

Denying Racism: Elite Discourse and Racism

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Introduction

Within a larger research framework that studies the ways white people speak and write about minorities, this chapter examines one major strategy in such discourse, viz., the denial of racism. The prototype of such denials is the well-known disclaimer: 'I have nothing against blacks, but...'

Discourse plays a prominent role in the reproduction of racism. It expresses, persuasively conveys and legitimates ethnic or racial stereotypes and prejudices among white group members, and may thus form or confirm the social cognitions of other whites. This is particularly true for various forms of elite discourse, since the elites control or have preferential access to the major means of public communication, e.g. through political, media, educational, scholarly or corporate discourse. Without alternative sources of information or opinion formation, the white public at large may have few resources for resistance against such prevailing messages that preformulate the ethnic consensus. Our (informal) discourse analytical approach is embedded within this complex socio-cognitive and socio-political framework, which will not be spelled out here (for details, see van Dijk 1984, 1987, 1991, 1993).

The Forms and Functions of Racism Denials

The many forms denials of racism may take are part of a well-known overall discourse and interaction strategy, viz. that of positive self-pre-

Parts of this paper were presented at conferences in Amsterdam, Coventry and Duisburg in 1991. A longer version of this chapter, 'Discourse and the Denial of Racism', was published in *Discourse and Society* 3 (1992), 87-118.

sentation or keeping face (Brown and Levinson 1987; Goffman 1967; Tedeschi 1981). Given general social norms that prohibit explicit discrimination and outgroup derogation, white group members usually do not want to be seen as 'racists'. When they want to say something negative about minorities, they will tend to use denials, disclaimers or other forms that are intended to avoid a negative impression with their listeners or their readers. That is denials have the function of blocking negative inferences of the recipients about the attitudes of the speaker or writer. Such denials may not only be personal, but especially in elite discourse, they may also pertain to 'our' group in general: 'We British (Dutch, French) are not racist ...' That is in talk about minorities, white people often speak as dominant group members.

Denials come in many guises. In general, a denial presupposes a real or potential accusation, reproach or suspicion of others about one's present or past actions or attitudes, and asserts that such attacks against one's moral integrity are not warranted. That is denials may be a move in a strategy of *defence*, as well as part of the strategy of positive self-presentation. Thus speakers may not only deny the incriminated (verbal or other) act itself, but also its underlying intentions, purposes or attitudes, or its non-controlled consequences: 'I did not do/say that', 'I did not do/say that on purpose', 'That is not what I meant', 'You got me wrong', etc. Since lack of specific intentions may diminish responsibility, denials of intentions are a well-known move in defences against accusations of legal or moral transgression, and typical in denials of discrimination. Thus journalists often deny prejudiced intentions of biased news reports about minorities, e.g. by claiming to have only written 'the truth', or by denying responsibility for the effects of their coverage upon the attitudes of the audience.

Another way to avoid negative impressions is to play down, trivialise or generally to mitigate the seriousness, extent or consequences of one's negative actions, for instance by using euphemisms in the description of such actions. Indeed, they may deny that their acts or attitudes are negative in the first place. 'Telling the truth' may thus be the typical euphemism of those accused of saying or writing derogatory things about minorities. Similarly, even the very term 'racism' may thus be declared taboo, for instance in the Netherlands and Germany, where the term is seen to apply only to overt right-wing racism (or to racism abroad), and considered to be 'exaggerated' or totally out of place for the more 'moderate' or 'modern' (Dovidio and Gaertner 1986) forms of everyday racism, especially among the elites. Instead, if at all, the terms 'discrimination', 'resentment' or 'xenophobia' are used to describe various manifestations of such everyday racism (for an analysis of such events of everyday racism, see Essed 1991).

