



## Elite Discourse and the Reproduction of Racism

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### **Editor's Introduction**

Polite society publicly eschews hate mongers and their evil acts. Consequently, when hate becomes a topic of conversation, the social status of the perpetrators is clearly implied. In this chapter, van Dijk contends that elites routinely attribute racism to lower-class whites or

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**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** An earlier version of this chapter was presented at the International Conference on European Racism, September 25-30, 1990, Hamburg, Germany.

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to the extreme Right factions in society. He then takes exception to that conclusion.

Van Dijk argues that because elites attribute the problem of racism to other social groups, they fail to recognize and deal with the racism that the dominant class imposes. He examines elite discourse in the mass media, education, politics, and business to expose inherent, institutional racism. This research is compelling and supports the argument that, although elites cloak their language in tolerance, they linguistically institutionalize the dominance of white groups over multiethnic components of society.

Van Dijk's findings are based on a program of research conducted in the Program of Discourse Studies of the University of Amsterdam, some of which he reviews here. In this analysis, he reminds us that hate can be cloaked in civility, and that language does not have to be visceral to inflict harm.

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### Introduction and Backgrounds

This chapter discusses some of the implications of a decade of research, carried out at the University of Amsterdam since the early 1980s, about the reproduction of racism through various types of discourse and communication. The fundamental thesis of this research program is that discourse-institutional as well as interpersonal text and talk-plays a crucial role in the enactment, expression, legitimation, and acquisition of racism in society (van Dijk, 1984, 1987a, 1987b, 1991, 1993).

White group members and white institutions are daily involved in a multitude of different discourses that express and confirm their dominance: from socializing talk and children's books during childhood, through textbooks at schools, and in the various discourses of the mass media, politics, business, and the professions. Their participation in this case may be active, as when they subtly or blatantly engage in racist talk addressed to minority group members, or in prejudiced stories among themselves about "those blacks" or "those foreigners." Or they may more passively be confronted with the

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portrayal of ethnic events and minorities in news reports, advertising, movies, or other media messages.

Such discourses are not simply innocent forms of language use or marginal types of verbal social interaction. Rather, they have a fundamental impact on the social cognitions of dominant group members, on the acquisition, confirmation, and uses of opinions, attitudes, and ideologies underlying social perceptions, actions, and structures. In other words, racism is socially learned, and discourse is essential in the process of its ideological production and reproduction.

The first major aim of this research framework, then, is to analyze systematically the details of some important discourse types about ethnic affairs and minorities. This discourse analytical approach goes beyond the traditional methods of content analysis and pays attention to such diverse discursive structures and strategies as topical or thematic structure (global contents), schematic organization (e.g., storytelling and argumentation), local semantic moves, style, rhetoric, and other properties of text and talk. So far, this program of research has analyzed everyday conversations, textbooks, and news reports in the press. At present we continue to extend this research toward an analysis of political (parliamentary) debates, academic discourse, and corporate text and talk.

The second aim of this research program is to examine the detailed structures, strategies, and contents of ethnically oriented social cognitions, such as prejudices and related ethnic attitudes. This cognitive "interface" allows us to link overt actions, including discourse, with social beliefs of white groups on the one hand, and with (representations of) societal structures on the other hand. It is at this point where the interaction between the micro and macro levels of racism needs to be theorized. It should, therefore, be emphasized that this approach to social cognition analysis is not some kind of individual psychology or traditional prejudice research. On the contrary, it is first of all *social* analysis, that is, analysis of the cognitions shared by members of groups or cultures.

Finally, both discourse and socio-cognitive analyses are embedded in a broader study of the societal, political, and cultural framework of racism in which structural and ideological roles and functions of racist discourse and cognitions play a role. At this level we study, for in-

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stance, the role of racist textbooks or news reports in the institutional framework of education or the mass media. Besides the study of power relations between groups, such an analysis also contributes to a more adequate insight into the cultural mechanisms involved in the reproduction of racism, ethnocentrism, and related forms of dominance.

This three-pronged approach (discourse, social cognition, and sociocultural contexts) is complex and necessarily multidisciplinary. The binding element is discourse, seen as a form of language use and communication, as social meaning and action and as a sociocultural, political, and ideological practice defining societal systems and structures. Interdisciplinary discourse analysis precisely studies the interrelations among these forms of discourse and, as a result, may provide some more detailed insights in the different modes and dimensions of the reproduction of racism in society.

#### **Elite Racism**

One important thesis of our theoretical framework has emerged from this large research program. It is the special role of the “elites.” Although this notion is notoriously vague (Bottomore, 1964; Domhoff & Ballard, 1968; Mills, 1956), it will here serve to denote those groups in the sociopolitical power structure that develop fundamental policies, make the most influential decisions, and control the overall modes of their execution: government, parliament, directors or boards of state agencies, leading politicians, corporate owners, directors and managers, and leading academics (for details, see van Dijk, 1993).

