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Jan Zienkowski

Challenging Nationalist Definitions of Racism

Critical Discursive Interventions in the Flemish Debates about Racism's Relativity

Zusammenfassung: Der folgende Artikel plädiert für einen Kritikbegriff, der Kritik als öffentlichen Meta-Diskurs konzipiert, welches es Subjekten ermöglicht, all jene Logiken und Rationalitäten, die soziales Leiden verursachen, zu erkennen, zu re-artikulieren und zu re-konfigurieren. Veranschaulicht wird dies anhand einer Analyse der spezifischen Kritikformen bzw. -modi innerhalb der von flämisch-nationalistischen Politikern initiierten Debatte um die vermeintliche Relativität von Rassismus. Die Analyse dieser Debatte orientiert sich hierbei an einer interpretativen und funktionalen Konzeption der Diskursanalyse. Für diese Analyseheuristik ist eine Operationalisierung des poststrukturalistischen Artikulationskonzepts zentral. Im Zuge der Untersuchung werden verschiedene Arten und Weisen der kritisch-diskursiven Intervention in diese Debatte identifiziert. Dadurch können gleichsam die Grenzen bzw. Grenzmarker der »Rassismus-ist-relativ-Debatte« skizziert werden: hegemoniale Ansprüche, ideologische und metalinguistische De-Legitimierungen sowie Konkretisierungsstrategien. Die identifizierten kritischen Interventionen wurden von einer Vielzahl unterschiedlicher Akteure (Bürger, Aktivisten, Wissenschaftler und Politiker) innerhalb verschiedenster Medienpublikationen, im Zeitraum zwischen 2013 und 2015, artikuliert. Die Grenzen politischer Interpretationsräume werden von sozialen Akteuren durch dieses Spiel diskursiver Interventionen verhandelt und herausgefordert. Der folgende Artikel veranschaulicht, dass die meisten Kritiken der Behauptung, Rassismus sei relativ, die diesem rassistischen Diskurs zugrundeliegenden Logiken und Artikulationsformen nicht radikal genug herausfordern bzw. untergraben. Auf theoretischer Ebene sollte er zudem DiskursforscherInnen für die Differenzierung spezifischer Kritikmodi sensibilisieren, da nur durch eine solche differenzierende Identifizierung die komplexen Artikulationsformen einer öffentlichen Debatte angemessen analysiert werden können. *Schlagwörter:* kritisch-diskursive Interventionen, Hegemonie, Ideologie, Metadiskurse, interpretative Analytik, Rassismus

Abstract: This paper proposes a notion of critique as a public metadiscourse that allows subjects to recognize, rearticulate and/or reconfigure the logics and rationalities that lead to social suffering. It analyses the way critique operates in a controversy triggered by Flemish nationalist politicians who claim that racism is [a] relative [concept]. The author proposes to analyse the associated debate by means of an interpretive and functional discourse analysis. This heuristic operationalizes the poststructuralist concept of articulation. The author identifies different types of critical discursive intervention (CDI) that delineate the boundaries of the racism-is-relative debate: hegemonic claims, ideological disqualifications, metalinguistic disqualifications, and concretization strategies. Such interventions have been articulated by citizens, activists, academics, and politicians across a variety of mostly written media between 2013 and 2015. It is through the play of discursive interventions that social actors challenge and negotiate political boundaries for interpretation. The article demonstrates that most critiques on assertions of racism being [a] relative [concept] do not undermine the logics and rationalities informing racism-is-relative discourse. It also shows that discourse analysts need to differentiate between different modes of critique in order to examine the complex acts of rearticulation that take place in any debate. *Keywords:* Critical Discursive Interventions (CDI), hegemony, ideology, metadiscourse, logics, interpretive repertoires, racism

Introduction: Discourse on Racism as [a] Relative [Concept]

The year 2013 was marked by an important innovation in the Flemish debates on racism. The right wing Flemish nationalist New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) developed a discourse wherein it proclaimed that racism is a relative concept and/or that racism is relative *tout court*. The debate started with a newspaper interview with N-VA politician Liesbeth Homans:

»Racism is a relative concept. I deplore that the word is used so quickly today. Is there still racism? Probably yes. On the part of the autochthon population with respect to the allochthon population? Probably yes. The other way around? That too. But today, racism is mostly used as an excuse for personal failure.« (Homans quoted in Homans and De Ridder 2013)

In a previous article I have provided an in-depth analysis of the N-VA statements on racism as a] relative [concept] (Zienkowski 2017b). Here I will focus on the articulation of critique levelled at racism-is-relative discourse by analysing the types of discursive intervention involved. This analysis resulted in a classification of different types of critique including: structural intellectual critiques; hegemonic claims; ideological disqualifications; metadiscursive disqualifications and concretization strategies. Together, these two articles provide an exhaustive overview of the political arguments, logics and modes of critique that structure the debate on racism's relativity in Flanders in mainstream news sources.

