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Missing in Action: Where's the Unconscious in Anti-Racist "Unconscious Bias Training"?

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Abstract: This article carries out a psychoanalytic and political critique of recent attempts at fighting racism, focusing on antiracist "unconscious bias training" at universities and in international development. It claims that these regimes of institutional training depend on knowledge- and awareness-based education of university staff and international cooperants, thereby not only negating the significant psychoanalytic dimensions of racism, but also disavowing any meaningful or collective engagement precisely with the unconscious. The political consequence is the treatment of racism as both symptom and individualized responsibility, thereby depoliticizing the struggle against global/structural racism. The article concludes by considering what a psychoanalytic antiracist politics might look like.

Keywords: unconscious bias training; implicit bias; universities; international development; psychoanalysis; enjoyment; racism; racist fantasy; psychoanalytic antiracist strategies



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1. Introduction

One of the latest practices in "diversity management" across the globe is "unconscious bias training", most often geared toward antiracist education. As Canadian academics with a research focus in psychoanalysis and, for one of us at least, international development politics, we are therefore keen to probe the implementation of such training at both the sites that concern us—the university sector and international development. Striking to us is the mainstream deployment of the unconscious for the purposes of sociopolitical and institutional transformation. Yet precisely because of such mainstreaming, there are many reasons to be skeptical: How is the unconscious being conceptualized? Is its deployment aimed at addressing the symptoms or the structures underlying racism? And are its antagonistic dimensions—which is what make the unconscious political, in our view—being disavowed or meaningfully integrated into antiracist programming?

2. Unconscious Bias Training in Universities and International Development

The notion of unconscious or "implicit" bias was first broached by social psychologists [Greenwald and Krieger \(2006\)](#), and later popularized in *Thinking, Fast and Slow* ([Kahneman 2013](#)) and *Blindspot* ([Banaji and Greenwald 2013](#)).¹ Each in their own way argues that, although we think we act with conscious intentions, most often we draw on "automatic" unconscious beliefs founded on (racist or gender) stereotypes. This is because human cognition tends to seek out information that is easily available to the brain. The challenge, then, is to think through our actions more slowly and thoroughly—to engage in more considered judgment that repudiates racial stereotypes.

Unconscious bias training thus aims at alleviating racism by making people—university staff and development practitioners, in this case—conscious of their racial biases. Adopted by a range of academic institutions and multilateral, governmental, and nongovernmental development agencies (e.g., [Lehman et al. 2023](#); [Smith et al. 2017](#); [Ali 2022](#); [SSHRC](#)

2023; Guterres 2021; Save The Children 2023; World Bank 2015, 2020), training workshops/modules are meant to curb racial prejudice by identifying and critically evaluating participants' racial predilections. Deliberation and awareness raising endeavor to bring to the surface participant prejudicial shortcuts, thus combating "unintentionalism with intentionalism" (Corrêa d'Almeida and Grossi 2016). Typically integrated with broader organizational Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion reform (EDI), faculty, managers, and staff undergo often mandatory training to avoid unconscious bias in their decision-making (e.g., checking bias against racialized or gendered minorities in teaching and program methodologies, implementation, and evaluation), work environments (creating "safe", equitable, and inclusive work spaces), and recruitment practices (averting nepotism or racial/gender prejudice in hiring) (SSHRC 2023; UNEP 2017; Corrêa d'Almeida and Grossi 2016).

In our survey of training programs in both the university and international development sectors (and to some extent, the private sector), we were struck by their similarity of approach and content, revealing of the modularity and adaptability of such programs across sectors and regions. Training usually involves, as a first step, taking an online Unconscious Bias Test that helps demonstrate visually and verbally (e.g., by identifying and ranking photos of fair versus dark-skinned people, or responding to workplace situations and case studies) how people fall prey to unconscious bias (Chen and Mahesri 2018; USAID 2018). These tests are often combined with in-person group workshops in which participants learn to recognize and respond to their racial (and gender) biases, are exposed to information that contradicts their stereotypes, and engage in role play adopting the perspectives of others. The idea then is to explore personal and organizational strategies to mitigate unconscious bias in the workplace (SSHRC 2023; Smith et al. 2017; UNEP 2017; Corrêa d'Almeida and Grossi 2016; Chen and Mahesri 2018; World Bank 2020). All in all, workshops aim at raising participants' awareness of the mental shortcuts that lead to snap racially biased judgements on people's character and abilities.