Ignoring further complexities of their political analysis, we identify elites for our analysis primarily by their role in the order of discourse. That is, elites are the ones who initiate, monitor, and control the majority and most influential forms of institutional and public text and talk. They have preferential access to the mass media, may set or change the agenda of public discourse and opinion making, prepare and issue reports, carry out and publish research—thereby controlling academic discourse—and so on. In other words, the power of specific elite groups may be a direct function of the measure of access to, and control over, the means of symbolic reproduction in society, that is, over public discourse. This also means that the power of the elites is

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especially persuasive: Through public discourse they indirectly also control access to the minds of the public at large. This does not mean that elite opinions and ideologies are simply imposed, inculcated, or otherwise passively adopted by the public, but only that their discursive resources are such that they are better able than other social groups to influence interpretations and social beliefs and to marginalize or suppress alternatives that are against their interests (see also the discussion in Abercrombie, Hill, & Turner, 1990).

The same is true in ethnic affairs and in the reproduction of racism. Because racism is essentially defined in terms of white group dominance over variously defined minority or immigrant groups, or more generally as the dominance of European(ized) groups over non-European ones, this dominance needs to be daily reproduced in the many contexts of a multiethnic society. Indeed, despite the undeniable existence of “popular racism” (Miles, 1982; Phizacklea & Miles, 1979), we have reasons to believe that such “grassroots” racism is not always spontaneous, and less influential than usually assumed (by elites!). Rather, we shall assume that many of its elements are *preformulated*, sometimes in seemingly indirect, subtle, or even “tolerant” terms, by various elite groups. In other words, elite discourse plays a fundamental role in the ethnic consensus (the consent to participate in domination) of the white group as a whole. This thesis does not imply that there is no interaction between popular and elite forms of racism. Elite racism today is seldom overt and blatant. Rather it often takes the “modern” form of “new” or “symbolic” racism and is typically enacted in the many forms of subtle and indirect discrimination (in action and discourse) in everyday situations controlled by these elites. It is also enacted whenever elite interests are threatened, for instance in hiring and affirmative action, cultural beliefs, political power, and so on (Barker, 1981; Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986; Essed, 1990, 1991; Wellman, 1977). Because of their positive self-image as tolerant citizens, elites’ racism is typically denied and therefore hard to oppose (van Dijk, 1992). One of the strategies of denial is precisely to attribute racism to the white lower class or the “poor inner cities,” or to identify racism exclusively with the ideologies of the extreme Right. The fact that there are also (usually marginalized) elite groups engaged in active antiracism also shows that elites and elite racism are not homogeneous.

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In the rest of this chapter I will focus on several types of elite racism, such as that of the media, politics, corporate business, and academia (for details see van Dijk, 1993). Obviously, these forms of text and talk are mutually related in many ways: The media largely focus on political discourse on ethnic affairs, while conversely both politicians and the media also use scholarly reports on immigration or minorities to support their views. Corporate discourse in turn influences political concerns (such as those about affirmative action). The discourse of the public at large, if heard at all, is often restricted to indirect representation by politicians and journalists. For example, when immigration restrictions may be legitimated because of an assumed “popular resentment,” social cognitions are partly instigated by the elites in the first place. In all these relationships, the media play the central role of the information and opinion interface among the elites themselves and (largely top down) between the elites and the public at large.

### Media Discourse

Despite conflicting evidence in mass communication research about the effects of the mass media, we have theoretical reasons and empirical support for the claim that mass media discourse plays a central role in the discursive, symbolic reproduction of racism by elites (Hartmann & Husband, 1974; van Dijk, 1991). Newspapers and television, as well as individual journalists and program makers, may themselves be partially dependent on other power elite groups in the definition of the ethnic situation. They may try to report “objectively” on government policies, police actions, court cases, immigration, social affairs, or crime. Yet for each of these domains they draw upon sources and source texts that are seemingly beyond their control. Journalists may have the illusion, therefore, of providing a “balanced” view of ethnic affairs. Here are a few examples to illustrate that point.

*Hiring.* Theory predicts. Research results show differently, however. First, as corporate or semi-state organizations, the mass media also participate in the labor market. Simple statistics show that, especially in Europe, virtually none of the media employ a substantial

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number of minority journalists, especially not at higher editorial or managerial levels (Wilson & Gutiérrez, 1985). Besides this form of discrimination, sometimes legitimated by alleged language or other “deficiencies” of immigrant journalists, the exclusion of minority journalists implies also that news stories or television programs are predominantly white in overall perspective, if not in content and style. Several factors similarly influence white reporters to attribute more importance and credibility to white (official) sources, such as government agencies, the police, or “minority experts.”

*Control and Access.* One way to control minority points of view in the press is through hiring. In Europe, there are few minority journalists and, if they are hired, their position in the news room is marginal (Wilson & Gutierrez, 1985). Minority organizations have less access to the media, less control over the definition of the ethnic situation, and less influence on their own portrayal. Analysis of quotation patterns confirms these hypotheses. Minorities are systematically less quoted in and about news that directly concerns them; or their opinions are “balanced” by those of white speakers. Indeed, minority speakers are seldom quoted alone. Also, if quoted, they are quoted in less credible modes of quotation. Accusations of discrimination and racism are typically and consistently accompanied by quotation marks or doubt words like alleged or claimed.

Research into news structures and news production has often shown that elite news actors have special access to the media because they are found to be important, newsworthy, and credible by journalists (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Gans, 1979; Tuchman, 1978). Elite sources and news actors have organized their access by institutional discursive practices such as press releases, press conferences, and the activities of their own public relations offices. Because most elites in North America and Europe happen to be white, a dominant white view and perspective pervades in the news, with the white group systematically presented in a more favorable light.