It is useful to start with a summary of my first article. By asserting that racism is [a] relative [concept], Flemish nationalist politicians and voters of the N-VA draw upon the interpretive repertoire of new realism (Wetherell 1998; Prins/Saharso 2010; Prins 2002) and on widespread neoliberal and culturalist logics (Lentin 2014; Maly 2012, 2016). The overall function of this assertion is to reserve the signifier of racism for discrimination on the basis of race and/or descent. It blocks delegitimizes critical, academic, and anti-racist interpretive repertoires that include notions such as structural racism, cultural or neo-racism (Balibar 1991; Romm 2010), racism as an ideology (Van Dijk 2000), entitlement racism (Essed/Hoving 2014) or racism as white privilege (McIntosh 2012; Rothenberg 2015). Assertions of racism as [a] relative [concept] thus pre-empt anti-racist and ›politically correct‹ modes of critique (Zienkowski 2017b, S. 161 f.).

The N-VA acknowledges the existence of racism when it distances itself from the raw racist discourse of the Flemish Interest (Dutch: Vlaams Belang / VB). It also acknowledges the existence of racism when framed as a consequence rather than as a cause of problems associated with minorities. However, its politicians relativize racism whenever accusations of racism threaten the positive self-image of the party or of Flemish national identity (Van Dijk 1992). Racism-is-relative discourse is part of a wider right-wing backlash against multiculturalism within and beyond Europe (see Vertovec/Wessendorf 2010). It draws upon the repertoire of new realism as described by Prins:

»[A new realist is] someone who dares face the facts, who speaks frankly about ›truths‹ that the dominant discourse has supposedly covered up. [...] Second, a new realist sets himself up as the spokesperson of the ordinary people, that is, the autochthonous population. [...] A third characteristic of new realism is the suggestion that realism is a characteristic feature of a Dutch identity: being Dutch equals being frank, straightforward and realistic. A fourth and final feature of new realism is its resistance to the left. New realists find it is high time to break the power of the progressive elite that dominates the public realm with its politically correct sensibilities regarding fascism, racism and intolerance.« (Prins 2002, S. 368 f.)

New realism has nothing to do with philosophical realism. It is an interpretive repertoire popular among populists who oppose the delusional advocates of multicultural utopia. New realists call for a ›no-nonsense‹ approach to diversity. They claim ›to break with taboos‹, ›to call a spade a spade‹, and detest any form of left wing informed ›political correctness‹. In Flanders and in the Netherlands the tropes of new realism have spread all across the political spectrum. In talk about Islam it has arguably become the norm (De Cleen 2006; Jacobs/Rummens 2003; Maly 2009).

Those who claim that racism is relative politicize racism as an unjust accusation aimed at well-meaning Flemish by politically correct elites and oversensitive minority members. At the same time they depoliticize racism as a responsibility for those in government. According to the N-VA, racism is a deplorable but natural response of the population to transgressions committed by minority members who are unwilling to take the opportunities offered to them. The only way to combat racism is to shake people out of the social security net and to activate them in the labour market through a neoliberal reform of the social security system. Its understanding of racism ties in with the party's neoliberal political rationality and with its culturalist logic (Zienkowski 2017b, S. 161 f.).

N-VA politicians only describe racism as real when it is understood as discrimination on the basis of skin colour or descent or as a logical consequence of communities that do not mingle with the Flemish mainstream. Its discourse is grounded in a nationalist and culturalist logic that homogenizes and reifies culture as the main explanative factor of social and political conflict (ebd., S. 159 f.). The assertion that racism is [a] relative [concept] was not innovative because it introduced a radically new idea in the Flemish public sphere. We are not so much dealing with a discursive shift as with a statement that crystallized a whole set of attitudes regarding culture, race and (anti-) racism that have been circulating in Flanders for decades. Moreover, even though the claim that racism is relative seems to be specific to Flanders its relevance exceeds this context because it draws on discursive patterns that can be found in populist projects across Europe and beyond.

I will focus on the way assertions of racism being close the parenthesis [a relative [concept] have been (re-) articulated by critical voices in the debate. By identifying different types of critical discursive intervention (CDI), I seek to assess how knowledge about racism is (not) being re-articulated in the public realm. Common sense knowledge about racism on the one hand and academic or activist knowledge on the other hand clash in this debate. In spite of the debate that followed N-VA assertions of racism's rela-

tivity, many critiques get stuck at a relatively superficial level and do not undermine the logics and rationalities informing racism-is-relative discourse.

This article starts with a description of my heuristic. I will then outline the notion of CDI and present five types of CDI: structural intellectual critiques; hegemonic claims; ideological disqualifications; metadiscursive disqualifications; and concretization strategies. This classification clarifies the structure of the debate and shows that discourse analysts need to pay attention to different modes of critique if they are to identify the boundaries of what can or cannot be said in public debates in general.

