

RACE IN THE CURRENT CONJUNCTURE

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Issues of ‘race’, ethnicity and nationality have been core concerns of *New Formations* throughout its history. Indeed, a key early influence on the journal was the work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the 1970s and 1980s, often credited as one of the points from which the study of racism and racist ideology would develop in the UK and beyond. In his fascinating contribution to this issue, however, Erik Borda investigates the CCCS archive to show that an interest in these issues long pre-dated the publication of such well-known books as *The Empire Strikes Back* and *Policing the Crisis*. As such, this issue of the journal continues a long and important tradition.

It was in the wake of the second great wave of Black Lives Matter protests in 2020 that the *New Formations* board began to think about commissioning an issue on this topic, with the help of friends and colleagues Shahidha Bari, Maitrayee Basu, Ash Sharma and Brett St Louis. The collection we present here contains a range of important work on the history, present and possible futures of critical thinking in this area, each of them serving to highlight in different ways the place that issues and experiences of racialisation, racism and anti-racism play in in the current conjuncture. Between them these papers indicate the extent of both continuity and discontinuity between the present context and that of the journal’s emergence in the 1980s.

On the one hand, it is clear that in 2025, explicit and more-or-less organised racism is undergoing a significant revival, even in parts of the world where it seemed to have been successfully marginalised by the hegemonic articulation of neoliberal politics and economics with individualistic and meritocratic ideologies of diversity. Here in the UK, a situation almost unimaginable in the 1980s obtains: the Conservative Party, the party of Margaret Thatcher and Norman Tebbit (who notoriously dismissed opponents of apartheid, including Nelson Mandela, as terrorists) is led by a Black woman. Kemi Badenoch rails against immigration and the welfare state, having been preceded in her role by former prime minister Rishi Sunak. Yet no person of colour has yet held the position of Labour leader or deputy leader.

On both sides of the Atlantic, the radical right, even while occupying the White House, presents itself as an insurgent force against what they imagine to be the most oppressive and unjust of institutions: government and corporate programmes to promote equality, diversity and inclusion. Explicit, public racism has become acceptable among sections of the Anglophone ruling classes for the first time in a generation, while the genocide in Gaza has left apologists for Israel unable to deny the explicit and violent ethnocentrism at the heart of its colonial project. On the other hand, the slow collapse of the neoliberal order and its polite multicultural facade has revived widespread

interest in the history of militant anti-racism and anti-colonial struggle, and in comprehensive analyses of racial capitalism.

It's in this context, where declining elite cosmopolitanism encounters both restorationist white supremacism and revived anti-racist militancy, that most of our papers make their interventions. Inna Arzumanova investigates the imbrication of the art and museum industries with both racial capitalism and contemporary diversity politics in her analysis of recent debates over the status of colonial artefacts in British public culture. Sarah Bufkin brings the classic analytical tools of Frantz Fanon to bear on the situation on the contemporary forms of racism informing British anti-migrant politics and increasingly assertive expressions of racialised Englishness. Brenna Bhandar's contribution examines the racialised and anti-racist politics of the historical moment that gave rise to this issue of *New Formations* itself, comparing state responses to both the 2020 Black Lives Matter protest and the management of racialised populations during a global pandemic. In a complementary analysis, Basuli Deb examines the historical specificity of contemporary anti-Asian racism with reference to the earlier moment of post-9/11 Islamophobia, drawing on thinkers from Berlant to Hall. Finally, Anamik Saha's article explores the vexed and crucial question of how to relate critically to the contemporary politics of media 'diversity' without collapsing into mere reaction. While anti-racist media studies in the 1970s and 1980s tended to focus on the absence of people of colour from screens, or their wholly negative portrayal, today the phenomena in need of interrogation include a more complex intersection of representational 'superdiversity' with a rising tide of actual racism and militarised border-policing.

These provocative and innovative essays make a valuable contribution to our understanding of a complex and surprising historical moment. Of course, no such collection can be exhaustive, and many important political problems now present themselves to progressive forces across the Western world and beyond. How do we relate to a virulent anti-immigration politics that abjures traditional epidermic racism? Should we differentiate between racism as a psycho-social pathology, committed to ethnic segregation and racism as a conservative strategy, deployed in defence of economic privileges? How do we engage with a situation in which corporate institutions really have deployed specific forms of cosmopolitanism in order to legitimate and reproduce material inequalities? Such questions lack easy answers, but only by trying to map out the contours of these specific instances and issues can we begin to get to grips with them.