

COMMENTARY

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# Beyond 'race'?: a rejoinder



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## Abstract

In this rejoinder we argue, based on the papers of this commentary series, that 'race' is such a tricky notion because it can be used in (at least) two very different and contradictory ways—as a *concept* to disentangle racism and racialisation (what M'charek calls the 'work race actually does') and as a way of *categorization* and social classification, in which case it might create the very essentialised hierarchies 'race' as a critical concept tries to disentangle. We wonder if it is indeed possible to use 'race' as a concept without evoking 'race' as a social classification. At first, we give a short summary of the four discussion papers and then delve into two aspects the papers share, namely the need for spatial and temporal contextualization and comparison, as well as their choice not to take up our invitation to compare race as a category with gender. In a second step we will discuss two points arising from the papers, (1) 'race' as *category*, not as *lens*, often resulting in essentialism and (2) 'race' as potentially obscuring racism and racialisation. We conclude by proposing to give more space to complexity.

**Keywords:** Race, Mixed race, Identity politics, Gender, Transracialism, Critical post-racialism

## Introduction

The idea for this commentary series was prompted by Kaufmann's (2018) book 'Whiteshift: Populism, immigration and the future of white majorities' and his claim that the population in White-majority regions, such as North America, Europe, or Australia, will be of mixed origin within a century. We started to wonder about the consequences of such a process. Will White cease to exist as a category? Or will parts of the mixed population be included into the White group and be considered White? In sociological terms, will it be a process of boundary blurring or of boundary shift (Alba, 2005)? What would that process mean for political programs and movements fighting inequality based on racial categorization? And would the concept of 'race' itself change or even be dissolved in the course of these transformations? We invited four discussants from different parts of the world, all social scientists and experts in racial and ethnic studies, to reflect on the questions we raised in our Introduction.

Based on their comments, we argue in our rejoinder that 'race' is such a tricky notion because it can be used in (at least) two very different and contradictory ways—as a *concept* to disentangle racism and racialisation (what M'charek calls the 'work race actually does') and as a way of *categorization* and social classification, in which case it might

create the very essentialised hierarchies ‘race’ as a critical concept tries to disentangle. While we agree with Amade M’charek’s plea to ‘stay with the trouble’, we wonder if it is indeed possible to use ‘race’ as a concept without evoking ‘race’ as a social classification. And we wondered how far it would be possible and/or desirable to focus on racism and racialisation without foregrounding ‘race’?

To do so, we will first give a short summary of the four discussion papers and then delve into two aspects the papers share, namely the need for spatial and temporal contextualization and comparison, as well as their choice not to take up our invitation to compare race as a category with gender. In a second step we will discuss two points arising from the papers, (1) ‘race’ as *category*, not as lens, often resulting in essentialism and (2) ‘race’ as potentially obscuring racism and racialisation. We conclude by proposing to give more space to complexity.