3. Unconscious Bias as "Implicit Bias"

At the workshop we attended at our university (York University, Toronto) in our capacity as members of hiring committees, the focus was mainly on instructing faculty on how to guard against unconscious bias in our hiring processes (York University 2017). In keeping with the training workshops described above, and following Canadian university guidelines (Universities Canada 2023), some of the concrete steps we were asked to consider included having a diverse selection committee, encouraging nominations from groups that are at a disadvantage due to racial and gender bias, providing checklists or structured evaluation forms such as rubrics, and removing information that indicates age, race, gender, or sexual orientation. Yet what surprised us was the workshop's failure to incorporate any conceptual content relating to the unconscious itself (although lots of examples of *conscious* bias were provided). Nor was a definition of unconscious bias forthcoming. This is the case not just with our workshop but also with the materials from the university and international development sectors that we have surveyed: their occlusion of content on the unconscious appears to reveal unconscious bias training's unconscious bias against the unconscious!

To be sure, we were unable to find a single reference to psychoanalysis, the area of inquiry designed specifically to study and interpret unconscious processes. Equally worrisome, from an anti-racist perspective, is the absence of any scholarship on the psychoanalysis of racism and colonialism (e.g., Fanon 1963, 1967; Fuss 1994; Bhabha 2015; Lane 1998; George 2016; Seshadri-Crooks 2002; Bergner 1999; Gaztambide 2020, 2021; Hook 2020; Marriott 2021; Basu Thakur 2021). Perhaps this is because the unconscious has an equivocal, if not subversive, quality to it: it is not an object that can be named, and it does not abide by the rules and logic of everyday discourse. Instead, as Lacan puts it, the "unconscious is a concept founded on the trail [*trace*] left by that which operates to constitute the subject" (Lacan 1960b, p. 703). It reveals itself symptomatically through slips, accidents, contradictions, excesses; and this elusive quality is likely what makes

those who wish to easily define, positivize, standardize, or commodify it—in this case, institutionalized unconscious bias training—resistant to it. Lacan was well aware of such resistance, already alerting us in the 1960s to the negative prejudice toward psychoanalysis, especially on the part of mainstream psychology (Lacan 1960b, p. 707).

While psychoanalysts would not argue that bias and prejudice do not exist, there is, in the Lacanian formulation of the unconscious, an insistence upon the polyvalent nature of the signifier and the central importance of the unconscious in destabilizing any single meaning or prejudicial belief/act. The unconscious, in this sense, is not responsible for the reproduction of stereotypes and biases, but that which disrupts any one-to-one correlation between a signifier and a signified. Building upon Freudian insights, Lacan explains how the unconscious is a “chain of signifiers”, unbound by “any given signified” (Lacan 1960a, pp. 676, 694). In fact, one of the misconceptions about the unconscious is that it is a repository of unsavoury content (including biases) that need to be reformed or censored. The Lacanian unconscious is *not* a storehouse of biases in need of correction; rather, it is structured *like* a language, meaning that it is better understood as a linguistic processing system. It does not distort or misperceive as much as unsettle and defer meaning. Far from being the cause of racist prejudice, then, the unconscious is the only part of the human subject that does *not* discriminate. “Unconscious bias” is thus a contradiction in terms, psychoanalytically speaking. If there is a logic and consistency to the unconscious, it lies in the realm of excess and enjoyment, which is nonetheless unpredictable because profligate (more on that below). This is how we interpret Lacan when he writes, in Seminar XI, that the unconscious is a “lost cause” (Lacan 1998, p. 128). Its function is thereby to mark or palliate the indeterminacy of the subject, something that likely does not sit well with those who require fixed and stable timelines, budgets, and indeed subjects, for the purposes of institutional planning and human resource training.

Unconscious bias training thus names the unconscious but negates its psychoanalytic content. Yet it seems to us that this is itself evidence of the work of the unconscious in unconscious bias training: psychoanalysis would call it “disavowal”—the process by which one recognizes a traumatic event but simultaneously denies it (Evans 2006, p. 44). EDI training is plainly drawn to the idea of the gap, the missing element, evoked by the psychoanalytic unconscious, but retreats from its unsettling and enigmatic characteristics, likely because they are too destabilizing to this training regime’s corporate-institutional purposes. Instead, the tactic appears to be the anesthetization and domestication of the unconscious through its equation with “implicit bias”. Consider, for example, Universities Canada’s definition of the term (2023):

[Unconscious biases]. . . are not the result of conscious decisions to discriminate, but rather the human need to stay within the realm of the expected. This need extends beyond the fields of science and research. These biases have an impact on who we choose to receive scholarships, whether we realize it or not. . . Implicit biases are subconscious shortcuts our minds take to fill in the gaps about a person based on our background views. Our background views are formed from our knowledge, experiences, education, values, and environment. As a result, these views influence our choices and actions, often manifesting as “instinct” or “gut feelings”.