Instead of directly or indirectly denying accusations or suspicions of bias or racist attitudes, white people may of course also have recourse to *justifications*, more or less according to the following pattern of argumentation: 'I did express a negative judgment, but it was justified in this case, and that does not mean I am a racist' (for various strategies of such justifications, see e.g. Antaki 1988; Scott and Lyman 1968; Tedeschi and Reiss 1981). Such justifications also play a prominent role in strategies of excuses (Cody and McLaughlin 1988), for instance in political discourse about immigration: 'That we restrict immigration is not because we are racist, but because we want (a) not to worsen the situation of the other immigrants, (b) avoid further unemployment, (c) avoid (white) popular resentment, etc.' Justifications may also go one step further and blame the victim: 'If they don't get a better education, and engage in crime (drugs), no wonder blacks don't get jobs or are being discriminated against' (Ryan 1976).

Denials may also transfer the charge to others: 'I have nothing against blacks, but my neighbours (customers, etc.) ...' Ultimately, denials may also reverse the charges and accuse the accuser for having (intentionally) misunderstood the actor/speaker, for having accused the actor/speaker without grounds or even for being intolerant: 'Not WE, but THEY are the real racists.' Such reversals are typical for right-wing attacks against anti-racists (Murray 1986; van Dijk 1991).

Denials not only have discursive and interactional functions at the level of interpersonal communication. We have already stressed that they also have social implications: they are intended to 'save face' for the whole ingroup. They express ingroup allegiances and white group solidarity, defend 'us' against 'them', that is, against minorities and (other) anti-racists. They mark social boundaries and re-affirm social and ethnic identities, and self-attribute moral superiority to their own group.

At the same time, denials of racism have a *socio-political function*. Denials challenge the very legitimacy of anti-racist analysis, and thus are part of the politics of ethnic management: as long as a problem is being denied in the first place, the critics are ridiculed, marginalised or delegitimated: denials debilitate resistance. As long as racism is denied, there is no need for official measures against it, for stricter laws, regulations or institutions to combat discrimination, or moral campaigns to change the biased attitudes of whites. By selectively attributing 'racism' only to the extreme right, the mainstream parties and institutions at the same time define themselves as being not racists'. 'After all [so the argument goes], discrimination is officially prohibited by law, and punished by the courts, so there is no problem, and there is nothing else we can do. We are a tolerant country. There may be incidental acts of discrimination, but that does not make our society or country "racist".'

It is this overall social and political myth in which denials function. They thus play a role in the manufacture of the ethnic consensus and, indirectly, contribute to the legitimation of white group dominance, that is to the reproduction of racism. Finally denials of racism and affirmation of tolerance also have a cultural function when 'our' or 'western' norms and values are contrasted with those of other, 'intolerant' cultures, such as Islam, with the obvious implication that 'our' culture is superior (Said 1981). Such implications, which were prominent during the Rushdie affair and the Gulf War, function within the broader culturalisation of modern racism, and its transformation into ethnicism.

Analysing Denials

Against this very succinctly sketched theoretical framework, let us now examine various forms of denial in different discourse genres. Although denials, such as the widespread disclaimer mentioned above, 'I have nothing against ... but ...', are also prevalent in everyday conversations about ethnic affairs (for details, see van Dijk 1984, 1987), we shall focus only on elite discourse, viz. on the press and on parliamentary discourse. Note though that many dominant properties of such elite discourses also influence everyday talk and opinions about ethnic affairs: similar topics are being discussed (viz. problems, for us, of immigration, crime, deviance, cultural deviance and ethnic relations), and even similar modes of argumentation, such as the denials that are part of the overall strategies of positive ingroup presentation. In the remainder of this chapter, we shall only focus on these denials (for other properties of elite discourse on ethnic affairs, see van Dijk 1991, 1993).

The Press

Although discrimination is often covered in the press, though usually defined as incidental, racism is denied in many ways. First of all, racism is usually elsewhere: in the past (during slavery or segregation) abroad (Apartheid in South Africa), politically at the far right (racist parties), and socially at the bottom (poor inner cities, skinheads). This is true for both the liberal and the conservative press. This means that it never applies to 'us', that is, the moderate mainstream, let alone to the liberal left or to the elites. Those who accuse 'us' of racism are therefore severely attacked in much of the conservative press or simply ignored or marginalised in the more liberal press, especially when the press itself is

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the target of critical analysis. Racism, thus, if discussed at all, is explained away by restricting its definition to old-style, aggressive, ideological racism based on notions of racial superiority. Everyday forms of cultural racism, or ethnicism, are at most characterised as intolerance or xenophobia, which may even be blamed on the victim.