### **Short summary of the four papers**

All four answers to our introductory paper argue that currently it is neither possible nor desirable to move beyond ‘race’, but they give different reasons. The first two contributions, by Sayaka Osanami Törngren and Karen Suyemoto and by Amade M’charek, focus on the very concept of ‘race’. Osanami Törngren and Suyemoto (2022) conceptualise ‘race’ as a multilevel and multidimensional construct, creating hierarchies of power, oppression and privilege, building on essentialising (often phenotypical) characteristics. They argue that even though there is a continuous (re)formation of racial groups (racialization), the structure of oppression and privilege stays the same. What actually matters is racism, and therefore we cannot go ‘beyond race’ as long as there is racism. M’charek (2022) explores further what the concept of ‘race’ actually does by differentiating the idea of ‘race’ as producing difference from ‘race’ as producing sameness. Concerning the latter, sameness can be related to phenotypic otherness, which reduces individuals to group members based on specific markers and produces “excludables” (p. 13); but sameness can also be thought as us-ness, which is still racialized, but leaves space for difference within the group, for individuality, family, and belonging to the place. She concludes by arguing that as long as the idea of race is doing work in society, it is necessary to ‘stay with the trouble’. The third and the fourth paper specifically discuss research and discourses on ‘mixedness’. Mitchell (2022) uses the examples of Brazil and the USA to discuss how ‘multiraciality’ has been deployed to maintain white supremacy and how “constructions of multiraciality [have historically] reinforc[ed] presumptions of racial difference and racialized ways of thinking” (p. 1). At the same time, she states that ‘multiraciality’ has a potential to decentre whiteness and disrupt power systems, if ‘multiraciality’ no longer means ‘whitening’ but a “purposeful vision of racial recognition and anti-racism” (p. 15). Fozdar (2022) makes a somewhat different argument by showing that in the multicultural Australian context, being of mixed-race migrant background is often experienced as a positive identity. Similar to Mitchell, Fozdar suggests the transformative potential of mixed backgrounds, which are a constant visible reminder of global connection and can promote alternative ways of being in the world and of engaging with others beyond ‘racial categorising’. The backdrop to the race-averse Australian multiculturalism and its celebration of cultural diversity is that race disappears from sight and makes Australia’s colonial history and oppression of Indigenous people invisible. Fozdar therefore calls for

“some means for talking about race that acknowledges these histories, which may be an intermediary step on the road beyond race, and, for that matter, nation.” (p. 12).

### **What struck us in their reactions?**

#### **Comparison and contexts matter**

One main aspect the contributions to this commentary series demonstrate is that comparison and context matter, as discourses on ‘race’ differ considerably between places and times, in addition to their being influenced by global or transterritorial conceptions of ‘race’ (Goldberg, 2009). Therefore, Farida Fozdar argues that also how we talk about ‘race’ and ‘mixed race’ should depend on the local socio-historico-political context.

Contrasting the USA and Brazil, Jasmine Mitchell shows that the historical denial of racial mixture in the national identity of the USA was linked to fears of diluting White purity. As a legacy of the one drop rule, people like Barack Obama, who has a White mother and Black father, are considered Black, not of mixed race. Hence, in the United States racial mixing was, and for some groups still is, perceived as a threat to the nation. In Brazil, by contrast, racial mixing was central to nation-building and national narrative (although discussions in terms of Whitening were not absent). Through an emphasis on mixture and on Afro-Brazilian cultural forms such as samba and capoeira, the Brazilian state has de-emphasized distinct racial identities in favor of a racial democracy. In both countries, counter-movements could be observed during the last decades, working in different directions, with the USA opening the possibility to self-identify with more than one racial group in the census and Brazil re-introducing racial categories in the census, to make social inequality along racial lines visible.

As also Sayaka Osanami Törngren and Karen Suyemoto show, ‘race’ and racism are not always discussed in terms of Black and White. In Japan, two forms of racial privilege can be found—on the one hand, the colonial past of Japan means that ethnic Koreans, Chinese and other non-Japanese Asians in Japan have historically been racialized as second-class citizens. But Japanese are also confronted with their own racialization as Asian and inferior to White (western) people. Concerning Australia, Farida Fozdar argues that its race averseness (or selective colour-blindness) makes Australia’s colonial history of dispossession and of racist migration policy invisible. In her research focusing on mixed families, she shows that mixedness was experienced positively by those of mixed origin. She hypothesizes that this may be an effect of Australia’s current policies of multi-culturalism, that may have made Australians more open to diversity, allowing for complexity of experience and a cosmopolitan outlook as a source of pride.

When presenting her research about Australia, Fozdar was however heavily criticized by an American colleague: “I had offended him by providing evidence that the situation in Australia might be somewhat different, more positive and cosmopolitan [...] rather than the overt racialized stratification that this academic had observed in the US and UK” (p. 2). The narration of this encounter made us wonder what exactly this colleague was offended by. Was it the research result itself or was it that Fozdar presented it as a positive development and did not accompany it with critical comments? We are inclined to believe that somehow this American colleague felt that celebrating mixedness came at the expense of Blackness and Black people’s struggle. We believe it would be a question worth exploring further under which conditions minorities view post-racial futures as

positive. We would suspect this to depend on whether they view racial justice as a matter of redistribution, that is of equal opportunities irrespective of one's identity, or as also a matter of recognition of group identity (Young, 1990).