Similar language is to be found in many of the other materials we studied (SSHRC 2023; Smith et al. 2017; Henry et al. 2017; Corrêa d’Almeida and Grossi 2016; UNEP 2017; USAID 2018), all equating unconscious bias with implicit bias. Following the ego-psychological models of human action from which they stem, each of them avoids the psychoanalytic unconscious in favour of “instinctual or guttural” shortcuts that can supposedly be consciously identified and checked, if not eliminated, in order to better include equity seeking groups. Implicit biases, the ones held responsible for favouring white, able-bodied, heterosexual men over equity seeking groups (racialized minorities, women, people with disabilities, and Indigenous peoples), are characterized as an anti-social part of our personalities that can be tested and corrected by personal reflection, social awareness, mindfulness, and the

adoption of the “right” (i.e., consciously chosen and equitable) courses of action. Inequality and bias are viewed as unspoken, yet still identifiable through education and training.

4. Psychoanalytic Critique

The trouble, from a psychoanalytic perspective, is that racism is a problem of unconscious enjoyment (*jouissance*), not a lack of knowledge. Indeed, the psychoanalytic unconscious may well defer meaning, but precisely because of that, enjoyment is the result (i.e., the *jouissance* of continuous deferral). Enjoyment here is to be understood not just as pleasure, but profligate and ecstatic satisfaction that causes the subject to engage in counterproductive, self-destructive, and often “irrational” behavior (Lacan 2006, pp. 45–46). Accordingly, despite being aware of the ills of racism, the subject can get attached to their perverse fantasy-enjoyment of prejudice against, and domination of, the racialized Other. Thus, as Kapoor explains (Kapoor 2020, pp. 236–64), addressing racial bigotry rationally misses the intensity and endurance of unconscious enjoyment, as a consequence of which knowledge is overwhelmed by the excess and irrationality of desire.

Indeed, if racism were simply a problem of knowing, it would be able to be curbed, if not eradicated. Yet, decades of antiracism education across the world (including unconscious bias training) provides little evidence on the abatement of racism; to the contrary, Islamophobia and anti-Black and -Indigenous racism appear to be on the rise of late, especially in the wake of the emergence of neopopulism, which thrives on xenophobia and the identification of “outsiders” as a way of uniting “the nation” (see Stavrakakis and Chrysoloras 2006; Kapoor 2018, 2021). This trend is borne out in recent research on unconscious bias, in particular, which argues that diversity training of this type is an ineffective tool (Kahn 2018; EHRC 2018; Herbert 2021; Ro 2021; Friedersdorf 2023): behavior in managers or employees does not automatically (or gradually) change because they often forget within hours or days what they have learned. More concerning is that, not only can they be resistant to learning, but their racial prejudices can be reinforced rather than allayed, especially when training is made, and perceived as, mandatory. The latter tendency speaks, if not to the perverse libidinal underpinnings of racism, at least to the disavowed resentment against mandatory antiracism training regimes. It is because we enjoy our racism that coercive or obligatory forms of antiracist education aggravate instead of stem prejudice: this is the aftereffect of *ressentiment* against any authority seen as threatening the subject’s deeply held sense of stability (anchored in their identification as, say, a privileged and “informed” faculty member or development worker, or a dominant white, Christian, or Hindu subject; more on that below).

Not to be missed here is the enjoyment of instituting a training regime such as unconscious bias, all the more so when it is made obligatory: the sado-masochistic *jouissance* of surveilling, disciplining, policing, or correcting people’s behaviors. To be sure, workshop enjoyment can be derived not only by the likes of upper management and human resource administrators and trainers—those who initiate, impose, or facilitate the training regime—but also by the workshop participants themselves—secretly delighting in monitoring and (subtly or self-righteously) castigating their colleagues or program “beneficiaries” for their behaviors; perhaps even surreptitiously relishing the workshop production of gossip and rumor, despite attempts to create “safe” discussion spaces. It is likely this circulation of enjoyment that becomes the source of resentment by those trainees whose post-workshop racial prejudices worsen.

Kapoor (2020, pp. 255–56) notes, in this regard, that talk and deliberation—upon which the training regime’s goal of awareness raising depends—can *also* turn into objects of enjoyment: “the thrill of chatting, discussing, participating, winning/losing a debate, can become an end in itself, as a result of which the objective of antiracist education gets lost”. So, like workshop panopticism, group deliberation develops into a source of satisfaction at the expense of fighting racism.

The mode of delivery of unconscious bias workshops is thus accompanied by an economy of *jouissance* that undermines the very objective of antiracism. This is something

that Habermasians ignore to their peril, since it implies that knowledge and deliberation, no matter how communicative or coercion-free, is outdone by the enjoyment of the exercise (Dean 2006, p. 91). Workshop participants become enamored by the “game” of deliberation at the expense of its antiracism awareness-raising aims.

