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Act Up and Act Out! An Uppity Manifesto for Institutional Racism in Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

Anti-racism is slowly being institutionally-integrated in Higher Education Institutions (HEI's) in numerous Liberal democracies. However, HEI elites are characterized by Whiteness and White Fragility privileging managerialist approaches pushing Impression Management agendas that compromise the degree to which internal challenges to institutional racism may be 'tolerated', permitting change primarily only where anti-racist drives from below align with institutional interests among elites. When anti-racist resistance breaches the limits of what may be permitted by an HEI, White Fragility disciplines its interrogators. In response, a recent contribution in this journal argues, we may create institutional 'margins', from where People of Colour may take refuge from institutions that conduct and deny racist practices, and mobilize collectively in resistance. Building on recent contributions in this journal by Dar et al, this work draws on historical anti-imperial resistances to propose an expansion of collective institutional resistance approaches into an extra-institutional dimension designed to make HEIs more publicly accountable when their internal efforts to end racism are compromised by hegemonic White Fragility, managerialist practices and neoliberal structures.

Introduction

I have always known the racism of British institutions. My white friends have not. They never know nor feel what I have known and felt over half a century of exposure to the whim of racism: one moment there, another moment not. I believed it would crumble, the smarter I got and the smarter spaces I inhabited. But school was racist and life was racist and the regular beatings at school and in life were racist. When finally I made it to the academy, I believed I would be safe, but I was not, and nor are so many People of Colour in White Higher Education. I have seen it most days, in the emails with my name left off that reach me via Allies, in the micro-aggressions of powerful White Managers, in the ignorance of Human Resources' in Covid and Race, in the hypocrisy of bare minimal Committee inclusion and the politics of exclusion of those who get Uppity. No White Folk gave their seats up on that bus, for sure. It's always a slap in the face and it never gets old. So I turned to Dar et al's margins and found I wasn't safe there either, if I lifted my head over the parapet of the government's Culture Wars fought on their behalf by the Universities who [refuse, in 2021, to take down](#) Statues of Imperial tormentors. So I turned to my forebears, the men and women who broke the Empires' stranglehold on their lives, for inspiration. This is a race story, and an institutional story, and it's also my forebears' story and legacy: their past in our present.

Dar et al (2020) called out institutional racism in Business Schools, and urged us to ‘Act Up!’ They declared that the idea of the Business School was racist because it derives from, propagates and uncritically sanctions a form of capitalism manifested and descended from imperial domination and extraction which perpetuates racial inequality and denies its racially structured neoimperial character.

The authors proposed alternative paths. They refer, for example, to ‘starting points of resistance – activist spaces in the margins of universities’ that derive from a ‘politics of refusal’ enabling academic communities to find some form of personal and professional expression where it is too often disabled by institutional racism (Dar, Liu, Dy, & Brewis, 2020, p. 5). They believe in change from within whilst creating an additional structure in which resistance by people of Colour can imagine and organize but also soothe institutionally-inflicted wounds. They are not alone. Kidman and Chu (2017, p. 11) describe such ‘cracks’ as forming ‘in parts of an institution that are generally below the radar for managers and administrators’. These are safer spaces beyond White Managerialism’s reach; they appear where power is asymmetrically organized. Institutional margins were common in the Imperial era, enabling resistance to White management of colonial spaces (Scott, 1987). In such spaces, collective action can mobilize, strengthening and protecting individual resistances within university communities.

This piece builds on Dar et al.’s work to identify extra-institutional spaces and strategies that, because of their location, circumvent Higher Education institutional and structural racism and call it loudly, publicly, to account. It further argues that precedent for this strategy is to be found in the anti-imperial struggle that liberated Black people from White Power.

Social Agendas

HEI reactions to the groundswell of antiracism in the UK in the wake of the police murder of George Floyd in the US have appeared relatively unequivocal. This is partly because academics often sustain resistance to oppression (Anderson, 2006). But it is also the case because the contemporary HEI is a neoliberal entity, and is subject to the forces of neoliberal managerialism. Neoliberal managerialism describes the process by which formerly publicly-managed institutions engage with market forces and transform their practices. This involves ‘stripping public services of moral and ethical values and replacing them with the market language of costs, efficiencies, profits and competition’ (Klikauer, 2015, p. 1104). Rendering HEI’s as capitalist bodies means they are subject to the social perceptions of their consumers in the education ‘market’. For this reason, HEI’s responses are in part framed by Impression Management strategies (Tata & Prasad, 2015). They must ensure the impressions they project into the market are aligned with their consumers’ priorities (Bolino, Kacmar, Turnley, & Gilstrap, 2008). In light of challenges to institutional racism, in the UK context a key means of achieving this alignment is to apply for recognition by the Race Equality Charter (REC), sponsored by Advance HE, a nationally-recognized professional development body.

