn Diprose, I would like to present a departure from this traditional school of thought that may offer anti-racists activists (like us) the potential to work together without needing to recognise each other's hurt on any scale of whiteness. This school of thought argues that community is propelled by alterity or essential difference: community does not emerge by some natural process but rather through 'desiring'. Consequently, I argue that in order to create communities that will be inclusive we need to understand solidarity based on reciprocated desire. That is, we can form inclusive communities with people who are other to us if we so desire rather than (solely) with those we recognise as 'like us'.

Here, the individual is present within the desired community not as a 'self-atomised being' seeking recognition but rather through a desire to share difference as a fundamental expression of uniqueness. Such a conceptualisation of community is formed through the desire for alterity, subjectivity and agency between another and me. This is an alterity that is promoted not subdued. This results in a heterogeneous rather than homogeneous community, as the individual is never reduced to a uniform subjectivity.

To explain how this occurs, Diprose draws on the metaphor of the handshake. This is the 'open hand' that signifies a desire for community as it is extended to the stranger. Central here is the issue of what is exchanged and shared: for the handshake that brings together different bodies has an important meaning. I have argued elsewhere that this handshake

involves more than just the offer of friendship but also the desire to share hope, trust, a sense of safety, and possibly intellect.[4]

This open hand does not necessarily indicate I want to be your friend – it does not even indicate that I like you. Rather, it presents my desire to work with you in an open exchange of ideas in a way that neither assumes recognition or judges. The handshake is often offered with the uncertainty of not knowing, nor understanding the other or their experiences. It is offered, however, with the expectation of reciprocation and thus, in the outstretched hand lays the hope for a community without an outside. That is, we establish a community that does not have a gatekeeper that judges who is allowed in, but one that is open to all who want to join.

A conclusion of sorts: Confronting the political economy of whiteness

What potential exists for anti-racists politics as a result? The answer, I believe is based on our desire – temporary or permanent – to work together with a reciprocated desire to confront the structures of racism. This amounts to a refusal to play the whiteness game: not to buy into the established political economy. For we are not required to compare stories nor biographies to justify experiences or our right to confront racism: rather, it can be an act of desiring to share our good will.

For there are many racial taunts and hurts that are beyond my grasp: but does this failure to understand your hurt diminish our ability to work together? The answer is hopefully 'no'. I was inspired to come to this conclusion a number of years ago when Linda Burney, the first Australian Aboriginal Woman elected to New South Wales' parliament, spoke at a conference. Ms. Burney was born under an act of injustice, when in the 1960s she was registered under the Flora and Fauna Act of NSW rather than as a citizen. This seems a substantially greater injustice than having eggs and insults – 'get off our beach you fucken wog cunt' – hurled at me while sitting at the north end of Maroubra Beach. I can never claim to understand the extent of Linda Burney's hurt and nor can she understand mine. But we can come together with a desire to never experience our

[4] See Arvanitakis (2007)

individual hurts again. To achieve this we need to work together in a way that does not perpetuate the hierarchy of whiteness by overlaying it with the hierarchy of hurt. If we cannot achieve such a desire, then we must consider if we are merely perpetuating the whiteness scale rather than confronting it.

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