The excess of enjoyment is also something that Foucauldians woefully miss since it helps explain not only how discursive regimes such as unconscious bias training are constructed but equally why they “stick” and propagate: there develops an unconscious institutional interest in reproducing them, which is to say, a libidinal support for administrative expansion (Kapoor 2005, pp. 1212–13; 2020, pp. 147–69). The implication is that it does not matter if unconscious bias training succeeds as long as it aids in institutional enlargement. Administrative drive/enjoyment trumps administrative rationality, with failure rather than success—or failure-as-success—written into it. “Drive” in Lacanese, after all, describes enjoyment derived not by attaining, but failing to attain, the desired object—circulating around it, endlessly moving from one object to another without any purpose other than enjoyment (Lacan 1998, p. 179; Johnston 2005). Perhaps it is no wonder, then, that unconscious bias training has indeed been found to be ineffective, as noted above. Such ineffectiveness is written into the logic of drive/enjoyment-laden institutional expansion.

What becomes apparent then is that, even though the unconscious may be omnipresent in the *form* of unconscious bias training regimes, it is all but absent in their *content*. This is plain from their equation of “unconscious bias” with “implicit bias” as underlined earlier, which makes prejudice an epistemological rather than a psychically invested problem. Hence their resort to education and increased awareness in tackling racism. But as McGowan (2021, p. 20) stresses, the “unconscious isn’t simply a lack of knowledge. It is what one does without being able to know it prior to acting. The unconscious acts ahead of our knowledge... we must [therefore] reverse the relationship between racism and knowledge. Racism is not the result of a bias in our knowing, but rather we have a bias in our knowing because of racism. To find the root of racism we must look not at mistakes in knowing but at successes in enjoying”.

Implicit here is fetishistic disavowal—the process through which we enjoy racism despite knowing, and *because* we know, that racism is bad. There is, in fact, a double libidinal kick to racism, helping to explain why the unconscious overwhelms our knowledge and drives our actions: first, the enjoyment of transgressing ethical norms—the perverse satisfaction we get when crossing any authority we are meant to obey; and second, the sado-masochistic enjoyment of dominating the Other—the pleasure of managing, controlling, policing, and/or subordinating the racialized Other. Both sources of pleasure are integral to the subject’s obdurate investment in—fetishization of—racism.

Crucial to deciphering racist enjoyment is fantasy, since fantasy is what structures desire. The unconscious may well be indiscriminate with respect to what it enjoys—i.e., everything can be enjoyed, racist and not—but it is fantasy that positions, directs, and justifies racist desire. For psychoanalysis, racist fantasy allows members of society to construct social stability and order (Lacan 1990, pp. 32–33; Žižek 2002; George 2016; Zalloua 2020; Kapoor 2020, pp. 241–53). Sheldon George claims, for example, that racism functions as “a tool for masking the central lack [in] subjectivity” (George 2014, p. 360). Thus, just as the ideological fantasy of progress has provided a foundation for securing capitalist development, thereby concealing social inequalities and environmental crisis (Kapoor 2020), so anti-Black and -Indigenous racist fantasies have provided the basis for stabilizing and reproducing European capitalist accumulation and settler colonialism. Indeed, as the likes of Cedric Robinson (2019) and Aníbal Quijano (2000) have stressed, racism was constructed in order to rationalize the brutal exploitation and domination of slaves and Indigenous labor required for plantation economies in the Americas. Racism/racist fantasy, in this sense, was integral to the birth of Western modernity, enabling the white European subject to cover over its constitutive lack, while justifying European imperial plunder and oppression.

Unconscious bias training thus involves a missed encounter with the unconscious (or the Real, as Lacan often denotes it—that which destabilizes any discursive attempt at closure, unity, harmony). In fact, such training misses how conscious, intentional, slow, and reflective thought can actually guard *against* the Real (i.e., the un-symbolizable) dimensions of racism. In his critique of psychologists who would anesthetize the unconscious, Lacan insists upon the importance of the “ever avoided encounter, of the missed opportunity. The function of missing lies at the centre of analytic repetition” (Lacan 1998, p. 128). Like the Real of racism that repeats itself despite public education, the missed encounter is what repeats itself when we do not make room for the unconscious to speak. This appears to be the case with those mandated to complete EDI training: they do not have the opportunity to meaningfully contribute to, disagree with, or historicize how racism operates. There is no room for the unconscious to speak. Unpleasant truths about our own longstanding culpability in, indeed sadomasochistic enjoyment of, racist thinking and actions are foreclosed because racism is reduced to a problem of intention. The unconscious bias regime thereby elides the psychoanalytic insight into why consciously chosen actions and anti-bias mandates may not ameliorate, and indeed may enable, racism, allowing it to reappear in new and sometimes more insidious ways (see below).