The [Race Equality Charter](#) ‘provides a framework through which institutions [may] work to identify and self-reflect on institutional and cultural barriers standing in the way of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic staff and students’. According to [Advance HE](#), this is necessary because ‘institutions can... perpetuate and compound racial inequalities through decisions made about institutional culture, policy and process’. The Charter acknowledges the [structural racism](#). Structural racism concerns the rules created by and projected from institutions like the government, the legislature, the business sector and the banks that create and perpetuate racism in society. Since racism’s origin is in ideology and belief, and the State projects its ideology and belief onto its population, it is hard not to see it as such. Fromm (1941, p. 88) refers to the idea of ‘anonymous authority’, a form of power ‘disguised as common sense, science, psychic health, normality, public opinion. It does not demand anything but the self-evident. It seems to use no pressure but only mild persuasion.

Foucault (2003, p. 61) describes how such invisible authority installs racism. He illuminates the way White government positions itself ‘as the one true race, the race that holds power and is entitled to

define the norm, and against those who deviate from that norm, against those who pose a threat to the biological heritage.

Racism is thus funneled from state ideology and institutions to people through nodes of governance that direct multiple levels of dominion over the 'lesser peoples' (Foucault, 2003; Galtung, 1990). These nodes may be council officers discriminating in housing allocation, or police stations turning away Black complaints against White people. They may be hospitals prioritizing beds for White people, and state-licensed pubs refusing entrance to people of colour (or Irish people, or women, historically), or prisons with a disproportionate Black population, or bus companies segregating seating. They may be White police murdering Black people at will.

These individual acts of interpersonal racism do not happen for no reason. They come from ideological belief directed through and by institutions against individuals and groups of people considered to deviate from institutional norms and the ideological values they enshrine (Young, 2011; Cesaire, 1972; Mbembe, 2020). This is a picture that develops slowly in a darkroom, gradually unmasking structural racial power in neoliberal society and its institutions as norms. Their deeply-embedded, anonymous, invisible routines subvert the anti-racism social agenda until the ideological, institutional authority behind them is exposed.

Subverting the social agenda

HEI's are in thrall to neoliberalism. They are correspondingly and historically in thrall to reductionist quantitative methods of change and evaluating change. In line with Cold War neoliberal epistemology (Knafo, Dutta, Lane, & Wyn-Jones, 2018), change processes must be of a form that can be demonstrated quantitatively. Two such processes reinforce institutional racism, prompt internal backlash and further threaten and marginalize anti-racism. These are a dependency on quantitative methodologies to accumulate auditable evidence, which ensures antiracism is blinded by epistemological tunnel vision; and the privileging of momentary training as the means to overturn lasting racism.

Measuring change.

The first process is the dominance of a methodology that privileges counting events over understanding them. It permits evidence of change to be accumulated without a discussion of what that change means for people of Colour. Such change is more symbolic representation than transformative substance. It is easy to manage: add more Colour and stir. It is easy to measure: it provides ready evidence for benchmark tallying. It is acceptable for White Power because a minimal repositioning of Black Faces on White Committees provides quantitative data for managerial objectives. But this is illusory. Scholars now refer to the McNamara Fallacy (Yankelovich, 1972), which cloaks social inertia in the presentation of numbers that imply social change, when in fact, only the numbers have changed. It ignores the 'politics of presence', the well-documented notion whereby 'racial presence is synonymous with racial justice' (Beltran, 2014, p. 137). Simply re-rigging the number of people of Colour in Business School Committees does not mean the inputs of those people of Colour reduce institutional racism in a dominant White Culture. Quantitative reckoning is not qualitative change, but it does facilitate a REC submission.

(Un)changing through training.

The second process in subverting the anti-racist social agenda is the use of implicit or unconscious bias training. Jackson (2018, p. 45) describes how this approach is popular for teaching people to understand and respond to 'present histories of racism'. This Human Resources (HR)-managed process is 'clearly linked to the strategic objectives of the organization to enhance competitive advantage' (Holland & Pryman, 2006, p. 30).

