RACISM, MORALISM, AND SOCIAL CRITICISM[1]

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Abstract

Through a critical engagement with Lawrence Blum's theory of racism, I defend a "social criticism" model for the philosophical study of racism. This model relies on empirical analyses of social and psychological phenomena but goes beyond this to include the assessment of the warrant of widely held beliefs and the normative evaluation of attitudes, actions, institutions, and social arrangements. I argue that we should give political philosophy theoretical primacy over moral philosophy in normative analyses of racism. I also show how conceptualizing racism as an ideology gives us a unified account of racism and helps us to see what is truly troubling about racism, both in the past and today.

Keywords: Racism, Social Justice, Ideology, Racial Inequality, Racial Politics, Political Philosophy

INTRODUCTION

There are at least four senses of the term "postracial society" that have currency in America today. The first refers to a society where the concept of *race* has come to be widely viewed as incoherent and empirically unsound (Appiah 1996). The second denotes a society where racial differences, while perhaps regarded as real, are no longer viewed as a legitimate basis for treating people differently, not even for developing a sense of group belonging or social identity (Wasserstrom 1976). On the third, what people mainly have in mind is a society that can't be accurately characterized as *racist* because racism has ceased to negatively affect people's basic liberties or life chances. And finally, we might mean a society where racism remains a serious problem but where it is no longer publicly acceptable to criticize the society on the ground that it is racist, that is, where charges of racism against the society are widely regarded as not worth taking seriously. This last sense of "postracial" is often meant ironically. Indeed, references to a society as "postracial" can be meant as a criticism—as an objection to the racist character of the society and to the fact that the society is in denial about its racism.

These various uses of "postracial" generally presuppose some understanding of what racism is, and invocations of the term often reflect rather different assessments of the extent to which racism remains a problem and different ideas about what kind of problems racism actually represents. Thus, debates about whether the United States is

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a "postracial" society raise not only complex empirical questions but also fundamental analytical and normative questions about racism. And so we might wonder whether philosophers—and moral and political philosophers in particular—have any wisdom to impart that can help us think more clearly about the contemporary significance of racism.

There are now well-developed and ongoing philosophical debates about racism that revolve around three questions: What is racism? What makes racism objectionable? And what is the appropriate practical response to racism? The first question is conceptual. The aim is to articulate, as precisely as we can, just what we are, or should be, referring to when we call something "racism." With the second, we seek to isolate the wrong-making characteristic(s) of racism, to identify what is truly and fundamentally troubling about it. The third question is about antiracist practice, that is, about which forms of individual conduct, political activism, public policy, or institutional reform aimed at countering racism and its effects are justified, permissible, or praiseworthy.

In addition to these three questions are two related methodological or meta-theoretical disagreements. One is a second-order disagreement about how to settle first-order disputes over the meaning of the term "racism." This is largely a matter of figuring out what must be established to demonstrate the correctness or superiority of a particular account of racism. The other second-order disagreement is over whether the three core questions about racism are best approached from the standpoint of *personal* morality or *political* morality. This debate is sometimes thought to come down, ultimately, to a choice between treating *individual* racism or *institutional* racism (sometimes called "structural racism") as the primary unit of analysis in (normative, not explanatory) matters of race (Haslanger 2004).

I defend an approach to the philosophical study of racism, weighing in specifically on the two methodological controversies. To demonstrate the first-order analytical and normative import of these methodological reflections, I sketch partial answers to the first and second of the three central questions in the racism debate. My arguments do have relevance for antiracist practice, though I will not develop these implications here. I take up these questions dialectically, by critically engaging an important contribution to the philosophical dispute over racism.

Lawrence Blum (2002) provides answers to each of the core questions about racism, tackling them through the normative lens of personal morality, whose central subject matter is the ethics of individual character and interpersonal conduct. I emphasize instead the value of taking up these issues through political philosophy, whose principal subject is the justice of institutional arrangements. Yet contrary to what some have argued, I don't maintain that the *political*-philosophical perspective is the only appropriate or important point of view in matters of race (Headley 2000; Mills 2003). Moral philosophy has its place and distinctive insights, as Blum ably shows. But nor do I claim merely that moral philosophy and political philosophy are distinct yet equally valid perspectives from which to think about racism. I am convinced that political philosophy must have theoretical primacy in analyses of racism. Indeed, I argue that we can better understand what is objectionable about *individual* racism, particularly racist beliefs, against the background of the conclusions of an adequate political-philosophical account of racism.

BLUM ON THE SCOPE OF "RACISM"

Blum (2002) observes that the charge of "racism" now expresses an especially strong moral condemnation. Yet the charge, he claims, is frequently used indiscriminately to

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cover all race-related wrongs, including some that do not warrant such damning criticism. He therefore has two related objectives: to explain why and when the charge of racism rightly has such strong condemnatory power and to show how we might preserve, or restore, the force of the charge as a form of moral criticism. Accordingly, he proposes that we restrict the extension of the term "racism" to only the most serious moral failings in the domain of race. He supports this restriction on several interconnected grounds.

Blum claims that this proposed usage already conforms, though imperfectly, to our current practice. We now call something "racist," he maintains, only if we seek to strongly condemn it. As he notes, the term was initially introduced to designate the doctrine of racial superiority advocated by the Nazis (Fredrickson 2002). However, the term no longer refers only to a system of beliefs; it now extends to persons, motives, actions, statements, institutions, symbols, and still other things.

Blum welcomes this expansion, up to a point, but he maintains that far too many lesser moral errors are today regarded as racist. He worries that because of this "conceptual inflation" the term could come to lose all meaning. And because some persons use the charge to strongly condemn relatively minor racial wrongs, the potency of the word as moral criticism has diminished. Blum thinks we should avoid making the word "racism" do so much moral work and choose alternative ways of describing and criticizing less serious race-related wrongs.