Positive Self-presentation

The semantic basis of denial is 'truth' as the writer sees it. The denial of racism in the press, therefore, presupposes that the journalist or columnist believes that his or her own group or country is essentially 'tolerant' towards minorities or immigrants. Positive self-presentation, thus, is an important move in journalistic discourse, and should be seen as the argumentative denial of the accusations of anti-racists:

(1) (Handsworth). Contrary to much doctrine, and acknowledging a small malevolent fascist fringe, this is a remarkably tolerant society. But tolerance would be stretched were it to be seen that enforcement of law adopted the principle of reverse discrimination. (*Daily Telegraph*, Editorial, 11 September 1985)

This example not only asserts or presupposes white British 'tolerance', but at the same time defines its boundaries. Tolerance might be interpreted as a position of weakness, and therefore it should not be 'stretched' too far, lest 'every terrorist', 'criminal' or other immigrants, take advantage of it. Affirmative action or liberal immigration laws, thus, can only be seen as a form of reverse discrimination, and hence as a form of self-destruction of white Britain. Ironically, therefore, this example is self-defeating because of its internal contradictions: It is not tolerance *per se* that is aimed at, but rather the limitations preventing its 'excesses'.

Denial and Counter-attack

Having constructed a positive self-image of white Britain, the conservative and tabloid press in particular engages in attacks against those who hold a different view, at the same time defending those who agree with its position, as was the case during the notorious Honeyford affair (Honeyford was headmaster of a Bradford school who was suspended, then reinstated and finally let go with a golden handshake, after having written articles on multicultural education which most of the parents of his mostly Asian students found racist). The attacks on the anti-racists often embody denials of racism:

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(2) (Reaction of 'race lobby' against Honeyford). Why is it that this lobby have chosen to persecute this man ... It is not because he is a racist; it is precisely because he is not a racist, yet has dared to challenge the attitudes, behaviour and approach of the ethnic minority professionals. (*Daily Telegraph*, 6 September 1985)

(3) (Worker accused of racism). The really alarming thing is that some of these pocket Hitlers of local government are moving into national politics. It's time we set about exposing their antics while we can. Forewarned is forearmed. (*Daily Mail*, Editorial, 26 October 1985)

These examples illustrate several strategic moves in the press campaign against anti-racists. First, as we have seen above, denial is closely linked to the presupposition of 'truth': Honeyford is presented as defending the 'truth', viz. the failure and the anti-British nature of multiculturalism.

Secondly, consequent denials often lead to the strategic move of reversal: Not we are the racists, *they* are the 'true racists'. This reversal also implies, thirdly, a reversal of the charges: Honeyford, and those who sympathise with him, are the victims, not his Asian students and their parents. Consequently, the anti-racists are the enemy: *they* are the ones who persecute innocent, ordinary British citizens, they are the ones who are intolerant. Therefore, victims who resist their attackers may be defined as folk heroes, who 'dare' the 'anti-racist brigade'. Ultimately, as in example (3), the charges may be fully reversed, viz. by identifying the symbolic enemy precisely with the categories of their own attacks: they are intolerant, they are totalitarian 'pocket Hitlers'.

Moral Blackmail

One element that was very prominent in the Honeyford affair, as well as in similar cases, was the pretence of censorship: The anti-racists not only ignore the 'truth' about multicultural society, they also prevent others (us) from telling the truth. Repeatedly, thus, journalists and columnists argue that this 'taboo' and this 'censorship' must be broken in order to be able to tell the 'truth', as was the case after the disturbances in Tottenham:

(4) (Tottenham). The time has come to state the truth without cant and without hypocrisy ... the strength to face the facts without being silenced by the fear of being called racist. (*Daily Mail* 9 October 1985, column by Linda Lee-Potter).