*Topics.* The lack of minority journalists, the overall white interests and perspective of most reporters and editors, as well as the role of white elite groups in the shaping of news also have consequences for

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the selection and treatment of news topics. If covered at all, minorities are portrayed in the news primarily in terms of topics that are “interesting” for white readers.

Earlier research and our own analyses of the British and Dutch press show that this is indeed the case: Minorities are represented in terms of a very limited and stereotypical set of topics. Among the top five topics—both as to frequency and size—we usually find topics (or rather topic clusters or “subjects”) such as (a) immigration; (b) violence, crime, riots, and other forms of deviance; (c) ethnic relations; (d) cultural differences; and, especially in the United States, (e) music and sports (Hartmann & Husband, 1974; Johnson, 1987; Martindale, 1986; Merten, Ruhrmann et al., 1986; van Dijk, 1983, 1991). Moreover, these topics are dealt with in such a way as to emphasize negative properties or actions of immigrants, refugees, or minorities. Immigration is seldom portrayed as a contribution to the economy or the culture. It is instead posed as a problem, a threat, or an invasion. Similarly, cultural differences such as those attributed to Muslims also tend to be characterized as problematic or threatening to “us.” On the contrary, problems for “them,” such as discrimination and racism, are typically mitigated or dealt with as regrettable incidents attributed to individuals or extremist groups outside of the consensus. Other topics relevant to the everyday lives of minorities (housing, education, health care) have low priority.

*Local Semantic Moves.* Whereas topics are defined as global semantic macrostructures of discourse, the local level of meaning in news discourse is also relevant for insight into media representation of minorities and ethnic affairs. At this level the actual description of ethnic persons and events are seldom innocent. To understand these local forms of discourse bias, we need to know the overall goals and agendas of discourse about ethnic affairs. As is also the case in everyday conversation (van Dijk, 1987a), we here find two complementary strategies: positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation.

Importantly, however, negative presentation of “them” is constrained by laws, norms, and values; as a result, explicitly and blatantly racist accounts are rare, especially in the quality press. The official norm that prohibits overt discrimination is rather well known and, up



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to a point, supported. To represent minorities in a negative way, therefore, the press also needs discursive forms that counterbalance such negativity, for instance, by affirming that “we are not racist, but . . .” Such disclaimers, in their various forms, are routine and involve apparent denials as well as apparent concessions (“there are also intelligent, hard-working blacks, but . . .”). In the latter case, for instance, we may expect positive success stories about individual minority group members. Functionally, this “solo” role of the individual exception reassuringly confirms for the white public that (a) some minority group members can make it, so we can’t be blamed, but (b) the minority group as a whole still occupies “its place,” so they are not becoming dominant.

The local semantics of racist discourse must be necessarily veiled. “Real” opinions and attitudes, especially in the public discourse of the mass media, need to be toned down or otherwise made less direct. This means that implications, presuppositions, and suggestions play an important role. Indeed, the discourse of ethnic affairs has become heavily coded in such a way that apparently neutral words are being used to avoid the racist implications of true intentions and meanings. Large sections of the Western press, in collusion with the authorities (government, ministries), now use the term *economic* refugee. This more or less neutral description, however, implies that they are not “real” refugees and also that they “only come to live here off our money,” two more direct forms of prejudice expression in everyday talk. The same is true, especially in the United States, for the coded uses of words such as *broken families*, *teenage mothers*, *welfare mothers*, *inner-city crime*, *crack*, and other social problems stereotypically attributed to African Americans or other minorities. Blaming the victim is one major implication of veiled and coded elite discourse.

*The Denial and Reversal of Racism.* The overall contrast, also found at the level of local meanings between positive “us” and negative “them,” implies that the media generally present whites not only as nonracist, but also as tolerant and helpful and the immigrants, at the least, as ungrateful and unadapted. This contrast requires a complex strategy of denial. Moves in such a strategy of denial are some of the moves mentioned above (“we are not racist, but . . .”); the systematic

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use of doubt signals, also mentioned above, when minorities or white antiracists accuse whites of discrimination or prejudice; the management of quotations (where minorities that could give evidence about racist practices are not quoted); and finally by reversal (“they are the real racists”). This is particularly the case in the right-wing British press, where emphatic denials of racism are routinely associated with violent attacks against the “Loony Left” as well as antiracist “busybodies” (van Dijk, 1991). Even in the liberal press, explicitly antiracist positions are seldom covered neutrally and virtually never positively. The racism of the media, more than any other form, is ignored and denied completely in those same media. The racism of other elite groups such as those in politics, corporate business, scholarship, or education, is similarly ignored or mitigated. Excesses are reported merely as painful incidents, never as structural properties of racial inequality in society at large. This is typically the case in the (few) media reports about discrimination in hiring and the workplace. Accusations of racism are often seen as more problematic than racism itself, while disturbing the fabric of in-group consensus and solidarity.