At first blush, this proposal might seem to provide philosophical support for today's disturbing denial about continuing racial problems. Yet Blum's proposal is not meant to deny that these lesser racial wrongs are wrongs. On the contrary, this shift in moral vocabulary, he claims, would actually better highlight these lesser moral errors, providing a richer, more fine-tuned set of normative categories for making evaluative judgments in the complex and always fraught sphere of race. Too often people mistakenly assume that if an infraction in the racial domain is not racism, then it cannot be criticized on moral grounds at all. If we are to make further progress in matters of race, we must transcend this "all-or-nothing" approach.

Perhaps most important, Blum argues that when lesser moral infractions are labeled "racist," this is effectively a conversation stopper. The accused become so anxious or resentful that they are unable to productively engage in open dialogue. Some persons of good will avoid discussing matters of race altogether for fear that their remarks will be wrongly interpreted as racist. Thus, this overly expansive use of "racism" intensifies group antagonism, inhibits interracial cooperation, and hence retards our progress toward racial conciliation.

SOCIAL CRITICISM AND THE POLITICS OF RACIAL DISCOURSE

Despite the obvious merits of Blum's narrow-scope conception of racism, I favor a broader conception, one that has a different focus and that gives less weight to how the term is used in everyday life.[2] I question Blum's claim that there is broad agreement that racism is a particularly serious moral error. The only evidence that he provides is that today people generally do not like to be viewed as or labeled "racist." I do not doubt the truth of this observation. Yet how much of this general concern to avoid being regarded as racist is *morally* based and how much is simply a matter of prudence? Certainly offensive terms like "nigger," "bitch," and "faggot" are not respectable in public discourse; and, as with the charge of racism, few want to be regarded as sexist or homophobic. But this does not establish that there is broad consensus that racism, sexism, and homophobia are serious moral failings.

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There is no question that many people have strong moral convictions about (what they regard as) racial misconduct, and that these persons suffer a deep sense of guilt or self-reproach when they detect or even suspect racial prejudice in themselves. However, a significant number of others may simply avoid the appearance of racism, not out of deep ethical commitment, but because they fear the wrath of the "politically correct." Though there is not universal agreement, there are certainly enough people who now regard racism as a serious moral failing that being thought to be racist can have real costs: it can lead to the loss of one's job, votes in elections, one's reputation, and good will from needed allies. Not everyone needs to sincerely endorse the public norms against overt racism for these norms to have real social force; a stable critical mass is all that is necessary. Moreover, to be perceived as racist is to risk engendering active hostility from members of low-status racial groups, who sometimes have the power to retaliate, making their indignation felt. One need not regard racism as a serious moral failing to be moved by these practical considerations.

In addition, discussions of racism, particularly in the United States, take place within the context of a deep and longstanding racial divide (Bobo and Charles, 2009; Kinder and Kam, 2009; Kinder and Sanders, 1996). Some members of disadvantaged racial groups believe that the government institutions whose responsibility it is to enforce antidiscrimination law are not adequately administered, funded, or staffed. They resent the fact that measures that could redress the racial inequalities created by past injustices are not seriously considered. They are painfully aware that efforts to desegregate neighborhoods and schools still face fierce resistance (Charles 2006; Massey and Denton, 1993; Wilson and Taub, 2006). And they know that many people do not support policies that would arguably improve the life prospects or protect the civil rights of disadvantaged racial minorities. If racial minorities are to believe that racism is generally thought to constitute a particularly serious moral wrong, one warranting strong condemnation, then they will naturally want a convincing explanation for why so many people oppose policies that would likely reduce its incidence or mitigate its negative effects.

Many Whites, by contrast, believe that racism is (largely) a thing of the past and that no one's (or hardly anyone's) life chances are seriously affected by racial prejudice or its historical legacy (Bobo 2011). Aggressive antiracist measures are thus thought to be unnecessary and perhaps counterproductive. In fact, many now dismiss charges of racism as empty rhetoric exploited to extract guilt from Whites and, through this, so-called special treatment from government for victim-minded racial minorities. When non-Whites charge racism—sometimes derisively called "playing the race card"—they are often suspected of using the charge as a term of abuse, a method of extortion, or an excuse for their own failings (Ford 2008).

In sum, claims of racism, and their denial, are highly politicized (Sears et al., 2000). Charges of racism are certainly morally loaded, as Blum contends. But they also reflect contemporary political dynamics and existing power relations. Philosophers should therefore be circumspect about how we enlist the contemporary public discourse of race—that is, common-sense race talk—in our theoretical efforts to better understand what racism is, what makes it wrong, and how best to respond to it.

THE WIDE-SCOPE AND NONMORALIZED CONCEPTION OF RACISM

Blum's useful distinctions and moral insights can be preserved while maintaining a healthy skepticism about the probative value of the public discourse around race-related issues. This would require dropping the assumption that judging someone

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or something to be racist is always an expression of strong moral condemnation. The following alternative set of initial assumptions would serve at least as well:

1. Racism comes in many forms and manifests itself in numerous ways.
2. All forms and expressions of racism are *prima facie* cause for moral concern.
3. Not every form or expression of racism is a *grave* moral failing.
4. Indeed, not every form or expression of racism represents a *moral* failing.

I won't defend these postulates by suggesting they are all self-evident. They clearly are not. The strength of my case will depend on showing how the postulates advance our understanding in comparison with a compelling alternative set of initial assumptions.

We can allow that many race-related ills are forms or expressions of racism but that the normative status of any particular instance of racism can vary considerably. From a strictly analytical and moral point of view, this way of carving up the domain of inquiry (which we might call the "wide-scope" conception of racism) and Blum's narrow-scope approach are functionally equivalent. One can either define the domain broadly and make the relevant moral distinctions within that domain (wide-scope) or define the domain narrowly and make moral distinctions that cut across its boundaries (narrow-scope).