In this case, it is designed to enable the now-obligatory possession of REC accreditation. However, neither HR nor training are neutral and impartial, and their participation in enforcing 'training'

presents an alibi for the continuity of White supremacy (Tate & Page, 2018). Training is primarily a disciplinary process. It is undertaken to bring people in line with managerial edicts, ‘telling people what to do, bending them to shape, or filling them as if they were empty vessels’ (Robinson, 2021, p. 1). The Army trains its soldiers to fight wars, less so to reflect on the reasons they must kill. Mechanics are trained to repair cars, not to ponder fossil fuel dependency. Training in HEI contexts primarily involves an unreflective approach derived from managerial priorities that bypass and subvert meaningful transformation. The literature clearly shows that racism is not something that can be trained out of people in time-limited regimes framed by Impression Management deadlines. Indeed, there is evidence that anti-racism training risks ‘promoting more adaptive racism... through the coaching of participants’ on how to behave (Jackson, 2018, p. 46). Training is not the answer to centuries of institutionalization and internalization.

Conscientization

Instead, conscientization, or critical consciousness raising, is more suited to reveal and challenge internal biases and deeply-help ideological beliefs about race and power. Conscientization refers to the ability to act to understand and recognize one’s own role in oppression and thereby be better situated to effect change in the real world where harm is being constructed by those in power who deny it. It brings into our conscious thinking the role of power in the creation of inequalities and social harms built into webs of invisible power (Freire, 1973; Howard & Maxwell, 2018).

Conscientization requires recognizing there is a problem when those who determine our fates declare there is not. As *conscientious* pedagogues, we will likely be familiar with this concept from reading Paulo Freire’s efforts (1973) to ensure society is not dumbed down and enslaved by the reduction of education to the service of the State and the economy. Or we may have engaged with Henri Giroux’s (2011) reconsideration of education as the means of achieving social freedom, or bell hooks’ (1994) exposition of teaching as a transgressive act embedded in changes in consciousness.

Conscientization is often a norm in our own research, so we may scrutinize institutional racism accordingly. We can frame it and theorize it, familiarize ourselves with its nuances, hunt down the widest literature to broaden our conceptualization and cognition. We may interrogate antiracism’s veracity and context, test hypotheses and apply a critical eye to methodologies and forms of interpretation of prevailing elite assumptions. We may reject generalizations and solely quantitative methods when they say too little about the power dynamic of the institutions we are investigating. We can draw conclusions from our inquiries, and then share them with friendly allies who are our intellectual peers. There are conversations to be had with our critics that may reveal weaknesses in our thinking, so we should prepare with humility to be wrong, again and again. From such failures, we should be able to grow without lashing out at our peers, knowing that through dialogue we are led to greater intellectual and social truths. We may evolve our own understanding of power before we make power into inequality. Conscientized scholarly rigour, intellectual debate, and concept reformation and critique are far more valuable than system-reinforcing training when it comes to structural and institutional transformation, and are much more familiar.

Instead of such compelling methods, however, neoliberal priorities reduce anti-racism to ideologically-fetishized, -ritualized and -metricated tick-box exercises for neoliberal managerialist purposes. Such priorities sideline the structural dynamics of institutionalized racism reflected from and in the ‘White, elitist, masculinist, heterosexist, able-bodied and Eurocentric culture’ that dominates UK HEIs (Law, 2017, p. 333). The cheaper faster route to benchmark alignment results in ‘well-worded mission statements and some minor cosmetic changes leav[ing] structural racial inequality intact’ (Tate & Bagguley, 2017, p. 290).

This is in part why Dar et al. (2020) identify the need for margins in their institutions, to collectively protect themselves from White Fragility’s racial (in)tolerance and the associated orthodox backlash. It is this paradox we must now address.

White Fragility, Institutional Backlash and the problem with ‘tolerance’.

White people in the UK have historically not experienced racial discomfort. They are not used to being challenged on racism, or being accused of experiencing institutionally-endorsed advantages. DiAngelo (2011, p. 55) tells us this experience ‘protects and insulates from race-based stress’ whilst at the same time ‘lowering the ability to tolerate’ racial challenges. This results in ‘a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves’. DiAngelo terms this White Fragility (2011).

White Fragility frames what may be said against White Power within a ‘spectrum of expressible opinion’ (Chomsky, 1989, p. 94). In Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings, 1998), this spectrum is defined in terms of ‘interest convergence’. Interest convergence refers to the phenomenon whereby ‘Whites in power will only accommodate racial equity for people of color when it converges with their own interests’ (Jupp & Lensmire, 2016, p. 987). This is where the idea of tolerance appears. In Impression Management terms, ‘tolerance’ is the credible institutional face of race relations. Yet in race relations terms, it is imperial continuity. Tolerance is a mindset based in relations of power, and it is very important to understanding how White Fragility is so quickly reactive to anti-racist challenges.