Our analysis suggests that the news media in general and the press in particular are crucially involved in the reproduction of elite racism. They do so, first of all, because of their close involvement with the power structure (Lichter, Rothman, & Lichter, 1990) and, hence, because they share in the ethnic consensus of the dominant political elites. Second, the media have their specific ways in producing, reproducing, and emphasizing an ethnic consensus. The white group is generally presented in neutral or favorable terms, especially in the domain of ethnic affairs, whereas immigrants, foreigners, refugees, or resident minorities are portrayed as the source of the problems, conflicts, and threats. Obviously, there are variations of mode and style among the different mass media. The liberal press may emphasize the positive role of white liberals as “helpers” of minority groups, whereas the conservative or right-wing press will tend to focus on the negative properties of the “aliens.” Through the discriminatory patterns of hiring and access, topic selection and emphasis, quotation, local semantic strategies, and the style and rhetoric of people description, the media play their own crucial role in the legitimation and reproduction of elite racism.

### **Educational Discourse: Textbooks**

Another major conduit for the reproduction of racism is educational discourse. After informal socialization and learning through parental talk, children's books, and television programs, lessons and textbooks provide the first encounter with the institutionalized educational communication of knowledge, beliefs, norms, and values. It is here that white children in Western countries may, sometimes for the first time, be hearing or reading about groups and peoples of color and about other cultures, continents, and nations.

Both formal and hidden curricula and their implementation in classroom interaction, formal lessons, and learning materials are similarly part of that dominant culture. Whether or not an increasing number of minority children enter the classrooms of European or North American schools, dominant educational discourse remains essentially white (Brandt, 1986). Third World peoples, cultures, and nations are viewed from a Western perspective; the same is true for minority groups and cultures within Western societies. Despite an increase of formal acknowledgments made (in several countries) to the need for "multicultural education," everyday teaching practices, the education of teachers, and the contents of textbooks are only slowly and minimally beginning to reflect such policies (Banks & Lynch, 1986; Troyna & Williams, 1986).

Textbook research in several countries has repeatedly supported this conclusion, at least for the more formal discourses of learning (Klein, 1986; Milner, 1983; Preiswerk, 1980). These studies are unambiguous in their concurrent findings that, whether more blatantly in the past or more subtly today, textbooks ignore, marginalize, inferiorize, or problematize non-Western peoples, societies, and cultures.

Our own study of social studies textbooks in the Netherlands also supports such a conclusion (van Dijk, 1987b, 1993). Despite the obvious presence of minorities in the country, half of all books in use in 1985 did not even deal with the topic of ethnic affairs. According to most textbooks in a variety of subjects, schools and society at large are still wholly "white." In that respect, textbooks in the United States have changed, so much so that a conservative backlash against mul-

ticulturalism in curricula and textbooks has become one of the potent new forms of cultural racism, for example, under the label of malicious accusations of political correctness (Aufderheide, 1992; Glazer & Ueda, 1983).

Second, in Dutch textbooks, if minority groups are portrayed at all, the focus is on a few major topics remarkably similar to those also dominant in the mass media: (a) immigration, (b) cultural difference, (c) race relations, and (d) crime and deviance. As is the case in the press, each of these topics tends to be framed in a negative perspective: that of problems, conflicts or threats to “us” (Western culture, “our” country, etc.). Immigration topics do not merely spell out the facts, such as which groups immigrated when and why, but also focus on overpopulation. Contributions to the economy due to migrant labor or the exploitation of low-wage workers are seldom acknowledged.

Cultural differences, the main topic of social studies textbooks in the Netherlands, are similarly associated with problems such as alleged lack of adaptation, strange habits, problems of language learning, or assumed deviance attributed to different religion, especially Islam, such as pathological family structure, the subordinate position of women, or irritating dietary restrictions. Whether or not the portrayal is mildly stereotypical or more blatantly prejudiced, one implication of the details of this topic is clear: “we” are obviously superior because we are more modern, more advanced, more rational, and even more tolerant. On the other hand, as with the press, discrimination and racism are hardly topicalized and safely attributed to others abroad, as when dealing with earlier segregation in the United States or apartheid in South Africa. Sometimes discrimination and racism are even blamed on minorities themselves. This is consistent with the mitigation of accounts of colonialism and slavery in history textbooks and with the way “Third World” peoples are presented with in geography textbooks; stereotyping, victim-blaming, and problematization are the dominant message of such books. Racism and Eurocentrism in textbooks are intimately related.

When minority groups are dealt with in Dutch social studies textbooks, even the few lines about the major groups involved nevertheless feature some information about crime and deviance, such as drug dealing or drug use by Surinamese or Chinese, terrorist violence by Moluccan youths, or culturally based crimes of Turks and Moroccans.

Sometimes such “information” will be followed by the disclaimer that of course, they are not all like that.”

These topics account for the vast majority of the (few and short) passages about “foreigners” in our present-day textbooks. Virtually absent is information about relevant other topics, such as social affairs, education, history, culture, and the problems experienced by immigrant minorities. If addressed at all in textbooks, minority students have virtually no possibilities of identification, particularly with the heroes of their histories.

Although the contents of Dutch textbooks in the early 1990s have been improving, the conclusions found in our research of the mid-1980s still largely hold true. The social science topic for the 1996 exam will be ethnic affairs, but the plans for that exam are virtually a reproduction of the dominant consensus on ethnic affairs. That is, it will focus on problems caused by “them,” whereas the word *racism* is carefully avoided. White and black children in the Netherlands are therefore inadequately prepared for the multicultural society in which they are growing up.