Such examples also show that the authors feel morally blackmailed, while at the same time realising that to 'state the truth', meaning 'to say negative things about minorities', may well be against the prevalent

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norms of tolerance and understanding. Clamouring for the 'truth' thus expresses a dilemma, even if the dilemma is only apparent: the apparent dilemma is a rhetorical strategy to accuse the opponent of censorship or blackmail, not the result of moral soul-searching and a difficult decision. After all, the same newspapers extensively do write negative things about young blacks, and never hesitate to write what they see as the 'truth'. Nobody 'silences' them, and the taboo is only imaginary. On the contrary, the right-wing press in Britain reaches many millions of readers.

Subtle Denials

Denials are not always explicit. There are many ways to express doubt, distance or non-acceptance of statements or accusations by others. When the official Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) in 1985 published a report on discrimination in the UK, outright denial of the facts would hardly be credible. Other discursive means, such as quotation marks, and the use of words like 'claim' or 'allege', presupposing doubt on the part of the writer, may be employed in accounting for the facts, as is the case in the following editorial of the *Daily Telegraph*:

(5) In its report which follows a detailed review of the operation of the 1976 Race Relations Act, the Commission claims that ethnic minorities continue to suffer high levels of discrimination and disadvantage. (*Daily Telegraph*, 1 August 1985)

Such linguistic tricks do not go unnoticed, as we may see in the following reaction to this passage in a letter from Peter Newsam, then director of the CRE:

(6) Of the Commission you say 'it claims that ethnic minorities continue to suffer high levels of discrimination and disadvantage'. This is like saying that someone 'claims' that July was wet. It was. And it is also a fact supported by the weight of independent research evidence that discrimination on racial grounds, in employment, housing and services, remains at a disconcertingly high level. (*Daily Telegraph*, 7 August 1985)

Denials, thus, may be subtly conveyed by expressing doubt or distance. Therefore, the very notion of 'racism' usually appears between quotation marks, especially also in the headlines. Such scare quotes are not merely a journalistic device for reporting opinions or controversial points of view. If that were the case, the opinions with which the newspaper happens to agree would also have to be put between quotation marks, which is not always the case. Rather, apart from signalling journalistic doubt

and distance, the quotation marks also connote ‘unfounded accusation’. The use of quotation marks around the notion of racism has become so much routine, that even in cases where the police or the courts themselves established that racism was involved in a particular case, the conservative press may maintain the quotation marks out of sheer habit.

Mitigation

Our conceptual analysis of denial has already shown that denial may also be implied by various forms of mitigation, such as toning down, using euphemisms or other circumlocutions that minimise the act itself or the responsibility of the accused. In the same editorial of the *Daily Telegraph* we quoted above, we find the following statement:

(7) (CRE report). No one would deny the fragile nature of race relations in Britain today or that there is misunderstanding and distrust between parts of the community. (*Daily Telegraph*, Editorial, 1 August 1985)

Thus instead of inequality or racism, race relations are assumed to be ‘fragile’, whereas ‘misunderstanding and distrust’ are also characteristic of these relations. Interestingly, this passage also explicitly denies the prevalence of denials, and therefore might be read, as such, as a concession: There are problems. However, the way this concession is rhetorically presented by way of various forms of mitigation, suggests, in the context of the rest of the same editorial, that the concession is apparent. Such apparent concessions are another major form of disclaimer in discourse about ethnic relations, as we also have them in statements like: ‘There are also intelligent blacks, but ...’ or ‘I know that minorities sometimes have problems, but...’ Note also that in the example from the *Daily Telegraph* the mitigation not only appears in the use of euphemisms, but also in the *redistribution of responsibility*, and hence in the denial of blame. It is not we (whites) who are mainly responsible for the tensions between the communities, but everybody is, as is suggested by the use of the impersonal existential phrase: ‘*There is misunderstanding ...*’ Apparently, one effective move of denial is either to dispute the responsible agency, or to conceal the agency.