Amade M'charek's contribution focussed on another kind of comparison—that between 'race' as sameness working so differently from 'race' as difference. While the latter excludes groups of people and homogenizes the excluded, 'race' as sameness individualizes and evokes a discourse of care. This becomes clear from the case, she discusses, of a brutal murder that took place in the Netherlands. When the local population realised that the perpetrator of the murder on a native Dutch young woman was not, as it was first believed, an asylum-seeker, but one of 'us', they came to see the perpetrator as a troubled individual and felt compassion with his family and even with him.

### On race and gender

Another aspect we found interesting about the comments was that the question we had posed in the introduction on the similarities and differences between race and gender categories was not taken up by the authors. We had referred to the Dolezal/Jenner affair that took place in the United States, with Rachel Dolezal being condemned for identity 'fraud' after having been outed as White and not African-American as she had claimed, while Caitlin Jenner coming out as a transgender woman having been applauded for her courage to publicly acknowledge her identity as a woman. Thus, Jenner's claim was accepted while Dolezal's was rejected; gender voluntarism was combined with racial essentialism.

When reading through the comments, we were not sure why none of the authors discussed this in more detail, as it would have fit well with the topics taken up. This is especially true in the case of discourses on racial mixing where a comparison with discourses on gender fluidity would have been promising. Mitchell mentions very briefly that passing was not a symbol "of racial fluidity, but rather a performance of multiraciality" (p. 13), but does not discuss why she thinks this is the case. Törngren & Suyemoto argue that the "social meaning of race is not about choice" (p. 13), but rather the group experience of oppression (or privilege)—something, we argue, that has been also true for gender for a long time. Especially the last statement also leaves us wondering about those having differing experiences of oppression or privilege, of people who would be categorised from the outside as belonging to a specific group without sharing the same experiences as its 'members'. The non-binary thinking, the *trans*, which has become more accepted among, in Brubaker's (2016) terms, the American cultural left in regard to gender (even if it is a politically contested possibility), did not develop in the case of race. And the question that stays is: why? Brubaker (2016) offers an interesting explanation why the political left in the United States has predominantly paired gender voluntarism—one can choose or change one's gender—with racial essentialism—one's race is a given that cannot be chosen or changed. He starts his argument by stating that if you combine the two questions of 'can one legitimately change one's gender?' and 'can one legitimately change one's race?' this creates four possible answers: gender and racial essentialism (two 'no's; a position found among cultural conservatives and radical feminist groups), gender and racial voluntarism (two 'yesses'), gender essentialism combined with racial voluntarism ('no', 'yes') and the option chosen by the American cultural left, gender voluntarism

combined with racial essentialism ('yes,' 'no') (Brubaker, 2016, 21–22). Brubaker believes that the cultural left overwhelmingly chose for gender voluntarism combined with racial essentialism because transgender claims could be framed as a civil rights issue: transpeople were seen as an oppressed minority. Transracial claims on the other hand, were considered as undermining Black people's struggle for civil rights and racial justice (Brubaker, 2016, 32). Hence, the difference between 'race' and 'gender' concepts is political in nature, not naturally given. In the case of 'race,' however, a seemingly naturalized 'biological' categorization is coupled with social identification, both as an identity ascribed by others and as self-identification.

### **'Race' as category, not as lens, often results in essentialism**

In addition to this coupling of social identification and biological classification into a naturalized and fixed biological and/or social *categorization*, there is a second coupling at play in the case of 'race.' Beside 'race' as categorization, the term 'race' is also used as a lens or *concept*, explaining inherited structural inequality and historically grown power hierarchies. Yet, in how far is it possible to use this concept without evoking 'race' as social or biological classification? We think that while 'race' as a concept often leads to rather complex theoretical approaches, 'race' as categorization can result in oversimplified essentialism. Amade M'charek hints at that danger when stating that we should be "wary of mobilizing race as a social classification, even if it is used as self-identification"; but she also argues we still need to look into 'race' as a concept to "analyze its manifestations". We wonder, if it is possible to decouple 'race' as *concept* and 'race' as *categorization*, and how such a decoupling could look like.