The vastly influential discourses of textbooks (textbooks are the only “obligatory” types of discourse in society!) are shaped by outside ideological forces, such as those of academic disciplines, teacher training, and the mass media. Far from being independent, there are multiple relations between elite discourse in education and that in other societal domains. For textbooks, there is the additional constraint of direct or indirect influence and decisions of parents, school boards, civic organizations, publishers, business corporations, political parties, governments, the churches, and many other societal formations and institutions with an interest in their contents. Again, most of these groups or organizations are white and reluctant to accept an educational account of the ethnic or international situation that involves or implicates them in the reproduction of white or Western power directed against minorities or Third World peoples.

Finally, it should be realized that these forms of ethnocentric educational discourse not only play a role in the inclusion and reproduction of dominant culture and its associated social cognitions, they are also part of the societal functions of the school and education themselves—that is, in the preparation of children for society and the labor market. By portraying and implementing the marginalization

and subordination of ethnic minority groups and their children, textbooks prepare minority children for a society in which a specific position is reserved for them: lower status and menial work. The educational statistics for most minority groups clearly reflect the school experiences and premonitions children have of this position and show how performance, achievements, drop-out (or rather “force out”) rates, and diplomas attained are not only a function of socioeconomic class or the alleged educational “culture” of the group, but also dependent on the educational system and the schools themselves.

### **Academic Discourse**

Whereas the history of the humanities and the social sciences amply shows the emphasis placed on the supremacy of white Europeans (Barker, 1981; Haghghat, 1988; Miles, 1989; Todorov, 1988; UNESCO, 1975), contemporary racism in scholarly discourse has become much more subtle and indirect and tends to focus on “cultural differences.”

Apart from the rather small right-wing fringe of racist sociobiologists (for critical analysis, see, e.g., Barker, 1981; Chase, 1975), more “modern” forms of racist academic discourse often tend to focus on the “incompatibility of cultures,” the “pathology” or the “culture of poverty” of the African-American family, the “underachievement” of minority children, the “fanaticism” of Moslem fundamentalism, or the “criminal” tendencies of African Americans or Afro-Caribbeans, among the many other “problems” or “disadvantages” attributed to minority groups in North America and Western Europe. In this respect, the major topics of “ethnic” research are not very different from the major topics of media coverage.

Ethnic relations, especially in Europe, are primarily studied by white academics. Obviously this has an impact on their perspective and interpretation. In the Netherlands this means, among other things, that most of these white scholars have minor interest in the issues of racism or may even deny its existence (for critical analysis, see Essed, 1987). Also, they may derogate or otherwise marginalize ethnic research by minority scholars, for example, with the argument that it is naturally “biased.” At the same time, it is often not realized, or may

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even be denied, that ethnic relations in general and racism in particular should be theorized in terms of dominance relations and power. In this way, even if benevolently or “objectively” studying minority language, culture, social structures, or “behavior,” they may unwittingly contribute to the reproduction of such ethnic power relations. Indeed, as is the case for elite racism generally, the major problem of the white elites is that their cognitions, discourse, and actions are indifferent to, if not conducive to, the change of such power relations in society.

In other words, the role of academic elites in the reproduction of racism is far from innocent. Unless they participate directly in public debate in the media, which they often do, their work may seem to be relegated to the margins of public opinion. Nothing is less wrong, however. Although sometimes delayed by years or decades, many of the beliefs and ideologies underlying or emerging from scholarly work are also communicated and represented by other elites (especially those of politics, education, and the media) and whence by the public at large, where “lay theories” of ethnic or racial differences, if not white Western superiority, have a very long life. It may well be that of all the elite preformulations of racism, those of academic discourse are ultimately, though often indirectly (through textbooks, media, or politics), most influential.

### Political Discourse

In the complex structure of most Western countries, political power may officially be dominating that of other elites or organizations, whatever the power of the media or business corporations. “Ethnic affairs,” however, are largely managed by local or national governments, elected bodies (parliament or city councils), and the bureaucracies that prepare, make, and implement the fundamental decisions about immigration, settlement, special employment schemes, housing programs, health care, education of minority groups or immigrants, and the regulation of ethnic relations through laws against discrimination.

Such political decision making is largely discursive. Policies, rules, regulations, laws, and general principles are informally discussed at all levels of the national or local political hierarchy and formally

discussed in meetings of committees or sessions of elected bodies, and then decided upon by such institutions. Finally, they are communicated to various organizations and agencies, such as the police, the immigration service, or the schools, or to the public at large through the mass media.

In other words, political communication and discourse are crucially involved in many of the early stages of decision making about relevant aspects of ethnic affairs. Such decision making and its characterizing discourse are neither autonomous nor free from influences from other sectors in society. Input and feedback for these decision processes—and therefore for political discourse—is provided by public opinion, largely expressed or orchestrated by the mass media, hearings, advice from a large number of experts, committees, organizations or institutions, decisions of political parties, the bureaucracies or the ministries or other state institutions, opinions and actions from minority groups, as well as the various “facts” of the socioeconomic situation (like unemployment statistics), and the international situation (arrival of refugees, immigration and refugee treaties).