‘Tolerance’ is the legacy of Empire and decolonization. Empires stole countries and then tolerated the presence of their indigenous populations (Cesaire, 1972; Fanon, 1961; Mbembe, 2020). [Subaltern](#) resistance – challenge by those groups of people subjugated under a narrow hegemonic interest - in imperial spaces was tolerated as long as it did not contravene the interests of the colonizers. Permissions were granted for integration within the dominating institutions. Our presence in our own lands was tolerated as long as we didn’t get ‘uppity’. That tolerance was passed down with decolonization and ensuing immigration. People of Colour were ‘tolerated’ because they did not ‘belong’ in the White, imperial lands that had stolen theirs from them. The [Windrush Scandal](#) shows us how durable that attitude is.

Tolerance has been defined as ‘value orientation towards difference’ (Hjerm, Eher, Bohman, & Connolly, 2020, p. 903). Dominant White spaces have long congratulated themselves on being tolerant. Their reward is to be perceived as ‘morally praiseworthy simply for refraining from mistreating “others” regarding their racial difference’ (Ikuenobe, 2019, p. 55). Bessone (2013, p. 209) describes tolerant people as those who ‘refrain from interfering with something [they] deeply disapprove of in spite of having the power to interfere’. Power is present in both interference and in not interfering. It is masked by the label’s rhetorical magnanimity. Tolerance permits difference as long as it doesn’t get ‘uppity’. And as long as ‘tolerant racism’ is the accepted mindset of a society and an institution, that mindset will reinforce hegemonic race dynamics, and confine the limits of institutional antiracism to the terms and conditions of White Fragility. This was true of race and Empire, and it is [true of race and university](#). Both share asymmetries of racial power, and it is the means to shift that imbalance that drive this argument.

Beyond the margins: extra-institutional challenge and resistance

The histories of Empire are currently re-emerging in public discourse and are important for what they say about racial power (Spencer, 2013). Asymmetrical racial power relations are as characteristic of modern HEIs as they are of Empire. White rules protect White institutions, White privilege and White advantage wherever it resides. The rules were not designed to facilitate challenge and when deviated from, discipline and punishment were routinely harsh, often lethal (Mcclintock, 1995). They were there to maintain White Power. Yet despite this power equation, subaltern anti-imperialism ultimately overthrew its oppressors.

This article takes guidance from successful anti-imperial resistances and applies it to the current predicament in which contemporary White Power’s refusal to properly engage with institutional racism in HEI’s can be further challenged.

Anti-imperial resistance differed everywhere. But certain themes emerge. Some subalterns' strategies were influenced by thinkers like Sun Tzu (2009), who urged that weaker sides should invert the prevailing power asymmetry by shifting the conflict space beyond the more powerful opponent's control. There is a long history of such strategic dislocation of asymmetrical power in anti-imperial resistances (Scott, 1987; Césaire, 1972; Beckett, 1973). In Viet Nam, for example, the American war was projected onto American soil, where its legitimacy was substantially weakened by people challenging the Draft, by the racial imbalance in US casualties, by associated social conscientization by Civil Rights and the peace movements, by much-publicized war crimes, and by the critical domestic media, enraged at having been lied to by successive US administrations (Hallin, 1985; Giap, 1970). Not dissimilarly, strategically-speaking, the African National Congress (ANC) famously held the Apartheid regime internationally accountable by raising consciousness of its brutal racism world-wide (Thorn, 2006). Drawing from these historical lessons, we should reshape the spaces in which we struggle.

To challenge racially-asymmetrical HEIs, we must fight the racist university where it is not. When institutions define and use their own structures to sustain themselves against internal criticism, resistance must mobilize alternative structures through which to challenge power. External accountability (beyond the racist institution's direct control) has, at the very least, two dynamics available to it. First is the mainstream and social media, as key means by which dissent is spread regarding an institution, away from the institution's ability to internally dampen such dissent. Redressal though the media dislocates the battleground and may offer some degree of protection to the asymmetrically weaker party. It is also able to bring institutional racism to the attention of key legislative bodies and to foment public campaigns like Change.org to hold powerful institutions to public account.