Farida Fozdar and Jasmine Mitchell show in their respective contributions how important racial "authenticity" has become in the context of affirmative action policies. In the case of Australia, this regards especially the "small, but growing, number of people who identify as of mixed Indigenous heritage [...] who are not easily recognisable as Aborigines [and] have been challenged as being inauthentic [...] and condemned for opportunism, especially that associated with affirmative action policies." (Fozdar, 2022, 6). Also in Brazil, the race-conscious policies from the early 2000s onwards resulted not only in a White backlash, but as well in Black students warning of racial fraud. The example Mitchell gives from the Brazilian universities' quest to find out which student qualifies for the quota category '*negro*' seems to strengthen our point regarding the difficulties of decoupling 'race' as a concept from 'race' as category (p. 11). Once 'membership' has to be established, 'race' becomes a concrete reality which can be tested and proven. The question thus remains—how to counter structural racism without simply sorting people into essentialising boxes? How would foregrounding socioeconomic aspects, which Brazil also applied, work alongside race in this case?

Törngren & Suyemoto even go as far as to say that "we should never stop organizing ourselves based on race" (p. 12). Reading this sentence with the principle of charitable interpretation in mind, it is clear what the authors want to say, especially when considering the second part of the sentence "because organizing based on race means organising against racism." But just allow us a thought experiment—try to imagine the passage "we should never stop organizing ourselves based on race" read by a right wing politician. That would sound rather scary. Thinking about moments of resurging fascist ideologies

of white supremacy, we would argue that talking about race does not necessarily have the effect of curbing racism, on the contrary—post-racial ideas would be very welcome during such times. We think that the argument of Törngren & Suyemoto only holds true if ‘race’ is discussed in a very specific (antiracist) way. If not, this could result in exactly the opposite of what the authors argue (see for instance Heinz et al. (2014) about the usage of ‘race’ and racialised ideas of culture in contemporary genetic, psychiatric, or neuroscience studies). Shouldn’t we, as social scientists, keep this possibility in mind—that the terms we use can be employed very differently from what we expect? We agree with Törngren & Suyemoto that promoting diversity and ‘post-raciality’ without paying attention to racist discourses and structures is indeed harmful, but we do not think that re-politicizing ‘race’ (p. 14) is the answer here.

### **A focus on ‘race’ can obscure racism and racialisation**

Due to the coupling of ‘race’ as *concept* to ‘race’ as *category*, we argue that a focus on ‘race’ might even obscure racism and racialisation. On the one hand, the current focus of discourses on ‘race’ on the binary White vs. Non-White/BIPOC might not only result in essentialising categorizations, but also in overlooking racisms not fitting into this binary. As Törngren & Suyemoto show, racial categorizations and racist structures and prejudices also exist beyond the Euro-American realm. On the other hand, foregrounding ‘race’, especially in the binary version, can a-historically disguise racialisation, the very process through which racialized groups are formed and categorized. We propose instead to focus on racism and racialisation without foregrounding ‘race’, while acknowledging that also racism and racialisation are concepts which need to be used with caution.

Abdi Kusow and colleagues have demonstrated how racism can differ within the category of people considered as Black/non-White. Using the example of Somalis, they show that in Somalia people regarded as descending from ‘noble’ clans, i.e. ‘the core’ of Somali society, discriminate against Bantu Jareer Somalis on the basis of “their African origin and alleged African-like physical characteristics in comparison with the features of other Somalis” (Eno & Kusow, 2014, 91). In Kenya, Somalis also differentiate between themselves and ‘Africans’, often out of a position of imagined superiority (Scharrer, 2018, 502). When migrating to North America, Somalis become categorized as Black, yet their own identification and experiences of discrimination (based also on religion and country of origin) differ from the descendents of slaves in North America (Kusow, 2006). Kusow concludes that “conceptualising race along skin colour lines undermines the real experiences of *black ethnics* [emphasis in the original]” (p. 547), of non-white immigrants who not only bring with them new social identifications, but also “redefine the meaning of racial categories from the historically and contemporaneously normative black/white dichotomy to a situation of multiple and hybrid identity categories” (p. 534).