This complex network of relations of power, influence, and information processes also means that we cannot simply identify “political discourse” with the autonomous expressions in text and talk of politicians or political organizations. The political voice is not only, by rule, a representative voice, but also a composite voice, incorporating opinions and even the style of other powerful organizations and their elites. Despite this heterogeneity of sources and influences, which of course also exists in other domains (typically so in the mass media), we take political discourse and communication here in its narrow and restricted sense as the body of text and talk of politicians: that is, of members of the national and local executive and legislature, as well as of political parties and political organizations.

Scholarly evidence about the nature of political discourse on ethnic affairs is either regrettably scarce or does not explicitly analyze such discourses in their own right (Reeves, 1984). Many studies exist on the politics of ethnic affairs, but they tend to be formulated in the usual terminology of political opinion and decision making, not in that of discourse and communication structures and strategies. Examples of political discourse on “race” abound in the literature but only



in a haphazard way—that is, by illustration. Few studies focus specifically on the political discourse on ethnic affairs and even fewer do so in terms of a discourse analytical approach or in view of an understanding of the role of discourse in the reproduction of racism in society (see, however, among other studies: Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978; Seidel, 1985, 1987, 1988; Wodak et al., 1990).

Political discourse about ethnic affairs is very similar, at least in certain respects, to other types of elite discourse, such as that of the media, education, or academic scholarship. One reason for this similarity is simple: Most politicians, especially in Europe, are white and have similar class and educational backgrounds as the other elites. Second, most voters are white, and most politicians will therefore (in principle) primarily think of the interests of their voters. Or conversely, it is unlikely that they make decisions that are in favor of minorities if they are not also in favor of whites. Third, most of the organizations that have organized access to and influence on political decision making are also white. Only in some specific cases, such as the case of antidiscrimination laws and affirmative action, are there decisions that seem to favor minority group members more than majority group members.

This complex set of interests and influences sets the stage for the overall white perspective of political discourse. There are many political and ideological variations—for example, between Left and Right—although in ethnic affairs such distinctions may not always be reliable indicators of ethnic attitudes. Although communist politicians, thinking of their (white) voters in poor inner-city areas, may sometimes espouse anti-immigrant views, as has been the case in France, we on the whole accept there is a correlation between the political Right and the “ethnicist Right.” The “ethnicist Right” is constituted of those politicians or organizations generally in favor of further restrictions on immigration if not of repatriation, against ethnic pluralism, against special measures in favor of minority groups, and in favor of maintaining white dominant culture (Gordon & Klug, 1986).

To get a picture of the backgrounds of the dominant political discourses on ethnic affairs, let us first summarize a few findings of

the Report of the European Parliament Committee of Inquiry into Racism and Xenophobia (Ford, 1990). Apart from giving a survey of extreme, right-wing racist groups and movements in Europe, it also quotes positions and statements of prominent politicians. It should be emphasized again, however, that although the focus is on politicians of the Right, racist discourse is not restricted to the Right. Also, more “moderate” conservatives and socialists may occasionally make derogatory remarks about immigrants or minorities when they see electoral advantages. Enoch Powell’s comments on immigrants in the United Kingdom are well known and so is the statement of former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher about the country being “swamped” by people of a different culture. President Mitterand, hardly known as a radical racist, also spoke of a “threshold of tolerance,” while Chirac in the spring of 1991 declared that he could well understand the resentment of ordinary white people being confronted with large and ill-smelling immigrant families from North Africa. France’s new prime minister, Edith Cresson, thought of solving the problem of illegal immigration by putting such immigrants en masse in a jumbo jet and transporting them back to their own countries. The list of such “bold ideas” and “slips of the tongue,” reminiscent of the statements of the National Front in the United Kingdom or France or of similar parties in other countries, can be extended without any difficulty.

Thus, the Report of the EC Parliament Committee tells us that the interior minister of the Belgian government in 1987 thought of immigrants as “barbarians,” a name gladly adopted by the racist Parti des Forces Nouvelles. Mr. Nolis, mayor of the Brussels borough of Schaerbeek, is the author of a racist pamphlet depicting North Africans as “terrorists,” “religious fundamentalists,” “drug addicts,” and “barbarians.” He had 150,000 copies distributed with this kind of “information” to local schools. The general resentment against immigrants in Belgium even allowed the government to ban immigrants from registering in six Brussels boroughs. In Denmark, often thought to be more tolerant, a leader of the right-wing Fremskridt Parti referred to immigrants as “the vast hoards of terrorists pouring in over us from the Middle East and Sri Lanka” and as people who “breed like rats.” The public prosecutor did not find these statements serious

enough for an indictment. Similar political discourse and practices are reported from other European countries where immigrant groups are harassed, attacked, and derogated, often with the tacit, or not so tacit, approval of the political or judicial elites. Most countries do not have effective antidiscrimination laws, often with the pretext that current laws are adequate to handle cases of discrimination.