An Interpretive and Functional Heuristic for Analysing Critical Voices in the Public Realm

I will rely on an interpretive and functional mode of discourse analysis grounded primarily in poststructuralist discourse theory and in linguistic pragmatics in order to identify different modes of critical discursive intervention in the N-VA's racism-is-relative discourse. As such, my heuristic is based on a notion of discourse understood as a multi-dimensional articulatory practice (Zienkowski 2017a, S. 91 ff.). Poststructuralist discourse theorists argue that articulation implies a practice of combining semiotic elements in a way that modifies their respective meanings (Laclau/Mouffe 1985, S. 105). Discourse allows us combine discursive elements according to linguistic and non-linguistic rules structured at all levels of discourse – from the phonological and grammatical levels up to the levels of argumentation, narrative and rationality. Discourse allows us to articulate ourselves to ourselves, to others and to the world in acts of communicative performance. It often includes language use but may also include gestures, visuals and institutionalized practices (Verschueren 2011; Glynos/Howarth 2007; Zienkowski 2017a). I will focus mostly on written discourse but agree that text is only one mode through which social and political relationships get re-articulated into historically specific formations.

Discourse theorists argue that every stage in the research process from the collection of data to the writing of an article involves acts of re-articulation that impact on the meaning(s) of the discourse under investigation (Howarth 2005). I contribute to this idea by developing an interpretive and functional heuristic (Zienkowski 2017b, S. 213 f.). We can investigate the processes of rearticulation that structure public discourse by focusing on functional relations between semiotic forms, the practices in which they are embedded, as well as the metadiscursive positioning of interlocutors in large-scale discursive networks.

I have made use of the CAQDAS package NVIVO in order to identify: (a) the voices (re-) articulating statements on racism's relativity; (b) implicit and explicit concepts of racism deployed by these voices; and (c) the types of critique uttered by the voices in question. Coding is neither a necessary nor a sufficient procedure for doing discourse analysis but it does allow for a systematic identification of relevant discursive elements and structures. From a discourse analytical point of view, coding can be defined as a prac-

tice of re-articulation through which researchers attempt to arrest flow of meaning in an attempt to answer their research questions.

In a first round of coding I coded utterances reflecting on assertions about racism being [a] relative [concept]. In the same round, I also coded implicit and explicit definitions of racism and the polyphonic voices involved. In a second round of coding five overarching de-legitimization strategies were identified leading to the five categories of critical discursive intervention that have delineated the limits of the debate (see further). I thereby work with a polyphonic theory of voice and subjectivity (see Zienkowski 2017b, S. 144 ff.). To be more precise, I coded the enunciated voices involved. Enunciations or utterances are littered with discursive beings called enunciators that do not necessarily correspond with the identity of the speaking subject (Ducrot 1984, S. 198–206; Anscombe 2009, S. 16 ff.; Roulet 2011). Enunciators do not necessarily ›talk‹ in the strict sense of the word. More often than not, they cannot even be assigned concrete words or utterances (Maingueneau 1991, S. 128). An example may be in order:

Responding to the racism-is-relative controversy, Thomas Decreus acknowledged that the meaning of the signifier racism shifts over time. He wrote that »racism is of course relative« in a semiotic sense and continued as follows:

»But the experience of racism is not relative. Whoever stands in front of the closed doors of a discotheque, doesn't find a house or an apartment, or is called names in the street, does not have a ›relative‹ experience. No more relative are the numerous investigations that prove the structural discrimination on the housing and labour market. Those are hard figures based on solid facts.« (Decreus 2015)

Even this short text contains multiple enunciators or voices. Decreus rearticulated the voices of those who assert that racism is relative in order to oppose this statement. Doing so he also included the voices of those who engage in racist name-calling and those of the researchers producing reports on structural discrimination. The segment has been coded for several explicit and implicit definitions of racism that play a role in this polyphony: »racism as an objective experience«, »racism as a structural problem«, »racism as a reality« and »racism as relative«. The strategies used in order to delegitimize racism-is-relative discourse include: »reference to experience with racism by others« and »reference to institutional sources of authority« (the research reports). As we will see, both coded segments fall under the header of a mode of critical discursive intervention that operates through a strategy of concretization.

The presence of N-VA voices in the debate is not a consequence of N-VA politicians being particularly present in the media as such. Homans authored only one article on racism's relativity and she appears only four times as an interviewee in interviews that touch on this debate between 2013 and 2016. N-VA chairman Bart De Wever did not author a single article on this issue and he only appeared once as an interviewee in a TV-interview touching upon this debate (see Zienkowski 2017b). Nevertheless, their voices echo strongly in the voices of their opponents. In order to oppose themselves to the N-VA approach to racism, critics rearticulated the N-VA

voices, paradoxically contributing to the viral diffusion of their discourse. I will therefore treat the utterances under investigation as ensembles of nested voices chained together in the light of their argumentative value (Angermüller 2011, S. 2994). In order to understand the racism-is-relative debate one needs to understand how critical voices rearticulated N-VA assertions on racism.

