



## Institutional racism is *alive* and *kicking*

A new book called *Institutional Racism in Higher Education* (editors Ian Law, Deborah Phillips and Laura Turney), Trentham Press, is published this summer. It is produced by the Centre for Ethnicity and Racism Studies, at the University of Leeds, and makes for shameful reading: documenting situations where black and Asian colleagues in UK universities are routinely undermined, 'cut out' of the loops of academic communication and subjected to crude racism inside and outside of the classroom.

There are no university vice-chancellors from an ethnic minority background and very few senior managers are black or Asian. So why is the evident diversity found in our national life is not reflected in university faculties?

There will be, no doubt, much hand-ringing and head-shaking about this new book. Tackling the issue of racism on campus is often fraught. The face of racism that we are willing to recognise is that of the moral degenerate, the hateful BNP-supporting bigot. Couched in these terms it becomes unthinkable that such an ugly word could be directed at educated and liberal dons. Even raising the issue of institutional racism in higher education produces responses like 'How dare you!' Such vitriol is ultimately not a

response to being accused fairly or unfairly. Seemingly, what raises the blood pressure is the theft of all that is mannerly about liberalism, knowledge and educational progress. To accuse educators of racism is tantamount to taking their education away from them.

Rather than simply hide in the refusal to acknowledge the problem the question that we need to embrace is 'Why not me'? I am not suggesting that the addiction to white supremacy should be countered by some kind of equivalent to an AA meeting: 'Hello. My name's Les Back – I am a recovering white person.' No, rather I want to acknowledge that racism has done damage to reason, to academic and civic freedoms, and has damaged education itself. Admitting this means a kind of resolute and ongoing reckoning with whiteness. It is never a matter of an end point, or an achievement.

There is another danger that needs to be reflected upon. The dubious temptation to present the persona of an 'all right white person'. I have seen others indulge such pieties and recognise it in myself. It is a masquerade where bad white academics can be denounced roundly from the comfortable position of being an exception to the rule. There is something

deeply disingenuous about this move because it forecloses critical thinking rather than opening it up. It can be manifest in a number of academic settings particularly around appointments. 'All right whites' castigate new white colleagues for their complicity in benefiting from exclusionary employment practices without any questioning of the status of their own tenure. The logic is something like this: 'Racism is not applicable to me and my employment because I am an 'all right white person'!' Delusions of this kind provide a false comfort.

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The kind of reflexivity I'd like to argue for should be troublesome and uncomfortable. This is a reckoning of ethical judgements driven by shame, not guilt. Toni Morrison said: 'If a university does not take seriously and rigorously its role as a guardian of wider civic freedoms, as interrogator of more and more complex ethical problems, as servant

and preserver of deeper democratic practices, then some other regime or ménage of regimes will do it for us, in spite of us, and without us.' Her warning is well put – regardless of the difficulties of this challenge there is something precious to be cherished and fought for.

To say that there are very serious problems in higher education is not to say that 'nothing has changed' and that 'racism wins out at every turn'. To think this would damage our understanding as much as our will. Real shifts are taking place and we need look no further to see this than across the lectern and into the faces of our students. None of this can be realised until there is a recognition that education and sophistication produce no necessary immunity from racism. The sheer weight of whiteness that bears down on the academy can only be lifted through the open and difficult acknowledgment of the damage that racism has done. Then, and perhaps only then, will universities be ready to play a role in producing a post-imperial society at peace with itself.

■ The opinions contained in this article are those of Dr Les Back, of Goldsmiths College, London, and not necessarily the AUT.