Review Symposium

Ethnicities
2023, Vol. 0(0) 1–6

DOI: 10.1177/14687968231172390
journals.sagepub.com/home/etn


Race as injustice and the im/possibility of racial justice

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Abstract

This review essay presents exposition and analysis of Nasar Meer's, *The Cruel Optimism of Racial Justice*. I outline Meer's argument detailing the historical emergence and ongoing social reproduction of racial injustice in relation to nation formation, endemic racism, health inequalities, restrictions on refugees and asylum, and White supremacism as pervasive throughout western societies. I suggest that Meer's intervention usefully highlights racial injustice as normalised instead of exceptional and also raises the importance of white people divesting their racial privilege. Analytically, I argue that Meer's book productively opens up a space to reflect on the efficacy of race as a normative category, both intrinsically and in relation to anti/racism. Furthermore, by demonstrating the inherent inequality of race, the book invites the reader to reflect on the coherence of a racialised ideal of justice.

Keywords

Discrimination, Inequality, Racialisation, Racial projects, Racism, White supremacy

The Cruel Optimism of Racial Justice is at once a wonderfully evocative and succinctly descriptive title for a practical political study and nuanced critique. Nasar Meer's book sets out ongoing struggles for racial justice as an unrealisable and yet unavoidable pursuit—unrealisable given the continual offensive against hard-won anti-racist gains and yet unavoidable insofar as resistance to racism is a compelling duty. Therefore, the 'cruel optimism', via Lauren Berlant's (2011) formulation, sketched here lies in the pursuit of racial justice as simultaneously enervating and energising.

Taking us through a series of historical and contemporary examples, Meer demonstrates how social systems operate over time to produce and reproduce racial projects.

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Historically, beginning with nationhood, we see how the modern nation-state is formed through imperialist and colonial projects that forged racial hierarchies only to then deny this enterprise and its consequences. Consequently, the 'problem' of multiculturalism is disingenuously attributed to outlandish migrants' own difference and failure to integrate as opposed to the prejudicial attitudes and endemic discrimination they are subjected to. Moving onto racial inequalities and institutional racism, Meer depicts an acute institutional awareness of this deeply embedded racism and wilful disinclination to address it meaningfully. With great critical acuity, Meer sets out the centrality of 'liberal obstacles' to meaningful action in terms of the equal treatment of individuals set against and privileged over the collective experiences of groups, for example illustrated by replacement of the Commission for Racial Equality with the Equalities and Human Rights Commission (2022: 76). In this sense, the book joins critiques of pathologies of racism as an individual behavioural deficiency that ignores its structural and institutional bases (Goldberg, 2009a) which, in turn, allows for the dismissal of racial justice as burdensome for the state (Kapoor, 2013).

Shifting focus to contemporary case examples, COVID-19 is shown to exemplify the significant impact of racism as a determinant of ethnic health inequalities but nonetheless stridently disavowed by the UK government (Meer, 2022: 82). Alongside this abjuration of racism, black, Asian and minority ethnic people are cast as primarily responsible for their comorbidities, such as obesity or diabetes, as well as their subsequent disproportionately higher COVID-19 morbidity and mortality rates. Noting that the pandemic enabled some European leaders to express anti-migrant views couched in public health terms, Meer then turns to the issue of refugees and asylum. Controls on those seeking asylum have been tightened as a demographic shift has taken place with the asylum-seeking population 'increasingly… made up of Black and Brown displaced migrants from the Global South' (2022: 102) in an attempt to establish a cordon sanitaire between Europe and its others. Continuing the previous theme detailing the racialisation of others followed by the instigation and then denial of racism, Meer calls for analysing asylum 'as part of a wider project of racialisation, something that better helps explain the *manufacture and mobilisation of anxieties* over the entry and presence of people seeking refuge' (2022: 107, emphasis added). The prescience of Meer's analysis is evident in the Conservative government's introduction of an Illegal Migration Bill seeking to 'speed up the removal of those with no right to be here' (Home Office, 2023) which, according to the UNHCR, effectively 'extinguishes the right to claim asylum in the UK' barring the recognition of refugees as such with 'extremely limited access to their rights under the European Convention on Human Rights' (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2023). Of course, this institutionalised and legalised state-sponsored racism is not a singularly British malady. Meer's discussion of COVID-19 and asylum also importantly establishes a relational analysis of the transnational formation and mutual dependence of racial ideas and racist practices (Goldberg, 2009b). As ethnic health inequalities and exclusionary asylum policies are commonplace throughout western democracies, they then cease to be exceptional and demonstrate the normalisation of racism and racial injustice (Meer, 2022: 116, 127).

The final part of the book adopts a more prescriptive thrust, first addressing whiteness then the ethics of social relations. For Meer, European societies have failed to reckon with the correspondence between White supremacy and European Christianity, as well as the centrality of the former to European societies and the latter birthing modern racial formation. Moreover, Whiteness is manifest within two registers, as supremacy and rendered negligible as opaque humanity. In addition, Whiteness is suffused with moral indifference, which forestalls recognition of its invidiousness and normalises White supremacy. The critical and programmatic response to this casuistry is twofold: first, Meer crucially points to an important 'analytical pivot' away from constant discussions of those racialised to refocus on the racialiser, whatever discomfort this brings for the latter (2022: 112). Second, and relatedly, Whiteness must be recognised 'as an everyday object of privilege, and not just about White Supremacy as a fringe element' (2022: 124). This evaluative and political pivot is crucial given current western governmental denialism about racism. In Britain, for example, reports linking minority ethnic COVID-19 health 'disparities' to environmental factors instead of inequality (Public Health England, 2020) and labelling charges of structural and institutional and racism as grossly inflated (Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, 2021) were enthusiastically lauded by government.