5. Sociopolitical Implications

Significantly, for psychoanalysis, the racist fantasy is a shared social construction, helping both to establish a strong bond between people and to distinguish “insiders” from “outsiders”—those who share “our” mode of enjoyment versus those who “steal our enjoyment” (Žižek 2010, p. 366).² Indeed, since the role of fantasy is to explain to us our lack of total enjoyment, the cause of the lack of enjoyment here is attributed to the (racialized) outsider, who we believe has stolen it from us. This “theft of enjoyment” is evident in such common racial slurs as “Blacks/Muslims are invading our lands and stealing our jobs”, “immigrants are polluting our country”, or “Aboriginals are draining our welfare programs”. Accordingly, the fantasized (and stereotypical) racial Other acts as obstacle to the racists’ enjoyment, paradoxically enabling—enabling by allegedly preventing—them to sustain the myth of full and boundless satisfaction.

Note here how the psychoanalytic view makes racism a collective structure of disavowed fantasies and desires. So, while some people may manage to repudiate the racist fantasy, it still remains a foundational one for most, requiring collective systemic transformation for addressing racism. This in contrast to institutionalized unconscious bias training, which tends toward reducing racism to individual (and isolated institutional) responsibility and action.³ The result is the depoliticization of racism: by making antiracist education and change agent-focused, it fails to meaningfully engage with structural racism in a way that takes seriously the widespread and chronic domination and exclusion of minorities and people of color. Transformation depends, for the most part, on the individual staff member’s (un)willingness to effect it, with racism thereby treated not as a problem requiring sociopolitical alteration both inside and outside the academic/development apparatus, but a symptom implying only limited institutional reform, which is to say, tinkering at the edges and after-the-fact.

But none of this should come as a surprise given that universities and mainstream development agencies, including the likes of the World Bank or Save the Children, have willingly embraced unconscious bias training. The institutionalization of unconscious bias conforms to their administrative “drive” to survive/expand, as we have underlined above, no matter whether the training succeeds or not. The hollowing out of the unconscious also suits well the goals of promoting global capitalism and humanitarianism, especially in the development sector: not only does such depoliticization refrain from posing a threat to accumulation or its accompanying charity set-up,⁴ but it helps rationalize the latter by putting a human face on global inequality, demonstrating outward concern against racism without attending to its historical-systemic causes (Kapoor 2013a, 2013b). In short, unconscious bias training, like the broader diversity and equity agenda from which it

stems, suits well neoliberal capitalism's disavowal of inequality (because the system vitally depends on it).⁵

Unconscious bias training can thereby be said to fit well into the capitalist liberal democratic framework of multicultural/identity politics. Here, real social problems (discrimination, marginalization, racialization, inequality) are pressingly raised, but only superficially or partially acted upon. People enjoy and publicize their critical self-awareness, their empathy with the oppressed, and their seemingly progressive and humanitarian politics, but without taking any meaningful action (confronting the systemic barriers to racism and inequality, or demanding collective and material/land rights, not simply individual civil and cultural rights). We feel good about naming our personal oppression or our complicity in global inequality, or we get off on scrutinizing and surveilling others' lack of "political correctness", but this only ends up reinforcing the particularity, fragmentation, and depoliticization that capitalist liberal democracies count on. The reason, once again, is that cultural rights/recognition pose no real threat to the System: the state's granting of minority rights or the business, university, and international development sectors' recognition of group identities requires no meaningful systemic changes. On the contrary, the corporate sector, for example, has been only too happy to capitalize on "cultural capitalism", niche marketing products to multicultural groups, while "proudly" sponsoring such events as Black/Indigenous History Month, Earth Day, Women's Marches, or Gay Pride (the latter also a feature at universities these days). The political weakness of identity politics lies, in other words, in its particularity—its fragmentation, which enables the System to "divide and rule"; and its tendency to too narrowly focus on identity/cultural issues, at the expense of broader and more collective material and socioeconomic issues/rights (Dean 2008; Kapoor and Zalloua 2022).