We could readily choose between these two approaches if "racism" had a relatively clear referent given ordinary usage. But the fact is, the term no longer has a determinate meaning in everyday life. Blum cannot therefore be acting as a lexicographer. He is making a *recommendation*, prescribing a meaning for "racism." If I am right that the wide-scope and narrow-scope approaches are functionally equivalent and that the meaning of the ordinary term is now indeterminate, then Blum's case for his recommendation ultimately rests on practical, antiracist grounds: he favors restricting the scope of the term because he believes this will more likely move us closer to racial comity and mutual understanding given current circumstances. In particular, he thinks that his approach will better facilitate interracial dialogue on the emotionally hot topic of race and that such dialogue is a means to, or a necessary condition for, racial conciliation on terms of mutual respect. Thus, he is effectively building a practical antiracist premise into his account of what racism is. However, this puts things backwards. The question of what constitutes racism is logically prior to the question of what to do about racism. Indeed, if reliable measures to end, reduce, or resist racism are to be devised, these should be based on an understanding of what racism is and why it should be opposed—and, arguably, what its causes are.

Yet, even if we were to agree that, in delimiting the scope of "racism," practical antiracist considerations are decisive, there are other such considerations that would naturally bear on the question. For instance, it would be just as reasonable, from a pragmatic point of view, to define the scope of "racism" by focusing on those race-related ills that have the greatest consequences for the liberty, material life prospects, and self-respect of individuals.[3] It is no doubt because of these urgent practical concerns that many African Americans insist that racism be understood (primarily) as a system of oppression rather than (strictly) in terms of individual prejudice. For example, in their influential book *Black Power*, Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton (1967) famously urged that we shift our critical eye away from identifying racist individuals and toward understanding the subtle dynamics of institutional racism. They recognized that overt expressions of personal bigotry were becoming less common but that Blacks and other racial minorities in the United States were still oppressed. They wanted a conception of racism that focused squarely on the unfair burdens that

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racial minorities were being forced to carry, regarding individual prejudice, whatever its normative valence from the standpoint of personal morality, as much less *practically* significant. Antiracist considerations such as these suggest placing questions of social justice at the center of accounts of racism, where the focus is on whether the major institutions of social life treat all individuals justly regardless of their race.

The conversation-stopper problem that Blum highlights should be taken seriously. But solving or mitigating that problem does not require us to accept a narrow-scope conception of racism. To see this, we need to distinguish between publically stating that a person is a racist and concluding, *in one's own mind*, that he or she is a racist. We can determine whether someone is racist first and then decide whether, in a given context, it would be prudent or productive to publicly call him or her racist. One's judgment that the person is racist could be entirely correct even though under the circumstances one should bite one's tongue or bide one's time. The primary philosophical task, I take it, is to figure out when such *judgments* are correct. That is, the aim is to determine whether something or someone is, in fact, racist. It is at best a secondary task to determine when and whether it would be a good idea, all things considered, to make specific public charges of racism.

Moreover, there is something utopian, in the bad sense, about Blum's way of dealing with the conversation-stopper problem. His focus on the need to facilitate interracial dialogue about the meaning and wrongs of racism assumes that almost everyone seeks to live in a society in which no one is disadvantaged because of his or her race. But it seems abundantly clear that many people are perfectly content with the racial status quo. There are deep inequalities in wealth, political power, employment, and educational opportunity between Whites and some racial minorities. Such inequalities create group-based conflicts of interest and racial antagonism. On his own account, eliminating inequities due to past injustices and creating equal life chances for all would require a significant transfer of resources from (some) Whites to (some) racial minorities. Given this situation, can we reasonably expect to achieve widespread interracial agreement on what racism is? There is every reason to believe that these substantive conflicts of interest will be reflected in what members of the respective racial groups regard as constituting racism, *especially* if all sides were to agree (following Blum's suggestion) that racism is a serious moral evil that demands immediate redress.

Take for example the principle of colorblindness (Eastland 1996). According to this principle, a person's race should never be a consideration in determining how government institutions treat him or her, even if the proposed race-conscious policy is designed to promote some otherwise worthy social goal, such as reducing occurrences of racial discrimination, creating greater racial integration, or attenuating the legacy of racial exclusion.[4] Most Whites have a material stake in treating colorblindness as an absolute moral principle, for in viewing it thusly redistributive measures that would be costly to them can be regarded not only as bad policy—that is, as unwise, ineffective, or inefficient—but as *unjust*.

I highlight this bias not because I believe all defenses of colorblindness are offered in bad faith. Nor do I do so because I think we should conceptualize racism from, say, the "Black point of view." Stigmatized racial groups, too, have a stake in how the general public understands the scope of "racism"; and it is not surprising that many from such groups favor an expansive conception, as this, if widely accepted and acted upon, could potentially improve their lot. Rather, I raise this issue to express general doubts about the common-sense morality of race in the "postracial" era. In particular, I want to urge caution about how we use the public discourse about race—an often self-serving, deeply dishonest, and conflict-ridden discourse—in our philosophical analyses of racism. Racial common sense, whether rooted in the sensibilities of dominant groups

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or subordinate ones, should not determine the conclusions of systematic theory, and generalizations about what "we" mean by "racism" should be viewed with skepticism.

I hasten to add that I am not suggesting that the philosopher theorizing about racism should not rely on his or her own moral judgments about race-related matters. Such reliance is unavoidable and perfectly permissible, provided one subjects these judgments to appropriate critical reflection—what Rawlsians call "wide-reflective equilibrium" (Daniels 1996; Rawls 1999). But using one's own moral judgment in developing an account of racism is not the same as relying on what one takes to be the moral convictions of others or speculating about how widespread particular moral convictions are.

So how, then, should disputes over the meaning of "racism" be settled? Much depends on what function the term plays, or should play, in the relevant discourse and of course on just what the relevant discourse is. There are at least three distinct though related discursive domains that take racism as their subject. Blum treats the function of the term as essentially one of moral criticism, and the relevant discourse is, for him, everyday race talk. The term also plays a role in empirical social science, where it designates particular phenomena to be empirically understood and explained. In empirical studies, the notion is often operationalized in (ostensibly) value-neutral language to better ensure objectivity and measurement; and many if not most social scientists (in the United States at least) accept a fact/value distinction and aim to avoid making value judgments about the phenomena they study.