Right-wing racist parties, sometimes getting more than 10% of the vote, and although systematically violating the law, are not prohibited in any European country, often with arguments that refer to their democratic rights. The democratic rights of minority groups or (other) immigrants are apparently less relevant. Right-wing racist parties play a very useful role, namely, in order to be able to take more “moderate” stands about the other parties, or to threaten immigrants to stay in line or the “forces of the Right” would take over—as was the case in the tabloid press in the United Kingdom after the “riots” in some inner cities.

Parliamentary discourse is generally of a more moderate type. In our comparative analysis of a decade of parliamentary debates about immigration, refugees, and ethnic affairs in the Netherlands, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States, we reconstructed the dominant modes of talk and opinion regarding these issues. All representatives, including those of overtly racist parties, emphatically deny that they are racist and emphasize that they are in favor of human rights, *but* that apart from being fair, they should also be strict, that curb immigration and be tough on “illegal aliens,” otherwise the present minorities would suffer. Here are a few examples of these “mixed” arguments and messages of our democratically elected representatives (with a few exceptions, we do not identify the speakers in this case. We are interested only in general properties of political discourse on ethnic affairs.):

1. In practice we should also come to a less soft approach. (Prime Minister Lubbers of the Netherlands, in a radio interview)

This statement was one among several announcing the new minority policy of the Dutch government. Here are a few statements that could recently be heard in the British House of Commons:

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2. I believe that we are a wonderfully fair country (... ) [but] British citizenship should be a most valuable prize for anyone, and it should not be granted lightly to all and sundry. (May 15, 1990)

3. If we are to work seriously for harmony, nondiscrimination and equality of opportunity in our cities, that has to be accompanied by firm and fair immigration control. (June 20, 1990)

4. My hon. Friend and I will continue to apply a strict but fair system of control, not because we are prejudiced or inhumane, but because we believe that control is needed if all the people who live in our cities are to live together in tolerance and decent harmony. (June 20, 1990)

Similar forms of positive self-presentation, nationalist self-glorification, denials of racism, mixed with buts and followed by restrictive measures, especially on the Right, may be heard in the French Assemblée Nationale:

5. Our country has [for a] long time been open to foreigners, a tradition of hospitality going back, beyond the Revolution, to the *Ancien Régime*. (July 7, 1990)

6. 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 neighborhoods, 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. (July 7, 1990)

Of course, such more veiled and indirect forms of derogation, warnings, and “firm” policies are still “moderate” compared to what the leader of the Front National, Jean-Marie Le Pen has to say:

7. 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. (July 7, 1990)

In Germany, parliamentary talk about immigrants is usually less blatant than this, but we find the same kind of “fair but firm” discourse as elsewhere, often having the same upshot:

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8. (. . .) An uncontrolled increase of foreigners from non-European cultural backgrounds would further exacerbate the integration of non-European citizens, which is already difficult enough.

When one of the Green Party speakers in the German Bundestag dared to characterize the new immigration law as “racist,” the Speaker of the House rather unusually intervenes as follows:

9. A chill ran down my back when our colleague Mrs. Trenez said that this bill was a form of institutionalized racism. Whereas the older ones among us had to live twelve years under institutionalized 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.

Even the concept of racism is banned from discussions in Parliament—being too reminiscent of old practices of the Nazi regime. Indeed, this denial of racism is, as we have suggested above, one of the hallmarks of elite racism. When discussing the 1990 Civil Rights Bill, one representative in the U.S. House expresses a similar idea:

10. 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.

Just as in Western Europe, the U.S. representatives, both Republicans and Democrats, joined in calling the United States the most tolerant country in the world. Yet (especially the Republicans), at the same time did everything they could to block the new Civil Rights Bill, eventually vetoed by President Bush, because it would allow “quotas” in hiring minorities. Says another representative,

11. This nonsense about quotas has to stop because when we begin to hire and promote people on the bases of their race, we are going to bring to our society feelings of distress, feelings of unhappiness, and these emotions will accumulate and ultimately explode and destroy us.

Presented again in 1991, this Civil Rights Bill led to similar arguments and allegations about quota as it did in 1990. In other words,

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even when irrelevant, specific buzz words, such as *busing* and *quota* are used to prevent the civil rights of minorities from “going too far.” We are all against discrimination, but minorities should not push their luck and expect to get free handouts, get hired without qualifications, or get away with easy litigation against employers—some of the tenets of the “symbolic” racism of the elites (see also the contributions to Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986).

These and similar examples from parliamentary discourse may be multiplied at random. They show, among other things, the same pattern of positive self-presentation (“we are fair,” “we are not racist”) and negative other-presentation of immigrants (“illegals”) or other minorities (“associated with drugs,” “not motivated to work”) as we have found in many other forms of elite discourse. Overtly racist statements are rare, but often the consequent policies do not diverge very much from the “stop immigration” policies and discourse of the Right. Only the rhetorical packaging is sometimes more subtle.

The major problem of such political discourse is that it is often reproduced (and sometimes enhanced) by the media, and thus reaches the public at large, which has no difficulty comprehending the gist of such messages: “These immigrants don’t belong here,” “We should be tough in immigration,” and “They should adapt to their new country,” among other ideological implications. In other words, in the complex process of the reproduction of racism, the preformulation of subtle racism by the political elites plays a primary role.