6. Conclusions: Psychoanalytic Antiracism Strategies

So then what might psychoanalytic-political strategies against racism look like? Answering would require a substantial treatment and much more space than we can cover here, so all we can do is point tentatively to a few directions, drawing on work by several others (Fanon 1967; Žižek 1995, 1998; Zalloua 2020; George and Hook 2021a, 2021b). Obviously, the psychoanalytic unconscious, not consciousness or implicit bias, needs to be the starting point of any investigation into, and struggle against, the lure of racism. Here, targeting and dismantling racist fantasies and the enjoyment they elicit will be key, if painstakingly hard. The wider and even more difficult task will be not only reconfiguring culture and the popular imaginary (upon which fantasies of race draw) but also thereby transfiguring subjectivity: since racism is built on the fiction of wholeness—the primal need to seek out unity and stability, which as stated earlier, requires a racialized Other—the significant challenge will be to expose the incompleteness of the symbolic-cultural order and to come to terms with the impossibility of fully grounding any subjective identity (see Friedlander 2021).

But to ensure such a struggle is properly collective and political, it would need to take place in a much broader ambit than institutional politics or indeed academic and international development politics: not only to meaningfully affect global cultural and political transformation but also to put the subaltern—the main target of systemic racial oppression—first. Without a link-up to subaltern antiracist struggles, without ensuring the primacy of their (universalist) battles for equality-freedom (*égalitéliberté*), any fight against racism ends up merely reinforcing the position of the already privileged (Balibar 2014; Žižek 1997, p. 40; Zalloua 2020, p. 8; Kapoor and Zalloua 2022, p. 24). This is because it is the Excluded who the System critically depends on, yet has no place for. It is they who must be subalternized (e.g., as reserve army of labor, slum-dwellers, racialized and gendered sweatshop workers) for the System to function. As symptom of capitalist development (Kapoor 2020, pp. 265–93), the Excluded thus expose both what is wrong with the System and what needs to be changed. And because they are the exception, because they have no interest in an order that systematically excludes them, they are the ones who stand for

égalité: ensuring their equality and freedom is thereby ensuring everyone's; including them is, to the extent possible, including all. Only by reconfiguring the System to put the last first, therefore, do equality, equity, and freedom begin to make political sense (in development as much as on university campuses).

Thus, the most meaningful antiracist transformation is likely to happen from the bottom. The radicality of progressive subaltern movements (e.g., Black Lives Matter [BLM], Idle No More, Left Dalit and Palestinian groups) lies in their refusal to accept the racial status quo, helping to break the chain of subjugation (unlike academe and mainstream development agencies, whose antiracist work can end up reproducing it). This is what enables racialized subalterns to start to "traverse" the dominant supremacist fantasy, dismantling and facing up to the racist fetish (Lacan 1998, pp. 273–74; Žižek 2015). Their struggles *are* a type of antiracist public education, although the point is not simply to increase awareness but to undercut dominant (racial) fantasies. In this regard, Žižek frequently points to the strategy of "overidentification" as a way of bringing to light—publicly staging—the obscene racist underside of power (Žižek 1998, pp. 171–72; 1995, pp. 936–38). This could mean, for example, imitating the Master to the point of absurdity (e.g., performing in gory detail scenes of racist brutality or sado-masochistic/sexual abuse). In different ways, this is what groups like BLM, Wikileaks, Idle No More, Pussy Riot, and Yes Men have been doing: laying bare the excesses and deviations of (class, racial, gender) power, its hidden and unwritten (racist) codes and practices. The idea is neither to glorify nor necessarily directly criticize such power but to expose its shadowy underbelly by publicly imitating it, overidentifying, and overconforming with it.

Such a public exposure of excess would have the effect of undermining the hold of the racist fantasy and enjoyment, thereby suspending its efficiency and authority, unmasking and unmooring its nonsensical libidinal support. Drawing on Fanon, Basu Thakur (2021, pp. 294–95) sees this as a means of helping free societies of fantasies of sovereign identity by questioning those sociocultural institutions responsible for sustaining identity politics. The challenge instead would be to strive to dis-alienate from racist fantasy, but neither by resignifying it (that would simply perpetuate the myth of recovering loss and attaining full enjoyment) nor by pretending to do away with it (one never can, since fantasy is inherent to identification), but rather by dis-identifying with it—dwelling in its negativity, which is to say abandoning identity for lack (Basu Thakur 2021, p. 295; Hook 2005; Friedlander 2021, p. 114). Thus, Žižek writes, fully "assuming the Other's [and one's own] lack and inconsistency means that the Other is no longer a complete mechanism that controls me: I can exploit its inconsistencies, play the Other against itself" (Žižek 2017, p. 234).

Part of the challenge here is to reconstruct such ideas as equality and liberty by reading them against the grain: "appropriating key elements of the 'white' egalitarian emancipatory tradition, [thereby redefining] that very tradition, transforming it not so much in terms of what it says as what it does not say—that is, obliterating the implicit qualifications which have de facto excluded Blacks from the egalitarian space . . . [while also depriving] whites of the monopoly on defining their own tradition" (Žižek 2009b, p. 120; see also Fanon 1963, p. 237; Vogt 2013, pp. 153–54). Egalitarian justice has no boundary, which is to say that it can be molded and extended to any socioeconomic domain.