But assume for the moment that our concern is with use of the term in ordinary moral criticism. Still, there is a distinctive social phenomenon that we are interested in, one with a long and tragic history that continues to this day. Suppose, for purposes of moral criticism, that we wanted to put the phenomenon of racism into some familiar category of recognized wrongs, such as intolerance for legitimate differences. We could not do so properly if we failed to grasp the nature of the phenomenon at issue, if, for example, we were wrongly to assume that it is a response to cultural differences between racially defined groups. Social scientific research will therefore be essential to ensuring that our moral assessments are suitably informed by the relevant facts. In addition, it is important to recognize the possibility that these facts, as with all scientific facts, may diverge from or conflict with common sense, prompting us to revise our pre-conceptions.

There is also the discourse of the social critic, which is identical with neither everyday discourse nor scientific discourse. Social critics don't merely systematize common sense or popularize scientific findings. Social critics seek to inform, and possibly shape, public opinion with clear and careful thinking, well-established facts, and moral insight. They will of course draw on and engage both common sense and scientific thought, but they do so without taking a slavish attitude toward either. After all, in addition to everyday common-sense racism, there has been, and still is, scientific racism—that is, racist doctrines masquerading as scientifically established facts.

I urge philosophers who take racism as their subject to regard themselves as such social critics. I don't mean that a philosopher thinking about race should be a "public intellectual," as many social critics are or aspire to be. The principal role of the philosophical social critic, as here conceived, is to shed light on the most fundamental conceptual and normative issues that race-related questions raise.[5] Indeed, I propose that we view the contemporary debate over the meaning of "racism" as, at its heart, a disagreement among philosophically-minded social critics. In this discursive domain, generating general agreement on the meaning of "racism" is not the aim. The objective is to arrive at the most illuminating account of racism, even if that account is gained at the cost of breaking with common sense or seeming to deny the obvious.

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Competing philosophical analyses of racism are to be judged, then, as a whole and comparatively, by how much each contributes to our overall understanding. Against the background of these meta-philosophical remarks, I now return to Blum's substantive account before offering an alternative.

MORAL CRITICISM AND RACIST BELIEFS

Blum maintains that we can understand all forms of racism in terms of two broad paradigms. Racial *inferiorization* occurs when one social group is viewed, represented, or treated as inferior because of its race. Racial *antipathy* is hatred, hostility, or bigotry directed toward a group because of its race. By drawing on one or both of these paradigms, Blum attempts to explain the varieties of racism.

Recent philosophical accounts of racism generally include racial antipathy or race-based hatred among the attitudes that are properly called "racist." If there is near-universal agreement about anything regarding race, it is that hating someone or some group simply because of their race is racist. The real disagreement arises over: (1) whether the presence of racial antipathy is a necessary condition for racism, (2) whether such antipathy should be regarded as the fundamental form of racism from which all other types are related, and (3) whether (unwarranted) antipathy is the sole wrong-making feature of racism. I have discussed the antipathy paradigm elsewhere (Shelby 2002). Here I want to consider the inferiorization paradigm and, specifically, to examine the place of racist *beliefs* within Blum's overall analysis.

He departs from Jorge Garcia's (1996, 1997) influential account of racism by including inferiorization as a separate paradigmatic form of racism in addition to racial antipathy. I believe this to be an advance (Mills 2003; Shelby 2002). Yet it does not go far enough. Inferiorizing racism, according to Blum, is regarding or treating the members of a racial group as defective or substandard in some significant way (for example, in moral character, intelligence, or capacity for self-determination). He also says that inferiorizing personal racism expresses itself in attitudes of disrespect, contempt, and demeaning. What isn't so clear is whether he thinks the term "racism," given his proposal for how we should understand its scope, applies in cases where such negative affect is absent but the belief in inferiority is still present. If the mere belief in the defective character of Blacks, Asians, or Native Americans is a form of racism (as many maintain), in what way does this belief represent a serious *moral* offense? Although beliefs can be false, unjustified, or irrational, it is less clear on what grounds they can be condemned as immoral.

Now beliefs can be open to moral criticism (as opposed to criticism on purely epistemic or cognitive grounds) because of how they have come to be formed. For instance, we often criticize persons who are careless or credulous when it comes to forming their beliefs.[6] And we also criticize those who are dogmatic. Such dispositions can be viewed as character flaws, and the beliefs formed because of these flaws accordingly could be regarded as morally tainted (Arthur 2007). Blum, at times, seems to take a position of this sort.[7] He thinks, for example, that inferiorizing beliefs that are merely the product of racial prejudice are suitable targets of moral criticism. He also maintains that inferiorizing beliefs (indeed, beliefs with any propositional content) that are mere rationalizations for racial antipathy are appropriate objects of moral criticism. So, for him, if such beliefs spring from racial antipathy or rationalize such antipathy, then they are morally objectionable.

By contrast, Blum at one point denies that inferiorizing beliefs that are the result of "independent intellectual processes" or a "dispassionate assessment" of the relevant

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evidence are racist (Blum 2002, p. 183). These beliefs could still be criticized on epistemic grounds (as false, for example), but they would not be open to moral criticism, let alone subject to strong moral condemnation. On the other hand, Blum accepts that the propositional content of a belief (e.g., "that blacks are lazy" or "that Indians are stupid") can be racist even if the person who holds it is not a racist and does not hold the belief because of racial animus. This suggests that cold, cognitive racism is possible. He also maintains that symbols, jokes, and images can be racist quite apart from the motives of those who make or use them.