As I mentioned before, I developed the notion of critical discursive intervention (CDI) in order to identify the different modes of critique directed at assertions of racism's relativity. Discursive Interventions are public articulations of discourse that aim to destabilize political opponents and their discursive projects. I reserve the label of *Critical Discursive Interventions* (CDI) for interventions aiming to destabilize discursive rationalities that inform or legitimize practices that (re-) produce inequality and/or social suffering.

My approach to the discourse of critical intervention is interpretive because it focuses on the metadiscursive dimension of discursive practice. It is functional because it stresses that any re-contextualization of a signifier such as racism implies a change in the meaning of the term (Zienkowski 2017b, S. 403 f.). The coding process described above allowed me to ask the following interpretive and functional research questions that form the focal points of this discourse analysis.

- What functions do CDI's into assertions of racism being [a] relative [concept] perform in relation to the implicit and explicit definitions of racism used?
- What functions do CDI's into assertions of racism being [a] relative [concept] perform in relation to the interpretive repertoires and logics informing Flemish nationalist assertions on racism's relativity?
- What functions do CDI's into assertions of racism being [a] relative [concept] perform in relation to the discourse and the political project of the New Flemish Alliance?

I have analysed all articles matching the Boolean query »racism AND relative« (Dutch: »racisme EN relatief«) in the GoPress database that contain statements about racism being [a] relative [concept] published between August 14th 2013 (when Homans coined this idea in *De Standaard*) and April 27th 2015 (the day of the search). All quotes are translations from Dutch. The corpus contains 81 articles from news sources *Belga*; *De Morgen*; *De Standaard*; *De Tijd*; *GvA*; *Het Laatste Nieuws*; *Het Nieuwsblad*; *Humo*; *'t Pallieterke*; *Trends*; *Mo** and *Knack*. I also included all articles that matched the query »racisme is relatief« (English: racism is relative) on the website of the Flemish public broadcasting company (VRT), the website of the online left-wing news channel *DeWereldMorgen*, and the website of the anti-racist organization *Kif Kif*. In addition, six articles that were indispensable for understanding specific episodes of the debate and a transcription of a TV interview with Bart De Wever were added.

The corpus contains 173 coded re-articulations of Homans' voice in 54 articles. Bart De Wever's voice is coded 127 times in 30 sources. The voices of Homans and De Wever mostly appear in the form of direct and indirect reported speech. Critics include politicians, media figures, academics, activists and citizens. No dominant voice can be singled

out. I coded all voices articulating statements on racism, the implicit and explicit definitions involved, as well as the modes of critique these voices engaged in by means of NVIVO for Mac. This allowed me to investigate relevant interpretive and functional relationships between these coded segments of text. It also allowed for a bottom-up identification of the five types of CDI that delimit the debate (Saldaña 2013).

My own approach is grounded mostly in poststructuralist and pragmatic approaches to discourse but I consider my heuristic to compatible with several other approaches the field of critical discourse studies including varieties of post-foundational discourse analysis; the more constructivist varieties of CDA; and the sociology of knowledge approach to discourse (SKAD).

Critical Discursive Interventions (CDI's)

By focusing on critical discursive interventions (CDI's), I will demonstrate how actors delineate and challenge the metadiscursive boundaries of mediatized debates. Societies are shaped through a multiplicity of interventions that destabilize existing identities, practices, institutions and discourses and highlight their contingencies. Homans' statements constitute a type of discursive intervention as well. Her statements are clearly marked by a mode of critique that rejects social scientific and left wing pre-constructs of racism. Moreover, the interpretive repertoire of new realism in which her statements are embedded is highly reflexive and critical of multiculturalism. In another sense, N-VA discourse on racism is decidedly uncritical however. It rejects the idea of racism as a problem of structural inequality, domination and other modes of power. I choose reserve the notion of *critical* discursive intervention (CDI) for modes of intervention that take such issues seriously.

Not all critique is equally complex, effective or thorough. Reisigl and Wodak distinguish between (1) text- or discourse immanent critique highlighting contradictions within the internal structure of a text or discourse; (2) socio-diagnostic critique in which the critic takes a normative point of view in order to demystify propagandist discursive practices; and (3) prognostic or retrospective critique that seeks to transform a current state of affairs through an engagement linked to guiding principles such as human rights (Reisigl/Wodak 2001, S. 88). The first type of critique is a sort of discourse-internal critique but the two other types are grounded in discursive norms and values external to the discursive practice under investigation.