Parliamentary Discourse

In close symbiosis with the mass media, politics plays a prominent role in the definition of the ethnic situation. In western Europe, decision-

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making by the administration and the bureaucracy, and parliamentary debates in the 1980s and 1990s increasingly deal with ethnic affairs, immigration and refugees. Persistent social inequalities, unemployment, affirmative action, educational 'disadvantage', popular resentment against immigration, and the arrival of 'waves' of new refugees from the south, are among the major topics on the political agenda, which are 'made public', and possibly emphasised, by the press, and thus by the population at large. Note that since parliamentary speeches are for the record, and usually written in advance, we should not normally expect, except by right-wing speakers, overt derogation of minority groups. However, since restrictions on immigration or refusals to legislate in favour of minorities need to be legitimated we may nevertheless expect negative other-presentation of immigrants, refugees or minorities. These subtle forms of derogation, in turn, require the usual forms of positive self-presentation, and hence of denial. Let us give some examples from parliamentary debates in the UK, France, Germany, the Netherlands and the USA (for detail, see van Dijk 1993). We shall not identify the individual speakers: here we are only interested, more generally, in official forms of talk about ethnic minorities.

Nationalist Self-glorification

Parliament is the prime forum for nationalistic rhetoric. This is particularly true when international norms and values, such as democracy, equal rights and tolerance are involved. Accusations of racism in such a context may easily be heard as a moral indictment of the nation as a whole, and are therefore permitted, though resented, only in partisan debates, in which one party accuses the other of racism. After all, as we have seen, racism is always elsewhere, and always a property of the others.

(8) I believe that we are a wonderfully fair country. We stick to the rules unlike some foreign Governments. (UK)

(9) Our country has long been open to foreigners, a tradition of hospitality going back, beyond the revolution, to the *ancien régime*. (France)

(10) I know no other country on this earth that gives more prominence to the rights of resident foreigners as does this bill in our country. (Germany)

(11) There are so many great things about our country, all the freedoms that we have, speech, religion, the right to vote and choose our leaders and of

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course our greatness lies in our mobility, the ability to each and every one of us, regardless of the circumstances of our birth, to rise in American society, to pursue our individual dreams. (USA)

Although nationalist rhetoric may differ in different countries (it is usually more exuberant in France and in the USA, for instance), the basic strategy of positive self-presentation appears in all Houses: we are fair, respect human rights, have a long tradition of tolerance etc. It is not uncommon to hear in each parliament that at least some representatives think of their own country as the most liberal, freedom-loving, democratic etc. in the world.

Fair, but ...

Such self-glorification, especially when introducing a debate on minorities or immigration, has various functions in parliamentary discourse. For those groups or parties that oppose legislation in favour of minorities or immigrants, positive self-presentation often functions as a disclaimer, that is, as an introduction for a BUT, followed by arguments in favour of special restrictions, as is also the case in the following fragment from a radio interview with the Dutch Prime Minister, Ruud Lubbers:

(12) In practice, we should come to opportunities and possibilities for them, but in practice we should also come to a less soft approach. There should be a line like: we also hold them responsible [literally: 'we address them'].

Elsewhere we find a nearly routine combination of fairness on the one hand, and firmness, realism, pragmatism etc. on the other hand:

(13) If we are to work seriously for harmony, non-discrimination and equality of opportunity in our cities, that has to be accompanied by firm and fair immigration control. (UK)

(14) It belongs to this fair balance of interests that the further immigration of foreigners must be limited, because for each society there are limits to the ability and the readiness to integrate. (Germany)

(15) This substitute offers the House of Representatives an opportunity to enact a landmark civil rights bill that is both fair and pragmatic. (USA)

This remarkably similar rhetoric of fairness ('fair, but strict' etc.) in the different countries also seeks to combine two opposed ideological or

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political aims, viz. the humanitarian values of tolerance or hospitality on the one hand, and the common sense values of ‘realism’ on the other hand. In other words, the humanitarian aims are recognised, but at the same time they are rejected as being too idealistic, and therefore unpractical in the business of everyday political management and decision-making. The reference to fairness also serves as an element in a ‘balance’, viz. in order to mitigate the negative implications of proposed legislation, such as limitations on further immigration in the European debates, and limitations on the 1990 Civil Rights Bill (eventually vetoed by President Bush) in the USA. Fairness in such rhetoric usually is supported by the claim that the (restrictive) measures are always ‘in their own best interests’.