The trouble is that the admission of these latter cases seems to violate his requirement that the charge of racism be reserved for serious *moral* failings in the racial domain. Can a belief by virtue of its propositional content alone violate a binding moral norm? To be sure, a person might have a belief whose content denies (or entails the denial of) the normative force of a valid moral principle. Here it would make sense to speak of "immoral beliefs." Take for instance the belief, widely held during the eighteenth century, that non-Whites, particularly Black Africans, can be enslaved without doing them any injustice. But the belief that non-Whites are lazier or less intelligent than Whites does not fall into this category, for one might hold such views while insisting that such group differences do not warrant differential moral treatment, that is, while viewing racial differences as real but morally irrelevant. We might plausibly think beliefs about racial differences in intelligence or indolence are typically linked to, or closely associated with, White supremacy. We might also maintain that morally culpable racists typically hold such beliefs. But neither claim, though no doubt true, would, taken alone, justify morally condemning controversial beliefs about races or those who hold them. So it seems that Blum has to admit that racism can exist where there is no serious moral failing on the part of the person who exhibits it. Indeed, he must allow that racism can exist when *no* moral criticism is applicable.

We could resolve this difficulty if we were to relax Blum's requirement that the charge of racism be applied strictly to the worst *moral* ills in matters of race. For instance, we could maintain that racism, whatever its form or mode of expression, is *prima facie* a cause for moral concern (in accordance with postulate 2 of the wide-scope conception) but that not everything properly regarded as racist represents a moral failing (in accordance with postulate 4). This would mean rejecting a *moralistic* definition of racism, that is, a definition that treats every instance of racism as a culpable failure of some individual or group to endorse or comply with a valid moral principle.

Blum would reject this approach, since he wants to preserve what he takes to be the established strong condemnatory force of the charge. But, as argued above, it is not so clear that the moral significance of charges of racism is as firmly or widely established in public discourse as he supposes. Therefore it is open to advocates of the wide-scope conception to say that some racist beliefs (for example, those rooted in unjustified malice) warrant strong condemnation; other racist beliefs (for instance, those formed because of the careless but non-malicious acceptance of racial stereotypes), though morally troubling, do not warrant such severe moral reproach; while still other racist beliefs (say, those based on ignorance or ordinary cognitive errors) are not, as such, morally culpable.

This less moralizing approach to racism could also help with the conversation-stopper problem, and so Blum's account does not have an advantage in that regard either. As Blum emphasizes, part of the reason claims of racism are sometimes perceived as threatening is that the targets of such claims often take the claims to imply some, perhaps serious, moral failing on their part. However, since most of us have been socialized into a culture shaped by the racist beliefs and attitudes of past generations, we are all susceptible to racially stereotyping others, to racial blind spots, and to unconscious

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forms of racial bias. Were we to recognize that one can do or say something racist, or make a decision on the basis of racist considerations, without being a bad person or acting immorally, a more honest and perhaps less tense interracial dialogue among those of good will about problems of race would be possible. Bringing more people around to this realization should be among our antiracist tasks, not narrowing the scope of "racism" to only the worst racial wrongs.

RACISM AS IDEOLOGY

We can develop a more adequate and unified account of racism, one that properly situates racist beliefs into a general framework, but only if we opt for a different paradigm than the inferiorization model. My suggestion, in brief, is that we think of racism as fundamentally a type of *ideology*. I begin with a schematic characterization (explanations and caveats to follow): *Racism is a set of misleading beliefs and implicit attitudes about "races" or race relations whose wide currency serves a hegemonic social function*.

The thesis that racism is an ideology is of course not new. Many social scientists and historians hold this view or something quite similar (see Bobo et al., 1997; Fields 1990; Fredrickson 2002; Holt 2000; Miles 1989; Sidanius and Pratto, 1999; Wilson 1973). However, given that their primary aim is to describe, analyze, and explain rather than to morally evaluate, condemn, and blame, they tend not to develop or to make explicit the normative dimensions of this standpoint. They often prefer instead to sharply separate judgments of empirical fact from judgments of value. Reconnecting the two therefore falls to (among others) the social critic with philosophical inclinations.

Blum briefly considers accounts of racism that treat it primarily as ideology and rejects them on three main grounds. He regards a racist ideology as a system of belief that holds that there exists a biologically-based hierarchy of races, but he maintains that there are racists who do not believe in a strict "natural" group-based hierarchy. He argues that a person can be a racist or do something racist without having any developed or sophisticated beliefs about what different races are like. And, finally, he thinks things other than ideologies, such as institutions and policies, should be regarded as racist. These objections can be rebutted.

Blum's criticisms of the ideology paradigm are premised on an overly narrow conception of ideology. He treats ideologies as explicit and fully developed doctrines whose propositional content is stable over time. However, I mean "ideology," not as it is currently understood in everyday discourse (where it often denotes partisan political doctrines), but as it has come to us from the Western Marxist tradition.[8] *An ideology is a widely held set of loosely associated beliefs and implicit judgments that misrepresent significant social realities and that function, through this distortion, to bring about or perpetuate unjust social relations* (Shelby 2003). In addition to racist ideology, there are nationalist, religious, sexist, economic, and even moral ideologies, and each has played an important role in creating and stabilizing unjust institutions and regimes.

I won't offer a full characterization of ideological phenomena here (see Shelby 2003). But there are a few features of ideologies that should be highlighted. First, the content of an ideological belief system can change over time. These changes occur in response to shifts in the cultural, political, and economic context and also, importantly, in response to social criticism. So, for example, explicit beliefs about the inherent biological inferiority of non-White racial groups were more widespread in the past, during the eras of chattel slavery, Jim Crow, apartheid, and colonialism. But social movements—the abolitionist movement, the Civil Rights Movement, the anti-apartheid movement, and various anticolonial liberation movements—fiercely attacked these

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ideas and the institutions they supported. With these ideas largely discredited (though not dead), beliefs and implicit judgments about the cultural backwardness or behavioral pathology of non-White racial groups are more common (Bobo 2011). Or, alternatively, it is believed that members of some racial groups *tend* to be less hardworking, less law abiding, less intelligent, and so on, without insisting that all members of such groups possess these negative characteristics and without necessarily concluding that these traits are (completely) congenital. These beliefs and assumptions are frequently called upon to explain why socially disadvantaged groups persist in a low position within their societies or the global community. They are enlisted to defend against charges that equal opportunity or just international relations do not yet obtain. They are invoked when people reject out of hand policies that would correct past injustices or lessen racial inequality. Rather than think of these more contemporary beliefs and assumptions about racial groups as forming a different ideology, I agree with those who argue that it is more accurate to view them as expressions of a newly constituted racist ideology (Bobo et al., 1997; McCarthy 2009).