Herzog argues that discourse studies should aim to develop society-immanent critiques that challenge the logics and forms of government that inform social suffering. Following Axel Honneth, he proposes to ground social critique normatively in the human capacity to experience disrespect in response to processes of misrecognition (Herzog 2016, S. 46 ff.). Inspired by Foucault, he proposes to think of critique as (4) »the social will not to be governed like that«, or »the will not to be governed contrary to the norms and values of a society« (ebd., S. 57). The goal is not to make one's critique coincide with society's self-description. Societies and individuals can be racist colonial and xenophobic

entities (ebd.). The point is rather that societies can be criticized on the basis of their self-proclaimed values:

»If we are aiming not only at corrective critique but also at real, transcending social critique, we furthermore must relate the critique to the fundamental social structure. [...] A world in which liberty, equality and solidarity are completely unfolded, or, to continue to use the language of Recognition Theory, in which everybody receives emotional support and care, cognitive attention as a person with equal rights, and social esteem of their particular characteristics, without doubt would be a world with a reproduction mode fundamentally different from the one we know.« (Herzog 2016, S. 155)

I therefore propose to think of critique as (5) a public type of metadiscourse that allows subjects to partially recognize, rearticulate and/or reconfigure the political rationalities that legitimate inequalities, injustices and social suffering.

The voices involved in the racism-is-relative debate articulate different degrees of critical awareness. Some critics limit themselves to a critique of word-choice or to a critique of a particular argument deployed by the N-VA. Others – a minority of which is known to be familiar with discourse analysis and/or other forms of social scientific critique – address more complex patterns.

CDI's may problematize isolated elements of identities, practices and discourses but can also destabilize the very logics and rationalities that generate social suffering. Rationalities should be understood as governing forms of normative reason that are both anterior for political action and a condition for it (Brown 2015, S. 115). They are logics that configure the relationships between our identities, subject positions, statements, practices, key words and narratives, tying these discursive elements into a web that provides our social experience with some degree of coherence and that shapes our sense of self, society and politics (Glynos/Howarth 2007, S. 404; Zienkowski 2017a). CDI's have to be performed reflexively and publicly in order to maximize their transformative potential.

Critical Discursive Interventions into N-VA Discourse on Racism's Relativity

Academic concepts such as neo-racism, cultural racism, or entitlement racism do not travel well in Flanders. There is no long-standing tradition of sophisticated discussions on racism. Neither within nor outside of anti-racist movements (see Detant 2005). There is no consensus within the global academic community as to what counts as racism either. However, racism can always be described in terms of an articulatory practice. It can be understood as a particular mode of fixing social and political relationships, the meanings that inform the inequalities and hierarchies involved, and the power structures supporting these. The meanings of the signifier »racism« itself shift together with the ele-

ments it is articulated with (e.g. concepts taken from nationalist, sexist or culturalist discourses) (Miles 1993 cited in Laclau/Mouffe 1985, S. 7; Reisigl/Wodak 2001).

I will discuss five types of CDI that challenge assertions of racism as [a] relative [concept] in Flanders: (1) structural intellectual critiques; (2) hegemonic claims; (3) metalinguistic disqualifications; (4) ideological disqualifications; and (5) and concretization strategies. By discussing the definitions of racism involved, the extent to which these interventions challenge the discursive patterns informing assertions of racism as [a] relative [concept], and the degree to which they potentially destabilize the project of the New Flemish Alliance, I show how my heuristic can be used in order to analyse the metadiscursive boundaries of mediatised debates. However, it is useful to provide a brief summary of the implicit and explicit definitions of racism found in articles containing critiques on racism's relativity first. The codes »racism as relative« and »racism as reality« are obviously the most common descriptions of racism found. The majority of voices in the mediatised debate do not subscribe to racism as relative, but this understanding of racism did centre the debate and is therefore omnipresent. Moreover, in some cases Homans supports the notion of racism as a reality. N-VA politicians agree that some forms of racism should be rejected and combatted: racism as discrimination on the basis of skin colour and race; racism as the radical right discourse of the VB; racism as a sad and painful experience; racism as normal; racism as exclusion. The most common definitions that ground critiques of N-VA assertions about racism being [a] relative [concept] include: »racism as a normalized everyday practice«; »racism as a crime«; »racism as a structural problem«; and »racism as a political responsibility« (see Zienkowski 2017b).

The scarcity of theoretically substantiated critique in the racism-is-relative debate explains why only one article addresses the relation between N-VA's neoliberalism and its stance on racism. Among the least common descriptions of racism we find: racism as ideology; racism as linked to class; racism as linked to gender; racism as linked to colonialism; racism as pseudo-science; racism as a historically changeable concept; racism as anti-democratic discourse and politics; and racism as anti-Enlightenment. Even though the racism-is-relative debate has clearly put the issue of racism into the limelight, the debate about its ›reality‹ and ›relativity‹ has not really led to a discussion of what it means to be racist in Flanders today.

CDI Type 1: Structural Intellectual Critiques

A first type of CDI consists of attempts to name and destabilize the discursive patterns that legitimate inequality, injustice and/or social suffering. It is the type of critique through which social actors use their voices in order to recognize, problematize, rearticulate and/or reconfigure the rationalities or logics that structure social and political problematics.