This broader subaltern fight for equality-freedom speaks to the necessity of antiracist struggles to reorganize not just the cultural order but at the same time the political-economic one.⁶ It is, after all, capitalism's dependence on inequality and exploitation that necessitates racial (and gender) domination, as stressed above. In this connection, Zahi Zalloua makes the point that an "anti-racist critique cannot remain at the level of the Imaginary (unmasking the images that fuel a politics of fear) and the Symbolic (uncovering the way civil rights laws serve white interests); it must also touch the Real of antagonism" (Zalloua 2020, pp. 123–24). Thus, only by reconfiguring political economy away from domination toward universal equality-freedom—a monumental task, to be sure—will we begin to emphatically subvert the racial fantasy. Only then can the contest to anchor subjectivity in lack rather than wholeness begin.

There are of course many dangers to any such psychoanalytic politics (including the always-present exposure by political movements to such factors as co-optation to the state/market, lack of adequate resources, etc.). Of particular note is the risk that antiracist groups resort back to identity politics: they confront dominant power not by agonistically re-configuring it but by asserting a putatively “authentic” alternative identity. The peril of identitarian counterclaims such as these is that they are an implicit acceptance of racist discourse, merely inverting the dominant racist binary (whiteness/blackness, modernity/tradition) and often creating new supremacist fantasies (e.g., “real” Blacks/Hindus/Malaysians vs. inauthentic ones). There is also the danger of the all-too-frequent and powerful backlash from dominant (right-wing and populist) groups, who lament the fall of their dearly held fantasies (and white privilege) and for whom antiracism amounts to catering to “special” interests.

The onus for anti-racist change though lies not just with grassroots groups, but also with the state. The state can help support subalterns/minorities in dismantling dominant racist fantasies (the big challenge is whether it can do so without co-opting, dominating, or disciplining these groups). It can help protect these groups’ rights and mitigate racist prejudice through laws and protections. Intrinsic to this contest, as Žižek suggests, is for the state to act as a buffer against the fantasies of civil society (Myers 2004, pp. 106–8): to keep them in check, but also to keep them apart to some extent so they do not get in each other’s way.

Inferred here is the notion that, because the Other is a traumatic intruder, impossible to really understand or accept (at least at the level of fantasy/enjoyment), it is important not to intrude on their fantasy space where possible. This is precisely the mistake of multiculturalism, as we have seen, since it pretends to encounter the Other, but does so only superficially (e.g., at the level of exotic culture and food), in the end denigrating the traumatic Real of the Other, depriving it of its difference. The “attitude of ‘understanding each-other’ has to be supplemented by the attitude of ‘getting-out-of-each-other’s-way’, by maintaining an appropriate distance, by implementing a new ‘code of discretion’ . . . Perhaps the lesson to be learned is that sometimes a dose of alienation is indispensable for peaceful coexistence” (Žižek 2008, p. 59). For, ultimately, the problem of intersubjectivity is how to accept the Other in the “ugly” enjoyment of their existence—with their annoying idiosyncrasies, smells, tics, vanities. Or to put it the other way around, as Lacan does, “Leaving this Other to [their] own mode of *jouissance*, that would only be possible by not imposing our own on [them], by not thinking of [them] as underdeveloped” (Lacan 1990, p. 32; see also Žižek 1998, pp. 167–68).

What does all this imply, practically speaking, for universities and development organizations themselves? We suggest several (interrelated) possibilities, all denoting a thoroughly broad and politicized approach to antiracism, in contrast to the above-noted “objective” administrative procedure that reproduces the status quo. One option is to bridge the gap between individual institutions and wider socioeconomic, politico-environmental, and cultural grassroots mobilization: this would entail supporting (without thereby controlling or dominating) the likes of antiracist subaltern movements, sweatshop labor unions, radical environmental/climate change organizations, and Black, Indigenous, Disability, Palestinian, and gender/LGBTQ+ activist groups. Such commitment to the symbolic, and especially material, struggles of the subaltern, as emphasized earlier, is what would ensure that antiracism initiatives maintain their subversive edge rather than becoming “just another problem of techno-managerial ‘sustainable development’” (Kapoor and Zalloua 2022, p. 124). A related option is actively pressuring, in collaboration with other organizations and movements, state and multilateral agencies (e.g., the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, World Trade Organization) to be more accountable to the subaltern through a wide range of equality-freedom seeking policies (e.g., employment protections and practices, hiring and pay equity, health and education benefits, strict environmental controls, transnational regulation of multinationals, etc.). As we have been claiming, only an ex-

pansive and ambitious reconfiguration of the political economy away from (racial, gender) domination in favour of *égalité* is likely to enable the dismantling of the fantasy of race.