A second countervailing dynamic is the nature of the markets to which neoliberal Impression Management priorities are in thrall. That market, made up primarily of potential students, is mostly young and increasingly intolerant of racist oppression. It is unlikely to respond well to reports of institutional racism, and HEIs are vulnerable to such concerns. An example of this was the 2015 #RhodesMustFall campaign at the University of Cape Town which later 'inspired epistemic disobedience' in the UK (Ahmed, 2020, p. 281). HEIs are held more independently and more publicly to more benchmarks and more consequences when their actions are exposed extra-institutionally. This means the threat of external action is one that destabilizes racist institutional mechanisms. Correspondingly, it may resort to threats to its challengers, which can also be displaced into the public domain.

Within this general strategic reframing of resistance to institutional racism, there are specific tactical acts of extra-institutional resistance. To begin with, we can publish critical scholarship with two effects. First, we can frame specific failures of institutional antiracism we experience in the wider literature and contribute constructively to advancing knowledge and understanding of racism in HEI's. Second, publications act as a shield to some extent. Having conferred external legitimacy on an author, an employer may think twice about attempting to discipline a dissenting employee.

A short version of such research can appear in blog form, pushing unpalatable data into the public domain. Although many people's blogs may not be widely read, the number of distribution platforms is increasing and the number of networks within which blogs are distributed is substantial. These may be professional (for example, SEDA, OneHE) or individual (Facebook, Twitter), but each provides the means by which evidence of racism may be carried beyond a given institution and revealed to a wider audience concerned with the extent and speed of anti-racist reform in HEIs. They can also be directed through sharing with specific audiences, like Student Union bodies or 6th Form Colleges, for example.

Individual blogs may also be picked up by more powerful Allies with greater public exposure. For example, another academic and well-known *Guardian* journalist, Gary Younge, takes an active interest in racism in UK universities. This means that lower-profile academics may also be able to connect with higher-profile influencers able to better publicize institutionalize racism. The 'bounds of the expressible' can be expanded by bypassing the boundary-makers.

We can also get involved in Whistleblowing activities. Whistleblowing after attempting to rectify managerial indiscretions internally is an increasingly common procedure (Vandekerckhove & Phillips, 2019). Indeed, some lawyers have set up free [help-lines](#) to support the process. Whistleblowing introduces the extra-institutional dimension of formal accountability without the asymmetric power advantage normally enjoyed by the institution, and allows for more autonomous evaluation and judgment. It is not an undertaking to be taken lightly and Union support is important, but it does extend the parameters of the conflict beyond the immediate reach of an oppressive employer. We may take heart in the fact this is so normal now that a Whistleblowing protection industry is on the rise (Cailleba & Petit, 2018).

Lastly, for now, in cases where the REC process is reduced by neoliberal managerialism to a box-ticking exercise, and/or where the process has aggravated rather than weakened institutional racism, there is the option of a parallel REC submission. Concerned individuals and groups may submit their own REC documentation highlighting subversion of REC imperatives. Depending on desired outcomes, they may do this after warning their employer, and identifying themselves, or not. Notifying the institution of the intention of extra-institutional activity may prompt institutional backlash, but it may also push an institution into reconsidering its choices. The same approach may be taken regarding institutional affiliation with professional standards bodies like the Chartered Association of Business Schools, and professional qualifications bodies like those responsible for Accounting and Legal certification.

Lastly (for now), we may draw once more from, and build upon, the work of Dar et al. People of Colour caught inside the maw of managerialist, marketized neoliberal HEI's are urged to self-protect through community, collective power. Those who also choose to challenge racism extra-institutionally may take heed. We may create exterior Communities of Practice with an ever-expanding array of free multi-user platforms. There, we may discuss, organize and mobilize against racist HEI's and racism in HEI's beyond the immediate reach of our employers, and where we may talk without fear of oppression by neoimperial, managerial, neoliberal White Fragility.

Conclusion

These methods may seem dramatic to some. But they are familiar to those who have always fought asymmetries of power. UK HE's institutional dynamics perpetuate an inherited racial asymmetry that willfully maintains ignorance of its own neoimperial nature and denies the racist abuses that take place. HEI's permit critique; but prevailing White power claims and owns the only critique permitted, as well as measures taken in response. Anti-racist resistance must apply pressure to HEI's from outside its usual remit, bypassing unreasonable, internal restrictions regarding the normalization of antiracist policies by exposing them to independent external scrutiny in a public environment that is able to hold them accountable for their indiscretions. It is not a radical strategy without precedent; it is a strategy of resistance borne of an older, imperial racism that is as necessary now as it was then.

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