This type of critique is structural in the sense that it does not only problematize isolated statements, identities, practices or institutions but seeks to address the processes and patterns that give rise to them in the first place. It is also intellectual because its artic-

ulation requires high degrees of historical, sociological and/or philosophical awareness and access to specific stocks of knowledge (Keller 2011, S. 49). Structural intellectual critiques require knowledge of abstract modes of analysis and context-specific knowledge about the object of critique.

Discourse analysis itself can be considered as a form of intellectualization. The analysis presented in my first article offers a structural and intellectual critique grounded upon poststructuralist and linguistic pragmatic understandings of discourse. Similar modes of critique have been articulated by other academics in alternative online media channels but are almost completely absent in mainstream sources.

Referring to his discourse analytical work, Jan Blommaert addressed the continuities in Flemish nationalist discourses on racism throughout the last few decades (Blommaert/Verschueren 1994, 1998). On an alternative left-wing news forum, he argued for a historicized approach to the debate:

»In media comments on the contested statements of Bart De Wever, one created the impression that this [discourse about racism's relativity] was something new, that De Wever really ›opened the debate‹, ›created room for discussion‹ or ›broke taboos‹. Nothing could be less true. De Wever simply placed himself in a twenty-year old discursive tradition – the tradition of the Flemish and Antwerp far right – and did absolutely nothing new. What he did do, was to take the course that benefited his far right predecessors for years, but that led them to the wrong side of the law and made them lose their political respectability. It is up to civil society to keep this history in mind and to keep track of De Wever's far right acceleration, and to react harshly when necessary. If such statements and their underlying logic were racist in 2004¹, they are still racist today.« (Blommaert 2015)

Among the continuities identified by Blommaert we find the tropes of new realism and a refusal to engage in radical anti-racism. During the nineties, mainstream politicians feared that radical modes of anti-racism would lead to more electoral successes for the VB. They adopted euphemisms such as ›insecurity‹, ›fear for the unknown‹, ›unfamiliarity‹ whenever they had to explain the racism of the VB electorate. Racism also came to be seen as an extreme but avoidable excess of otherwise normal modes of nationalism. The idea that the VB asks the right questions but gives the wrong answers stems from this period. The same goes for the idea that ›one has to be careful with accusations of racism‹, because racism can be a ›normal‹ fact unconnected to bad intentions, it can just be a ›truth‹ (Blommaert 2015).

Blommaert's article contains a rare example of a theorized notion of racism. With reference to Balibar, he argues that »contemporary racism is a racism aimed at cultural identities, properties, ideas, and behaviours of people – including their religious ideas and behaviours, especially in the case of Islam«. It objectifies »a vague and potentially infinite

1 In 2004, the Flemish Blok (Vlaams Belang) was abolished after a conviction for racism. The VB renamed itself as the Flemish Interest (Vlaams Belang) and continues to operate as such.

whole of features that one may designate as ›culture‹ (Blommaert 2015). Any microscopic aspect of behaviour may therefore become indicative of large-scale problems endemic to the culture of the Other (Blommaert 2015; see also Balibar 1991).

Jan Blommaert is not the only anti-racist activist scholar taking issue with the culturalist logic informing the racism-is-relative trope. Pointing at another Dutch discourse analytical publication – the book ›Cultu(u)r(en)politiek‹ (Maly 2007) – Ico Maly accuses Homans of refusing to accept that ›politics plays a crucial role in feeding racism‹. He considers islamophobia as a contemporary mode of racism and defines racism as follows:

»[...] racism maintains power inequalities. Racist discourses are not just words, they inform the actions of men. These discourses generate inequality and maintain this inequality by representing it as normal (as a key characteristics of its victims, for instance). Discourses necessarily materialize: they structure society.« (Maly 2014)

Maly argues that discrimination on the basis of race is a crime and that the difficulties in proving it in front of a court could be overcome by laws that would allow for mystery shopping in the education system, in the labour market and in the housing market (Maly 2014). Initiatives to create such laws are systematically hindered and/or blocked by the N-VA and most other political parties.

Other CDI's that take this structural intellectual path have pointed at the circular patterns of debates on racism in Flanders. Decreus takes issue with N-VA politicians who try ›to extend the relativity of the concept [of racism] to the experience [of racism]‹ and explains their emphasis on relativity as ›a strategy for not having to take the testimonies and research results about racism seriously, to minimize the utterly serious problem called racism‹ (Decreus 2014). He also pointed out that explaining inequalities with reference to cultural and/or religious difference rather than with reference to socio-economic explanative models, allows for a mode of racism that works in tandem with the neoliberal emphasis on individual responsibility.