Finally, in as far as internal organizational politics is concerned, our gloss indicates the option of doing away with mandatory antiracism regimes that thrive on enjoyment, attempting instead to create a wider antiracist organizational culture through more tacit, but also more straightforwardly obligatory, mechanisms. One possibility here is fostering a broad and critical intellectual environment by organizing not only antiracism seminars but also more intersectional anti-oppression and political economy symposia, including ones that expose the *libidinal* dimensions of domination so as to focus on fantasy, not just knowledge. The voluntary nature of such intellectual fora, while certainly not eliminating the circulation of panoptic and deliberative enjoyment, may help stem the latter by mitigating resentment against the imposed authority of mandatory training. The other related possibility is the institution of a subaltern focus to *all* of the organization's activities, not just its external programming. This would mean prioritizing the subaltern in all internal decision-making structures (human resources, hiring, policymaking, governing bodies, etc.). In this sense, the anti-racism/oppression regime is not artificially "imposed" on the organization, thus becoming an object of *ressentiment* between "insiders" and "outsiders", but integral to the organization's very mandate and character. The related ramification is the identification of the subaltern not in the narrow terms of identity (as Blacks, Indigenous people, Dalits, etc.), which encrusts (the enjoyment of) positive and competitive group identity claims, but more expansively in terms of need and class (and their wider social intersections), which uphold structural forms of oppression and marginalization. It is the negative and systemic form of the latter that helps shift focus to a politics of lack, centering not on common identities but shared patterns of exclusion.

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Notes

- ¹ As far as we are aware, the first strictly psychoanalytic mention of "unconscious bias" was made by Karen Horney, well before its conceptualization as implicit bias by cognitivists such as Greenwald and Krieger (2006). See Jones (1927) for a discussion of Horney's use of the term.
- ² Note as well that, for psychoanalysis, the unconscious is not internal to the subject (or an individual mind). Rather, it is trans-individual, nested in (inherited and historically dynamic) sociolinguistic structures. This is what leads Lacan to contend that the unconscious is the discourse of the Other. In this sense, our desires are not, strictly speaking, our own. My desire, like the unconscious, is the Other's desire in me. But for Lacan, much like the subject recognizes (or, more accurately, misrecognizes) themselves in the mirror, desire is mediated through an Other, who is misrecognized and does not exist as such. In this regard, Lacan never tires of saying that there is no Other of the Other (Lacan 1960a, p. 688), by which he means that the Other's signifiers are contingent.
- ³ In psychoanalysis, there is no first-person of prejudicial thinking. What we might, correctly, identify as a series of integrated racist sayings is interrupted, cut, and reformulated by the unconscious. A racist thought, saying, or act is a social, political, and economic problem with structural underpinnings, as most anti-racist educators would likely agree. As such, a racist enactment thought to exist "within" the individual has an Other component. The Lacanian unconscious, after all, is the discourse of the Other and the "Other is the locus of the signifier" (Lacan 2006, p. 688). This has significant implications with respect to the idea

that the unconscious is anti-social. From a Lacanian perspective, the unconscious is social insofar as it is where the Other speaks in me (see Note 2). By “checking unconscious bias” (as we are sometimes asked to do), we are, in a way, being asked to do away with the Other (which, of course, we cannot). This is not to say that we cannot counter racisms; but it is to say that the individual does not act alone.

- ⁴ Žižek (2009a) and Kapoor (2013a, p. 62; 2015) claim that charity is an ideological fantasy that puts a human face on inequality: by only haphazardly attending to the visible outward symptoms of poverty, it hides the systemic causes—wealth creation and social and spatial hierarchy, premised on socioeconomic exploitation and class, racial, gender, disability, and environmental domination.
- ⁵ This is all the more true given that many organizations, especially private sector ones, institutionalize unconscious bias training for legal purposes: it helps protect against claims of employment discrimination (in recruitment, programming, etc.). See for example Johnson (2021) and NJBIA (2020).
- ⁶ On this point, we see it as crucial to never ignore the political and economic dimensions of racial (dis)identification since this would leave one with the impression that the fight for overcoming the fantasy of race can happen only at the level of the Symbolic and Imaginary without broaching the materiality of racism. And it would ignore how such an overcoming would happen: what political mechanisms—civil society/social movement mobilization? state activism? group psychoanalytic therapy?—would ensure such broad and collective transformation? Not sufficiently addressing these dimensions would make any approach to antiracism, psychoanalytic or not, appear depoliticized and/or naively theoretical.

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