Also within the category ‘White’ there are many gradations, as we already discussed in our Introduction (Saharso & Scharrer, 2022, 4). Daria Krivosos (2020) notes that Eastern Europe for instance is often considered as “too white” to be a research field for critical theory of race (p. 388). Using the example of Russian-speaking migrants in Finland trying to pass as non-Russian, she demonstrates how Europeanness is also formed by an “internal racialized division between (proper) Western Europeanness and (incomplete)

Eastern Europeanness” (p. 388). Among others, this differentiation builds in Finland on taxonomies developed by scientific racism in the 19th and early twentieth century, distinguishing between ‘Nordic’ (Swedish), ‘Mongolian’ (Finns) and ‘Slavic’ (Russian) populations.

A binary White vs. non-White approach to ‘race’ might also obscure processes of racialisation. By racialisation we mean the process through which groups become linked to specific attributes relating to body and/or mind, such as skin-tone, hair, blood, but also culture,<sup>1</sup> a link which is then treated as fixed, naturalised and/or inheritable (e.g., Lewicki, 2021). A focus on racialization allows understanding the histories that produced current lived realities of ‘race’ and racisms. One example of this history of racialisation is given in the work of Garrouette (2003) on Native American identity. She shows that the many different legal rules that define who is an American Indian have been developed by different actors and for different purposes. Many Native American tribes require, for instance, a one-quarter blood degree to count as a member. This blood criterion stems from nineteenth century theories of race, introduced into indigenous cultures by Euro-Americans, but thus came to count as ‘proof’ of authenticity. Meanwhile, recognition has direct material consequences for individuals, as it is a precondition for benefits like access to social services or economic rights, like the exclusive use of land. Hence, who is an Indian is a heavily contested racial identity, based on nineteenth centuries Euroamerican practices of racialisation, and involving actors with different interests.

If we argue that ‘race’ is not something given, but something made and having an impact, then we need to look at precisely these processes of racialisation and instances and structures of racism, instead of presenting a bipolar world, erasing its complexities.

### **Conclusion—giving space to complexity**

Williams’ (2019) decision, mentioned in the introductory paper, to become an ex-Black man, thus to no longer self-identify as Black, without whitewashing difference was to him, to use his own words, ‘an act of the most extreme rebellion in the face of racism’. Yet, our impression is that for most people of color this is a position they feel they (still) are not able to take in the current political constellation of racialised hierarchies. In the meantime, we propose to study racism, the discrimination and inequality resulting from it, as well as processes of racialization—that is to focus on the work ‘race’ does in particular places and in particular times—but to stay away from the use of ‘race’ as a social classification, instead giving space to complexity and diversity.

With our proposition to study racism and racialization, but to abstain from using race as a real-existing social categorization, we think we are not far from the other authors of this commentary series, when they call for a decentering of Whiteness (Mitchell, 2022), stress the playful engagement with diversity and the complexity of experience (Fozdar, 2022, 10) or show that us-ness is leaving space for difference (M’charek, 2022). In the last couple of years, several publications have appeared that either show protagonists trying to break free from homogenising racial categorizations (Singh, 2022), or which are a plea for the acceptance of complexity (e.g. Prilutski, 2018, arguing for a ‘right to be complex’ or Sanyal, 2021,

<sup>1</sup> Many authors also add ‘religion’ to this list, which finds its expression for instance in the term ‘anti-Muslim racism’. One could argue, however, that even though religion can be racialised, there is also the possibility of conversion, which, even if contested, makes it appear less fixed than the other attributes mentioned.

showing the complexities of ‘race’ as experience, of identification processes, the continua on which they take place and their entanglements). We think it is worth taking these voices seriously.

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