Decreus identifies a circular pattern in Flemish debates on racism: (a) a racist incident happens and gets picked up by social media; (b) reproduction by mainstream media; (c) a battle of opinions marked by an intellectualization and whitewashing of the debate; and (d) political indecisiveness. The intellectual battle of opinions tilts the debate to ›a meta-level‹ and ›becomes a debate about the conditions of the debate held by specialized opinion makers‹, thus pushing actually existing racism into the background (Decreus 2015). Decreus admits that his own article could be counted as being part of this dynamic.

A philosophic perspective on racism can be found in an interview with Anya Topolski who distinguishes between racism as an objective structural phenomenon and its subjective experience. In order to start a debate that transgresses static moral positions on alleged racism one needs more than studies that demonstrate the reproduction of racism related privilege and inequality. One also needs stories about experiences with racism such as those shared via Bleri Lleshi's #dailyracism. But even more important is ›a culture of critical reflection‹ (Topolski 2015):

»Only when we are able to consistently criticize ourselves, we will become able to criticize others. When a culture of critical self-reflection emerges, people will engage in the debate on racism in less moral terms. To be called racist or sexist is only painful when you never bothered to think critically about your own position. When nobody questions their own position, conversations about racism and sexism will remain difficult. Everyone will unconsciously take a racist or sexist position at one time or another. It does not make a lot of sense to pass a moral judgement on this. But you do have the moral duty to think about the positions you occupy, to think critically about your own social position.« (Topolski 2015)

Like most people voicing structural intellectual critiques, Topolski considers racism as a subjective (but not relative) experience on the one hand, and as an objective sociological phenomenon on the other hand. Racism may be grounded in a universal human need for categorization, but it is also a historical phenomenon that should be dealt with by developing a reflexive politics with respect to oneself and to the others we engage with (Topolski 2015).

Structural intellectual critique is the most thorough form of critique articulated in the debate on racism's relativity. It is also the least common form and is predominantly found on left-wing online media. CDI's of the structural intellectual variety often involve other types of CDI: (2) hegemonic claims; (3); ideological disqualifications; (4) metalinguistic disqualifications; and (5) concretization strategies.

CDI Type 2: Hegemonic Claims

CDI's are often articulated as part of (counter-) hegemonic claims. Hegemonic claims should be distinguished from actually established hegemonies. Even though no hegemony can be complete, many political discourses claim a hegemonic status by making absolute claims to common sense and/or to the will of the people. Political actors make hegemonic claims in order to fix their preferred meanings of discursive elements for as many people as possible. They always involve the projection of specific (sets of) values onto a complete society. Hegemonic claims may or may not be articulated in the context of structural intellectual CDI's. Critiques on assertions of racism being relative can be embedded in (counter-) hegemonic claims.

The former director of the Centre for Equal Opportunities and combating Racism (CGKR) provides us with a good example of such a CDI. He played ironically with the repertoire of new realism by blaming Homans for ›not calling a spade a spade‹ and pointed out that the »story of the left, about migration having brought nothing but good things«, is clearly a »self-invented story«. He also criticized the idea that racism does not constitute a crime against humanity while embedding his points in an over-arching hegemonic claim (De Witte cited in De Boeck 2013):

»Racism stands opposed to the values and norms of the Enlightenment and of the human rights that our society likes to take recourse to. These values and norms stipulate that a man, in any given situation, is only judged on the basis of what really matters and that one does not disqualify someone on the basis of skin colour or decent, or on the basis of age, sexual preference, handicap, faith or denomination. Our society claims to fully recognize and protect minority rights and never to abuse its majority in order to impede on these rights.« (De Witte cited in De Boeck 2013)

By claiming the legacy of the Enlightenment for his anti-racist project, De Witte pointed out that Homans' statements contradict the N-VA's self-representation as a defender of Western Enlightenment values in the face of globalization forces and violent extremist versions of Islam. It is surprising that so few critics took this line of attack. De Witte was the only author who turned supposedly hegemonic Enlightenment values and human rights against Homans. The ten most common values articulated in hegemonic claims that oppose N-VA discourse include in descending order: diversity; multilingualism; democracy; human rights; multiculturalism; citizenship; a non-specified set of enlightenment values; multi-religiosity; social cohesion; and superdiversity.