Despite frequent references to "culture," "race" is still the operative (if not the ostensible) category used to identify the relevant groups. The group stereotypes remain the same. For example, Blacks are still represented as substandard (or at least inferior to Whites) with respect to intelligence, moral character, and industriousness. Though the defects are now more often attributed to cultural characteristics, these are treated as thoroughly entrenched and (practically) unchangeable, which effectively *racializes* these purported differences. Race and culture are here fused to give the ideology greater legitimacy, but racial classification and familiar racial thinking are still essential to the function the ideology serves. The wide diffusion of these beliefs and assumptions helps to reinforce the subordinate position of the members of non-White racial groups. In short, these patterns of thought deploy an only slightly modified notion of race and play a crucial role in reproducing an informal racial hierarchy that has existed for generations. They are thus quite similar, in both content and function, with "classic" racist ideology, which isn't really surprising, since contemporary forms of racism are often nothing more than remnants of the classic doctrine, either operating implicitly in the background culture or repackaged to buttress the racial status quo.

Second, ideologies are not, generally, attributed to individuals but to social groups, whole societies, or historical eras. These are those commonly held beliefs and implicit judgments that legitimate stratified social orders or imperial projects. Elites do sometimes espouse what we might call ideological doctrines, that is, developed belief systems or theories. Most people, however, do not have systematic or sophisticated views about the relevant phenomena yet will have absorbed—through various media, schools, public rituals, or other revered institutions—many of the core assumptions propagated by elites. Indeed, the locus of ideology is common sense, that reservoir of background assumptions that agents draw on spontaneously as they engage in social intercourse. These assumptions are often held without full conscious awareness, creating various forms of unconscious bias (Hodson et al., 2004). For this reason people can actually be surprised to learn that they harbor racial prejudices or implicitly accept degrading racial stereotypes. And even the most progressive and tolerant among us must admit that this experience is not unfamiliar.

Third, treating ideology as the paradigmatic form of racism does not preclude regarding things other than beliefs as racist. It simply means—as with Blum's use of the inferiorization and antipathy paradigms—that we understand these other forms or expressions of racism in terms of ideology, i.e., in terms of ideology's main characteristics or effects. So, for instance, someone who explicitly subscribes to a racist

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ideology is certainly a racist *person*, but so is someone who is disposed to act on racist assumptions though the person may not (fully) know that such assumptions shape his or her conduct and attitudes. A racist *action* is one undertaken because of the agent's racist beliefs or one the agent rationalizes in terms of such beliefs. The propositional *content* of an ideology can be expressed in literature, jokes, symbols, popular culture, advertisements, and other media. An *institution* is racist if (1) its goals or policies are premised on or convey racist propositions or (2) its rules and regulations fail to be impartially and consistently applied because racial ideology has a pervasive (though perhaps unconscious) hold over its officials or functionaries (Shelby 2004). Indeed, a *society* can itself be racist if racial ideology is among the primary mechanisms through which the dominant group(s) maintains its dominance (Hall 1980).

Finally, in addition to their oppressive social consequences, ideologies possess *epistemic* deficiencies. They make faulty claims to knowledge; they mislead and distort; they create and spread myths; they misinform and conceal. Most importantly, they legitimate group dominance *through* their misrepresentations. The central organizing idea of racist ideology is of course the modern idea of "race" itself, which often leads to pseudo-scientific accounts of human variety and group differences, which in turn rationalize social oppression and thereby perpetuate injustice (Appiah 1990). And it often requires empirical studies to debunk the latest incarnation of the ideology and to reveal its pernicious social and psychological consequences.

To say that a person's conduct, an institution, or a whole society is shaped by ideology is certainly a type of criticism. It is not however an ordinary moral criticism, like calling someone a liar, coward, or murderer. The social critique of ideology combines epistemic evaluation, moral assessment, and social-scientific analysis, and serves as the foundation for a distinctive type of social criticism, sometimes called "critical theory."

WHAT'S OBJECTIONABLE ABOUT RACISM?

But even if racism should be thought of as an ideology, we are still left with the question of what precisely is objectionable about racism so understood. How should we assess racial ideology from a normative point of view? Blum maintains that inferiorizing racism is morally wrong because it "violates fundamental norms of respect, equality, and recognition of the dignity of other persons," and that racial antipathy is wrong because it "exemplifies unworthy or destructive sentiments and attitudes" (2002, pp. 27–28). He recognizes, however, that many moral wrongs—great evils and lesser moral faults—satisfy these criteria, and so this does not explain what it is about racism that should lead us to classify it among the worst moral errors. He wants to identify what it is about race-based violations of these general moral norms that constitutes an aggravating factor in such transgressions.

His answer is that racism is tied to certain historical race-based systems of oppression (e.g., slavery, fascism, segregation, and colonialism). According to Blum, the contemporary charge of racism derives part of its moral power from its connection to these systems, and it does so in two ways. First, these forms of oppression were *based* on race distinctions, and the *association* of race with such great evils is enough to give the charge of racism extra condemnatory power. Second, we continue to live with the legacy of those systems (e.g., racial inequalities in education, wealth, political power, and employment). Thus the moral intensifiers of race-related wrongs, according to Blum, are these associations with past atrocities and the negative contemporary consequences of these great evils.

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There is wisdom and insight in this approach. It helps us to see that part of the reason that contemporary racism should trouble us is its close link to serious past wrongs. One of its weaknesses, however, is that it cannot explain why New World slavery and modern European colonial expansion were racist. These systems of oppression cannot plausibly be thought to have inherited their moral status from some prior, particularly appalling form of domination, and there of course have been systems of slavery and imperialism that were not race-based. So what, if anything, makes *race-based* forms of oppression viler than other forms?