In the concluding meditation, Meer recognises the present and future of racial justice as impacted by the past and suggests that affecting meaningful, progressive change 'requires imagining a different *present* as well as future' (2022: 125, original emphasis). Such an undertaking is subject to a problematic Lauren Berlant sets out at the outset of *Cruel Optimism*. 'A relation of cruel optimism', Berlant writes, 'exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing' (2011: 1). Moreover, 'kinds of optimistic relation are not inherently cruel. They become cruel only when *the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially*' (2011: 1, added emphasis). In this vein, the desire for an end to racist subjection is not 'inherently cruel.' If this point is self-evident, the question arises of whether this desire may become cruel when an end to racist subjection is sought in antithetical terms that actively impedes its realisation. This delicate dialectical conflict challenges the entire conceptual premise and practical objective of racial justice and merits further discussion.

The issue for consideration here is twofold. First, that racial realism—however qualified in social terms—reproduces the normalisation of race along with its constituent inconsistencies that may, in turn, 'actively impede' anti-racist objectives. For example, 'the social aspects of race, such as stigma and discrimination, can also have biological consequences – precisely, an inversion of what is often presumed to be the case' (Meer, 2022: 85). This claim would apparently attribute causal properties to race, via its social traits. In turn, this would suggest that the amelioration of stigma and discrimination requires addressing the 'social aspects of race' in question. However, elsewhere Meer asserts that *racism* adversely impacts life chances and social outcomes that have significant consequences for health (2022: 88). Therefore, while ethnic health inequalities are biological insofar as they are somatic events experienced in an embodied manner, *racism* is the significant contributory social factor (Pollock, 2021). Moreover, 'stigma' and 'discrimination' are not social aspects *of race*, rather, people are stigmatised

and discriminated against in a given social context and a manner that references ascribed racial characteristics. 'Stigma' and 'discrimination', then, are more accurately regarded as iniquitous forms of racialisation and manifestations of racism and not indicative of any racial characteristic, even if the social is invoked as a caveat. To think this relation the other way around risks identifying race as the object that draws our attachment which can actively impede the initial anti-racist aim. Indeed, the art of 'racecraft' naturalises and normalises race while simultaneously eliding racism and deliberately obscuring its linkages to other forms of inequality (Fields and Fields, 2012).

Second, there is the simple question of whether racial justice constitutes a viable enterprise and worthy ambition. Meer's assertion that 'racial injustice is conventional and not exceptional' (2022: 127) invites elaboration. Viewed through the lens of 'racecraft', race is conjured as purportedly natural in order to obscure its production and functions as a discursive formation to pursue and realise specific interests. This suggests that the pernicious convention of racial injustice is not simply analogous but also intentional, a design feature of race not a bug attributable to human error. As I have argued with regard to technology, race is specifically designed for iniquitous purposes; its successive iterations are adaptations to contingent circumstances in pursuit of that same aim of securing privileges for some while disadvantaging others (St Louis, 2022). This foundational inequity of race raises the monumental question of whether 'racial justice' is a misnomer and impossibility: As a constitutionally discriminatory category and concept, can race serve as a repository for justice? From my preferred racial eliminativist perspective (St Louis, 2015) the short answer would be 'no'. Justice cannot be reconciled with race and racial being that is irrevocably synonymous with inequity. The all too common proclamation 'no justice, no peace' is a clarion call for inclusion within general rights and the entitlements of citizenship and not a demand for a particular form of racial justice. In racial eliminativist terms and invoking Fanon (1967), achieving just outcomes for victims and survivors of racism requires human 'disalienation', an undermining of race and its inequities altogether. Of course, this is easier said than done and the project to truly universalise rights regardless is an arduous task and improbable outcome. This dilemma and struggle for justice typifies cruel optimism, assiduously detailed by Meer's tracing of racist prejudice, discrimination and subjugation throughout connected time and across space, all under the aegis of liberal ideals of freedom, democracy and, without a trace of irony, justice.

The Cruel Optimism of Racial Justice is marked by an arresting concluding intervention. As with shifting the critical focus from racialised to racialiser, Meer presents a powerful and compelling case for racial justice requiring white people to recognise and divest their power and privilege. As both a moral issue and a 'political and affective struggle' (2022: 126), the quest for racial justice requires white people understanding that 'White supremacy kills White people too' (2022: 112). The enormity of this task is evident in numerous circumstances, for example the striking American case of resentful small town and rural conservative Whites' continued strong racialised identification with and support for second amendment constitutional rights while suicides by gun rates within that same population rise exponentially (Metzl, 2019). Nonetheless, as impossible as the task appears, the struggle for justice in its optimistic register is 'a future-oriented concern',

with Meer powerfully reminding us to remain mindful of agency and not tethered to a pessimistic defeatism mired in the cruelty of the past and present.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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