

Peter Womack

No Place for Racism

It has become customary to say that racism *has no place in* something – in sport, in our organisation, in 2020, in society. The expression has been much repeated in the global response to the killing of George Floyd, but it was already current in the UK as a result of the travails of the Corbyn-led Labour Party; people often prefaced their interventions in the debate on anti-Semitism by declaring that racism of any kind *has no place in* the Labour Movement; and indeed the official Labour leaflet on the subject is entitled *No Place For Antisemitism*. The formula has something irresistible about it; when anyone wants to make their abhorrence of racism publicly clear, these are the words that are likely to spring to their lips.

What is its force? Most obviously, it is a claim to complete thoroughness, rather like the expression ‘zero tolerance’, which had an analogous vogue a few years ago. ‘Place’ adds a faint territorial metaphor, as if the organisation is a landscape where racism, like an escaped criminal, is seeking refuge in vain. He will not elude us; we will look behind every bush! This hyperbolic assurance is amplified, too, by the impersonal form of the statement: the speaker does not promise to deny racism a place, but states absolutely that it does not have one. Intention assumes the authority of fact: *Carthago delenda est*. The speaker is adopting, as if for the camera, an expression of implacable determination.

That is what it looks like from a rhetorical point of view, but if instead we think about it formally, the same gesture of conspicuous objectivity appears as an equivocation about what kind of speech act this is. *There is no place for racism in football* – the existential clause suggests a simple constative utterance, analogous to *There is no basis for life on Mars*. It looks as if what is being advanced is a factual proposition which could be confirmed or questioned by reference to empirical evidence. But actually no one takes it in that sense. To retort, for example, that racism observably *does* have a place in most professional football grounds, would show a wilful misunderstanding of the original utterance. It only sounds constative: it is really a performative, spoken not to describe the absence it enunciates, but to decree it.

This tension has implications for its politics. After all, it is not just that racism is present as a matter of fact in sport, society, business, and all the other fields of activity where it is said to have no place. It is also that this fact is precisely what the speaker is insisting on. The whole point of the declaration is to focus attention on the racism that is, or at the very least may be, inherent in the organisation, and to promise redoubled efforts to combat it. If a particular organisation were literally and totally free of racism, it would be vacuous for its representative to declare that racism had no place in it: well, of course not. In effect, then, to say that there is no place for racism is to say that it is present. In this sense the two levels of the utterance – its epistemic and deontic modes, so to speak – do not so much coexist as collide.

The effect of the collision is to make the political gesture a maximal one. It undertakes to extirpate racism entirely, so that there will be nothing left of it, but in the same breath it represents it as endemic. So the stated aim appears as utopian: it proposes not a change in policy or law, but a different world. This is not an accidental implication: it is an explicit theme of BLM polemic that the racism of Western societies is structural, and that overcoming it therefore entails revolutionary transformation, not just liberal adjustment. The formula does bear the traces of that politics in its imagery of root-and-branch change; but the more it is repeated by mainstream speakers, the fainter this radical intonation inevitably becomes. An elementary Google search shows that there is, officially, *no place for racism* in the media multinational Bertelsmann, in the English Premier League, in the US armed forces, in the international community of birdwatchers, or in society as it is perceived by Boris Johnson. It is hard to see this list as a coalition for revolutionary change.

However, there is another way of hearing the absoluteness of the expression, its solemn refusal of all compromise: namely, as piety. The declaration that racism has no place in our society, repeated by a great variety of spokespersons in almost identical words, has a ritual character which suggests that the underlying speech genre is religious. Racism is, after all, well equipped to occupy the conceptual place traditionally occupied by sin. Like sin, it is axiomatically bad; unlike, say, war, or inequality, whose value in certain circumstances can be defended, it has nothing to be said for it; even racists usually say they are against it. Like sin, it is polymorphous. It can't be reduced to a kind of politics (like Fascism), or a kind of action (like violence), or a kind of feeling (like phobia), or a kind of injustice (like unequal pay), or a kind of historical institution (like slavery); rather, it is all those things and more. Laws, states, people,

narratives, images, jokes, blindnesses, impulses, practices, and omissions can all be racist, and racism doesn't inhere in any one of these forms, but is the malign principle that underlies them all and constitutes their essence. Like sin, too, it is at once an original fatality and an individual responsibility: it afflicts its inheritors through the ineluctable logic of centuries, but in such a way that each of them is nonetheless personally guilty. It is thus the accusation against which there is no defence: 'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.' (1 John 1: 8). It is striking that for the current generation there is only one word that is really taboo, and that word is not either blasphemous or indecent like the banned words of the past, it is racist. This confirms, I think, that racism is approaching the status of a (negatively) sacred object. Hence the air of constrained propriety with which CEOs and social media managers queue up to testify that racism has no place in their organisations. They are not being insincere or cynical – or at least, there is no need to suppose so. Rather, they are people in church, reciting the General Confession.

It can certainly be argued that for practical purposes this is no bad thing. If high-profile people and powerful institutions are genuflecting to an anti-racist imperative, they are to that extent not ignoring or marginalising it as they were before. But the formula is not altogether a happy one, even so. Its comprehensive grandeur has a homogenising effect: if there is no place for any kind of racism, anywhere, then all kinds of racism are equivalent. All-white reading lists and murderous attacks, a rigged electoral system and an insensitive turn of phrase – it is all alike racist, there is no place for any of it: as in the Calvinist account of human depravity, sinfulness is a condition with no gradations. And as with Calvinism, the trouble with such a structure of belief is that its monotonous negativity produces despair, or, as a more palatable alternative to despair, incredulity. The project of an immaculately non-racist society, in which the legacy of every past empire and nationalism has been transcended, and every human group enjoys its own collectivity without the need to construct negative 'others', is not plausible: it is, to pursue the analogy, the Kingdom of Heaven, from which the sins of the world have been divinely removed. Short of that apocalypse, politics must operate in a secular sphere, where 'racism' is not a singular devil that can be cast out like a statue being thrown off a quayside, but a protean, interactive, historically actual dimension of our living together, which cannot be eradicated, though it can be opposed, understood, blocked, outflanked, weakened. Rather than having *no place in our society*, it has many, and they are sites of difficult conversation, not easy anathema.

PS

The language doesn't stay still. I wrote this piece at the end of August 2020, and on 4 September a letter was sent to US executive agencies by Russell Vought, President Trump's director of the Office of Management and Budget. It stated that federally funded racism awareness programmes were disseminating anti-American doctrines and ordered that this should stop. And it added:

The divisive, false, and demeaning propaganda of the critical race theory movement is contrary to all we stand for as Americans and should have no place in the Federal government.

This sentence coopts the formula of anti-racist piety to reinforce a direct attack on anti-racist practice. No doubt Vought was attracted by its *gravitas*, its air of commanding the moral high ground. But even more than that, his misappropriation of the phrase is enabled by its rhetoric of implacability. As we saw, it enacts an absolute refusal to admit any exceptions to the prohibition it announces; it is in that sense an *authoritarian* locution. It is not so surprising, then, that it fits so frictionlessly into the discourse of racist bullying. This adaptability suggests in turn what the trouble is with the language of anti-racist zero tolerance. It reduces the conversation to a matter of which side can force the other to comply – a game in which the victims of discrimination do not usually have the advantage.