We should first note that just because the members from one racially defined group dominate and exploit members from another does not necessarily make the domination or exploitation *morally* worse than it would have been had it occurred intra-racially. Members from one racial group can treat the members of another in abominable ways while being indifferent to the race of their victims, and in such cases it is not meaningful to speak of "racism" at all. Racist actions and policies require reliance, if only implicitly, on the race idea.

What made the monstrous systems of oppression of the past specifically racist and distinguished them from similar but non-racist forms of group dominance—which have also involved exploitation, slavery, segregation, conquest, and genocide—is that the notion of "race" was invoked in a way that legitimized denying persons the respect and just treatment due them, and this ideological work enhanced the likelihood that the dominant group's hegemony would be successful or continue unabated. Such ideological legitimations for group dominance are ubiquitous in human history.

A working hypothesis, then, is that whatever makes ideologies in general wrongful is what makes racism wrongful. Some might reject this idea immediately, claiming that racial ideologies are worse than other ideological justifications, making racism especially egregious. But is it really morally worse to attempt to justify such dominance in terms of alleged "racial differences" than to do so in terms of, say, a religious doctrine or a civilizing mission? It is not clear that it is. The basic moral problem with all of these ideologies is that they deny that members of the relevant subordinate group are equal members of the moral community entitled to just treatment, and so each is dehumanizing. Ideological justifications, whether race-based or not, that deny the equal moral standing of the oppressed add insult to injury, making an already serious wrong worse. This *expressive harm* is itself morally objectionable.

It might be thought that racial ideology implies *permanent* subordinate status, while religious or civilizing ideologies typically allow that the subordinate group *may*—through conversion, tutelage, or assimilation—eventually gain equal moral status. The trouble with all of these ideologies, though, is they suggest that just treatment is owed on some basis other than personhood or humanity, that one has to have the "correct" race, religion, or culture to be accorded respect as an equal. Basic just treatment does not have to be earned, however. Each of us is entitled to it in virtue of our capacity for rational and moral agency (Rawls 1999). Thus, were one's unjust treatment premised on divine prescriptions or cultural backwardness rather than on racial inferiority, this would not be a reason to feel any less aggrieved.[9]

Another possibility is that ideological justifications, race-based or not, are offered in *bad faith* and that this constitutes a wrong in addition to the dominance itself (Gordon 1995). That is, racists just promulgate these absurd things to cover their tracks or soothe their souls but don't, at least on reflection, honestly believe them. But ideological justifications, while invalid, are often sincere. People can be in the grip of an illusion they are propagating. Consider many religious ideologies, which are often earnestly embraced. Similarly, some people subscribe to racial ideologies as deeply held convictions.

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Or perhaps moral inconsistency is the problem (e.g., believing that Blacks are subhuman yet producing offspring with them or celebrating liberty and equality while holding slaves), such that *hypocrisy* is the moral vice at issue. However, while consistent racists may be morally better—that is, more principled—than hypocritical racists, this lack of hypocrisy would not make the consistent racist's *beliefs and judgments* any better from a moral point of view. And we are here trying to determine whether there is something that makes racist ideologies morally worse than other ideologies.

Recall, though, that not all ideologies contain "immoral beliefs." There are ideologies that have no moral content. Some make purely factual claims and, in themselves, make no claims about the moral standing of subordinate groups. Some racial ideologies fit this pattern, for example, those that make claims about the intelligence or temperament of the darker races. So what, if anything, is morally objectionable about an ideology that claims, say, that Blacks are strong and run fast but are unintelligent and impulsive?

Setting aside the factual distortions and inaccuracies of such legitimating ideologies (the epistemic ills), I want to suggest that the *morally* troubling feature of these beliefs and assumptions, the cause for moral concern, lies not in their specific content (i.e., in what their propositional content conveys) but in their social function: *They contribute to the production and reproduction of unjust social arrangements by concealing the fact that these arrangements are unjust*. Racist beliefs historically, *and even today*, play exactly this role.

Racial ideologies—what I am here suggesting as the primary referent of "racism"—have the same function as other ideologies but can be distinguished from them by their content. Both dimensions, content and function, are proper objects of social criticism. Their content justifies epistemic criticism (though sometimes moral criticism, as with immoral beliefs). Their function justifies moral criticism. But what makes an ideology *racist* (its content) and what makes it morally *wrong* (its function) need not be the same thing. We sometimes object morally to something, not because it is intrinsically wrong, but because it has a tendency to engender or reinforce something that is intrinsically wrong.

Compare the case of economic inequality. Some egalitarians object to economic inequalities, not because they think the fact that some have more economic resources than others is in itself morally problematic, but because they believe that economic inequality, when large enough, confers illegitimate power on some over others, creating relations of oppression or degrading forms of servitude (Anderson 1999; Scanlon 2003). The wrong-making feature in this instance is, say, economic exploitation or political subordination, not economic inequality as such. Antiracists can object to racism on analogous grounds: racist beliefs and implicit attitudes are not necessarily intrinsically wrong, but we are justified in objecting to them because they tend to create or reinforce unjust social hierarchies.

Now, *truth* is ordinarily a sufficient defense against such objections. And were racist claims true, regardless of the consequences of their widespread acceptance, this would be enough to rebut the social critic's attacks. But since racist thinking lacks epistemic warrant—indeed, it tends to be positively distorting—the ideological function it serves provides a reason to take a moral stance against it. Racist beliefs and assumptions fall into the category of "false and dangerous," not merely "false."

I am not suggesting that racism is merely an "epiphenomenon" that masks the "real" injustice of economic exploitation or class domination. There are serious forms of injustice that are not essentially about money, property, or labor (e.g., being unfairly denied the right to vote or the right to due process) and racial ideology has played a

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significant role in buttressing such injustices. Moreover, once the ideology of racism crystallized into habit and culture, becoming a central component of modern social life, it created additional race-related ills. These ills cannot be reduced to how racial ideology conceals systematic forms of domination and exploitation. Nor, again, are all these ills economic in nature—though many obviously do have economic consequences. Individuals now absorb, through processes of socialization and mass media, the attitudes and habits of mind that are constitutive of racial ideology. This includes learning the social significance of so-called racial differences and acquiring their associated group stereotypes.