### Corporate Discourse

Although discrimination in business has been widely documented (Fernandez, 1981; Jaynes & Williams, 1989; Jenkins, 1986; Jenkins & Solomos, 1987), data and research results about corporate discourse of ethnic affairs are scarce. Less than political, social, educational, or academic discourse, such forms of text and talk are rarely reported in the media, if only because they are usually inaccessible to journalists. Corporations and their public relations (PR) departments have a powerful control over what is communicated to the press and are not likely to give insight into the decision making and daily

practices of hiring, promoting, interaction, and business transactions involving minority groups.

Evidence from research on the experiences of minority group members, however, unambiguously shows that at the level of everyday racism, discriminatory practices in business are widespread (Essed, 1990, 1991). These practices may themselves be discursive or can be legitimated in text and talk. The dominant properties of such discourse are in line with the overall goals of capitalist business corporations: competition and profit. Thus, when minorities will be less hired or promoted, such discriminatory action will be legitimated in terms of assumed cultural, educational, or professional “deficiencies,” alleged problems” created by minority group workers, or in terms of reduced competition due to the presence of minority employees. Especially in Europe, any form of affirmative action or ethnic monitoring, proposed to counter the staggering unemployment among minority groups, is resolutely rejected as a form of intolerable infringement on the “freedom of enterprise.” Claiming reduced competitiveness, corporations usually can get away with such rejections.

In order to examine the properties of corporate discourse on race, we interviewed the personnel managers of several major, sometimes multinational companies in the Netherlands. Again, at this high level, blatant racist talk to interviewers is rare. On the contrary, positive self-presentation here (better known in business as PR-talk) is rife, especially in the larger companies. They know their social responsibility, are in favor of equal opportunities, will hire minorities, but only, of course, when they can get them, when these applicants are qualified, and so on. Here are a few fragments of such talk:

12. (Does business have the responsibility to help solve the problem of minority unemployment?) Yes, oh yes. I think I see this as a task of the whole society, and X is part of that, so we should contribute our bit. But the buck should not be passed to business alone.

13. (Opinion about a target of a minimum of 60,000 minorities to be hired by Dutch employers, in an agreement with the unions, but:) I don't think that we would immediately give preference to hiring a lot of aliens. Because we do not operate, uhh, after all we are a business company. We are there to function economically.

14. Positive action, yes, that, uhhh ... positive discrimination. Yes, as I already said before, I don't believe in that. I only believe in economic stimuli. Uhhh ... I don't think you should formulate a policy if there is no rationale behind it. If you do that, that is irrational behavior. We should combat that with the intuition of business interest.

In the same vein, any discrimination in the company is denied or reduced to regrettable small incidents, affirmative action resolutely rejected as against principles of the free market and the laws of making profits, and government intervention and legislation forcefully resisted. At the same time, minority unemployment, especially in the Netherlands, is more than 3 times as high as majority unemployment, and may reach more than 50% for certain minority youths.

### **Conclusions**

We started from the assumption, detailed in our earlier work, that discourse plays a prominent role in the reproduction of racism. More specifically, this chapter further elaborates the thesis that it is not primarily "popular" racism, but elite racism that is particularly influential in this reproduction process. The media, educational, academic, social, corporate, and political elites, among others, control or have access to widely published types of text and talk and may thus preformulate, though often in more "moderate" terms, the kind of modern racism that will then be taken up and be legitimated by large segments of the general population.

The media play a central role in this process, because they both relay political or corporate discourse to the public, while at the same time contributing their own slanted perspective of ethnic affairs. Minority journalists, especially in Europe, are scarce: Minority groups are much less quoted, or quoted more negatively; topics focus on stereotypes about minorities, such as crime, drugs, cultural differences, and generally the problems that immigrants and minorities cause.

The same is true in textbooks, which similarly stereotype people from non-European countries as being poor, dependent, without initiative, and as having bizarre habits, but above all as being responsible for their own misery. More sophisticated but hardly different is



the message that comes across in many white academic studies of minorities, which also tend to focus on “deviance” or “deficits” and are typically interested in the kind of topics that confirm widespread stereotypes.

Political discourse is focused on control, that is, on the restriction of immigration and on the limitation of the civil rights (and welfare) of minorities, although often with the mixed message of positive self-presentation (“we are fair”) that characterizes virtually all elite discourse on minorities or race relations. Corporate discourse, finally, similarly engages in PR-talk about minorities but at the same time argues against any form of compulsory affirmative action that may restrict the freedom of the labor market.

All of this elite text and talk is obsessed by the possible accusation of discrimination, bias, or racism and emphatically denies it. The elites have the unshakable self-image of being specifically tolerant, unlike ordinary people. At the same time, they need arguments, reasons, and legitimation to keep (too many) non-Europeans from entering the country, the city, the school, the university, the scholarly journal, the company, or politics. To do that they have recourse to a number of standard arguments about equality and equal rights (primarily of their own white group), about quality (never mentioned when the minority of white men were favored by positive discrimination), social order, and so on. In sum, given that it is articulate, seemingly well-argued, apparently moderate and humane, and given its power of control and access to the means of ideological production, elite discourse about ethnic affairs effectively establishes, maintains, and legitimates the ethnic consensus, and consequently the dominance of the white group in the increasingly multiethnic societies of Western Europe and Northern America.

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