Denial of Racism

In such a political context of public impression management, the denial of racism plays a prominent role. Whatever the political orientation or party involved, including the extremist right, all parliamentarians emphatically reject any accusation or suggestion of prejudice, discrimination or racism. Indeed, the more racist the opinions professed, the more insistent are the denials of racism, as may be apparent in the following quote from a representative of the Front National in the French Assemblée Nationale:

(16) We are neither racist nor xenophobic. Our aim is only that, quite naturally, there be a hierarchy, because we are dealing with France, and France is the country of the French.

Note that an implicit but (‘only’) follows the denial. The speaker (the leader of the Front National, Le Pen, himself) even claims that it is ‘natural’ to have a hierarchy between the ‘own group’, the French, and the immigrants. This assignment of a ‘natural’ right to a superior position is at the heart of racist ideologies.

Besides the discursive and political strategy of populism, which is very prominent in such debates (‘The people would resent it’, ‘You should listen to what ordinary French, English ... people say’), we also find the element of *euphemism*: we are not racist, only worried. Here is a more sophisticated example of such a strategy:

(17) The French are not racist. But, facing this continuous increase of the foreign population in France, one has witnessed the development, in certain cities and neighbourhoods, of reactions that come close to xenophobia. In the eyes of the French unemployed man, for instance, the foreigner may easily become a rival, towards whom a sentiment of animosity may threaten to appear.

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Following the usual ‘but’, we do not find, as in other disclaimers, a negative statement about immigrants, but rather an explanation of the reaction of the ‘common man’ (women are apparently not involved). Note that the way this explanation is formulated (‘continuous increase’, ‘rival’) suggests understanding, if not an excuse, as in the usual accounts of racism in terms of economic competition. The denial of racism itself is rather complex, however. It is a denial that holds for the French in general. It is followed by a partial concession, duly limited by heavy mitigation and hedging (‘coming close to xenophobia’, ‘a sentiment of animosity may threaten to appear’), as well as limited in place (‘in certain cities’). In other words, prejudice, discrimination and racism are local incidents, and should also be seen as being provoked by continuous immigration, arguments we also found in the right-wing British press.

When restrictive measures are being debated, those who support them feel impelled to remind their audience, and the public at large, that such political decisions have nothing to do with prejudice or racism:

(18) I hope that people outside, whether they are black or white and wherever they come from, will recognize that these are not major changes resulting from prejudice. (UK)

Such denials need argumentative support. Saying only that the measures are ‘fair’ may be seen as too flimsy. Therefore they are often followed by the moves we have found earlier, such as concern for the inner cities. Note that such arguments also imply a move of transfer: we are not racist, but the poor people in the inner cities are, and we should avoid exacerbating the mood of resentment among the population at large. This argument is rather typical of what we have called ‘elite racism’, which consistently denies racism among the own elite group, but recognizes that others, especially poor white people, may fail to be as tolerant.

Denial and Reproach

In the analysis of the British press, we have found that denials of racism easily transform into attacks against anti-racists. Such a strategy may also be found in parliamentary discourse. Thus, conservative representatives will not accept accusations or even implicit suggestions that their stricter immigration or ethnic minority policies are categorized as racist by other politicians. Since the official norm is ‘that we are all tolerant citizens’, such allegations are declared unacceptable:

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(19) Addressing myself to the people of the left I repeat again that we are ... I have noted in your words, my God, terms such as racism and xenophobia, that those who do not support your proposals would be judged with the same terms. It should be understood once and for all: we are not racists because we combat your text. (France)

(20) Well, now can we also agree this afternoon that you can have different philosophies about how to achieve through law civil rights and equal opportunities for everybody without somehow being anti-civil-rights or being a racist or something like that. (USA)

One interesting case may be found in a German debate on the new aliens bill. When one of the Green Party representatives qualifies the provisions of the bill as 'racist', a term that is as unusual in official German discourse as it is in the Netherlands, other representatives are shocked:

(21) A chill ran down my back when our colleague ... said that this bill was a form of institutionalized racism. Whereas the older ones among us had to live twelve years under institutionalised racism, ladies and gentlemen, I beg you, and in particular our younger colleagues, to show respect for these terrible experiences, and not to introduce such concepts to our everyday political business.