Racial ideology works by attributing social meaning to visible physical traits, genealogy, and geographic origins (e.g., to skin color, lineage, and continental derivation), marking off some human populations as superior or normal and others as inferior or defective. The content of these beliefs and attitudes gives us reason to fear that those in their grip will likely treat others unjustly. The worry becomes cause for alarm and strong action when those with racist beliefs occupy positions of power, control the distribution of vital resources, administer the law, or determine access to important opportunities.

In addition, because of long exposure to negative stereotypes, members of stigmatized racial groups often come to (implicitly) accept the validity of these stereotypes, which can create in them a negative self-image and a sense of inadequacy (Jost and Banaji, 1994). Those from subordinate groups who explicitly disavow these stereotypes are still burdened with having to navigate social environments where negative assumptions about their abilities are widespread. This burden may lead them to avoid situations in which they fear they might be negatively stereotyped, and anxiety about confirming a negative stereotype can itself cause underperformance in school and work environments (Steele 1997). These are all ramifications of entrenched and long-standing racial ideologies, and they, too, should elicit our moral concern.

CONCLUSION: RACISM AS SOCIAL INJUSTICE

Blum is certainly concerned about group oppression. I'm not suggesting otherwise. The issue is how best to understand the relationship between racism and group-based dominance, both present and past. I question the wisdom of thinking of racism as fundamentally a problem of personal racism, where questions of individual wrongdoing and moral character are the main focus. I would also caution against an overly moralistic approach to the problem of racism, for this leads to a misdiagnosis of the problem with racist beliefs. Ultimately, I agree with Carmichael and Hamilton (1967) that racism should, first and foremost, be understood as a problem of social injustice, where matters of basic liberty, the allocation vital resources, access to educational and employment opportunities, and the rule of law are at stake. And I think we can maintain this focus without downplaying or ignoring the normative significance of individual racism and race prejudice, which can also be serious wrongs quite apart from their broader social consequences.

As I have argued elsewhere (Shelby 2004, 2007, 2013), a fruitful way to develop this approach would be to analyze problems of racism within the framework of John Rawls's (1999) conception of justice. The primary unit of evaluation, from the standpoint of justice, is the basic structure of society—the way society's principal institutions apportion the benefits and burdens, liberties and duties, of social cooperation. The institutions that constitute the basic structure have a profound, pervasive, and practically inescapable impact on those who live under them. Rawls rightly insists that the principles of justice should not be confused with the principles we rely on to evaluate the conduct and

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character of individuals. This is to distinguish personal morality from political morality. Both are relevant to understanding what makes racism wrong and which antiracist strategies should be pursued. But racial ideology cannot be adequately understood or combatted without grasping its role in legitimating unjust social arrangements.

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NOTES

1. I received helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay from Lawrie Balfour, Cristina Beltrán, Lawrence Blum, Derrick Darby, Jorge Garcia, Joshua Glasgow, Robert Gooding-Williams, Pamela Hieronymi, Joy James, Howard McGary, Charles Mills, Thomas Scanlon, Falguni Sheth, Anna Stubblefield, and an anonymous reviewer. Versions of the essay were presented at meetings of the American Philosophical Association, the American Political Science Association, and the North American Society for Social Philosophy. I also benefitted from feedback from audiences at Cornell University, Miami University, Ohio State University, Rutgers University, Sarah Lawrence College, UC Berkeley, UCLA, University of the Witwatersrand, University of Toronto, and Williams College.
2. Glasgow (2009) also defends an account of racism that gives considerable weight to how the term "racism" is used in everyday discourse. And he agrees with Blum (2002) and Garcia (1996) that racism is always immoral. However, he does not insist that racism always represents a serious moral failing worthy of strong condemnation. So only some of the criticisms I raise against Blum's account apply to Glasgow's theory.
3. This seems to be the background assumption behind Ezorsky's (1991) conception of racism.
4. It should be noted that Blum (2002, ch. 4) is quite critical of the colorblind principle. For other insightful critical discussions of this principle, see Anderson 2010; Boxill 1992; Loury 2002; Sundstrom 2008.
5. The general public may not have much of an appetite for the complexity and abstractness of philosophical argument. However, there are other social critics, some of them public intellectuals, who are interested in or open to philosophical work on race, and so the philosopher can realistically seek to have productive discursive exchanges with these critics, who may in turn directly influence the broader public conversation.
6. I ignore here the interesting question of whether beliefs should be regarded as voluntary and if not, whether people can be held morally responsible or blameworthy for their beliefs. For helpful discussions of this and related issues, see Hieronymi 2008; Smith 2005.
7. See Blum (2002, p. 20).
8. I should note that I recognize that Marxism, understood as a comprehensive social theory and political philosophy, is rarely taken seriously these days, and it is not my aim here to mount a defense of it. Yet whatever one thinks of the classical doctrine taken as a whole, it would be "ideological" in that other sense (i.e., dogmatically partisan) to presume without argument that the Marxist tradition—a tradition whose origins lie, to be sure, in the canonical texts of Marx and Engels but whose key ideas have been developed, corrected, and augmented by later thinkers—has produced no helpful intellectual tools for explaining and criticizing oppression. The concept of ideology is, I believe, one of these useful tools, and indeed it has come to be absorbed into mainstream social science and modern social criticism, though not always used now in quite the same manner in which it was originally conceived. Indeed, terms such as 'frame,' 'legitimizing myth,' 'symbol system,' 'discourse,' '(meta-)narrative,' 'social meaning,' and the like are more often used today, but they typically designate the same social phenomenon.
9. This is not to deny that one might take consolation in the thought that, though oppressed, one's subjugation will not be permanent or one may, with hard work, be able to overcome it.

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