In other words, evaluations in terms of racism are limited only to the Nazi past, and are banned from official political discourse. At most, the term *Ausländerfeindslichkeit* (literally: animosity against foreigners) may be used. 'Racism' thus is by definition too strong, if only because the present situation cannot be compared to the monstrosities of the Nazis. A similar attitude exists in the Netherlands, where racism is also avoided as a term in public (political, media) discourse because it is understood only in terms of extremist, right-wing ideologies of racial superiority.

Reversal

Although moderate reproaches directed against anti-racist delegates are not uncommon in parliament, reversal is rather exceptional. However, it is quite typical for right-wing party representatives, such as those of the Front National in France. Being routinely accused, also explicitly, of racism, they go beyond mere denial, and reverse the charges. For them, this means that the others, and especially the socialists, allegedly letting in so many immigrants and granting them equal rights, are guilty of what they call 'anti-French racism':

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(22) There exists a form of racism, my dear colleagues [interruptions] that is passed over silently, but of which the manifestations nowadays reach an insupportable level and a scope that should concern us: that is the anti-French racism.

Another way of reversing the charges is to accuse the anti-racists of being themselves responsible for creating racism in the country, if only by not listening to the people and by letting in so many non-European immigrants:

(23) Well, France today, according to what those creatures of the whole world tell us who often have come to take refuge in our country ... France is the least racist country that exists in the world. We can't tolerate to hear it said that France is a racist country ... In this respect, this law proposal, because of the debate that takes place at this moment, secretes and fabricates racism!

These examples taken from several western parliaments show that although the debate may be couched in less extremist terms than in much of the right-wing or tabloid press, or in everyday conversations, rather similar strategies and moves are used to talk about ethnic affairs. Most characteristic of this kind of political discourse is not merely the nationalist self-praise, but also the strategic management of impression: whatever we decide, we are fair. Since, especially in Europe, ethnic minorities, let alone new immigrants and refugees, have virtually no political power, this 'balancing act' of presenting policies as 'firm but fair' is obviously addressed primarily to the dominant white public at large. When defined as humane without being too soft, thus, the government and its supporting parties may be acceptable as essentially reasonable: 'We take energetic measures, but we are not racist.'

In other words, besides managing impressions, such political discourse also manages its own legitimation by manufacturing consent on ethnic policies, and at the same time manages the politics of ethnic affairs, immigration and international relations.

Conclusions

Racism, defined as a system of racial and ethnic inequality, can survive only when it is daily reproduced through multiple acts of exclusion, inferiorisation or marginalisation. Such acts need to be sustained by an ideological system and by a set of attitudes that legitimate difference and dominance. Discourse is the principal means for the construction and reproduction of this socio-cognitive framework. At the same time,

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there are norms and values of tolerance and democratic humanitarianism, which may be felt to be inconsistent with biased attitudes and negative text and talk about minorities. To manage such contradictions, white speakers engage in strategies of positive self-presentation in order to be able credibly to present the 'others' in a negative light. Disclaimers, mitigations, euphemisms, transfers, and many other forms of racism denial are the routine moves in social face-keeping, so that ingroup members are able to come to terms with their own prejudices. At the same time, these denials of racism have important social and political functions, e.g. in the management of ethnic affairs and the delegitimation of resistance. We have seen that, especially in elite discourse, for instance in the media and in the legislature, the 'official' versions of own-group tolerance, and the rejection of racism as an implied or explicit accusation, are crucial for the self-image of the elite as being tolerant, understanding leaders. However, we have also seen how these strategies of denial at the same time confirm their special role in the formulation and the reproduction of racism.

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