Counterhegemonic claims often involve the construction of an alternative political imaginary. When the Royal Flemish Theater (KVS) decided to stop its collaboration with newspaper DM in response to a series of racist publications (see Torfs 2014), a group of activist intellectuals articulated a counter-hegemonic discursive intervention supporting the KVS. The authors wrote how they had been watching »the banalization of racism and the associated discrimination in Flanders with growing amazement« while establishment figures like Liesbeth Homans consider racism to be relative. The article opposes those who accuse the KVS of ›McCarthyism‹ and ›political correctness‹ (Fadil/Rutazibwa/Charkaoui 2014):

»We are those others who also live in Belgium and Flanders and who recognize themselves less and less in the dominant discourse that claims to speak for all inhabitants. It is the ›us‹ of our national football team, the us that has been born in Tielt, Asse, Genk or Molenbeek, born out of ›pure race‹ Flemish or Portuguese parents, [the ›us‹] that has spent part of its childhood in Kisangani or Istanbul and has been busy to honour the 50-year presence of their grandparents over the last twelve months. It is an ›us‹ that has grown up with the normality of a multilingual, multi-religious, multicultural and sexually diverse Flanders, Brussels and Belgium – or not – but that sees this reality as a vision for the future, both for itself and for its children.« (Fadil/Rutazibwa/Charkaoui 2014)

The authors couple their critique of the idea that racism is relative to a more encompassing political project linked to the construction of a new collective ›we‹ and to a normalisation of diversity. Such programmatic hegemonic claims are extremely rare when compared to the strategies of critique discussed below. This scarcity is indicative of the low degree of political awareness in anti-racist discourse manifest in Flemish mainstream media.

CDI Type 3: Ideological Disqualifications

Many CDIs take the form of ideological disqualifications. Hegemonic claims and ideological disqualifications are not incompatible but it is possible to denounce an actor, statement and/or practice ideologically without articulating an alternative hegemonic project. Ideological disqualifications imply positioning or stance taking. To take a stance on the assertion that racism is [a] relative [concept] means that one positions oneself in relation to this assertion, that one evaluates it, and that one (dis-) aligns oneself with respect to the stances articulated by others in the debate (Du Bois 2007, S. 169 ff.).

Depending on one's position in the ideological field, it is possible to use particular labels and arguments in order to disqualify (the statements of) opponents. The enunciation of ideological labels such as ›extreme right‹, ›racist‹, ›neoliberal‹, ›populist‹ or ›nationalist‹ in disqualifications of the racism-is-relative trope leaves traces of one's own subjectivity. Christian Democratic politician and anti-racist activist Youssef Kobo disqualifies De Wever ideologically by associating him with the chairman of the VB: ›Is there still a difference between Bart de Wever and Filip Dewinter? Both spread the same racist and populist nonsense« (Kobo 2013).

The use of adjectives such as ›racist‹ or ›populist‹ is common among actors whose political stances are known. Public identities of opinion makers and politicians are defined through a positioning game that requires such acts. Ideological disqualifications do not necessarily attack the underlying logics of the object of critique though. They rather serve as identity markers and positioning devices.

The entire discourse of new realism and the positioning of N-VA-politicians as being different from the ›far right‹ VB is part of a systematic strategy of ideological disqualification. Ideological disqualifications can be articulated on either side of the political spectrum. Whether a statement is read as a qualification or disqualification depends on one's own position in the field. Such positioning practices are rarely meant to change anyone's opinion but do play a role in the positioning practices inherent in political discourse. Critiques that only rely on this type of CDI to attack racism-is-relative discourse tend to be weak in the sense that they do not deal with the underlying logics informing assertions of racism's relativity. In isolation, they do not pose a significant challenge to the hegemonic claim of the N-VA's stance on racism. The same thing can be said about the following CDI.

CDI Type 4: Metadiscursive Disqualification Strategies

Metalinguistic disqualifications disqualify an opponent's discourse through evaluative language about language. In the debate about racism's relativity, several of the most common metalinguistic disqualifications take issue with new realist tropes in which statements on racism's relativity are embedded. All CDIs require some form of metalinguistic or metadiscursive awareness. In fact, the capacity to articulate a critical and reflexive stance with respect to the discourses of others is the sine qua non of political awareness and practice.

The top ten of the most common metalinguistic disqualifications of discourse on racism as [a] relative [concept] include: accusations of omission or avoidance of the real issues at stake; accusations of minimalizing racism; accusations of political opportunism and electoral strategy (aimed at fishing for VB votes). However, metalinguistic CDI's also come in the shape of irony and reversal. Reversals shed a radically different light on a statement by adopting and adapting one or more of its elements in order to construct a contradicting message. For instance, responding to Homans' suggestion that racism is not a crime against humanity, activist Youssef Kobo wrote:

»But what if we replace the word racism by sexism, homophobia or anti-semitism?
 ›Anti-semitism, you act as if it is a horrible crime‹. Than the shit would really hit the fan.« (Kobo 2013)

Irony and reversal involve a rearticulation of the voice of one's opponent. Playing with N-VA ideas on ›social cohesion‹ and the existence of a right-wing ideological ›undertow‹ in Flanders, Rina Rabau asks if the avalanche of critique on the racism-is-relative trope might signal the advent of a new generation of politicians who consider diversity to be normal and who are prepared to draft corresponding policies. Ironically appropriating N-VA discourse, she writes that »if this is the case, I think we will find ourselves in a favourable undertow that will be beneficial to social cohesion« (Rabau 2014). Activist Samira Azabar parodies the N-VA in a similar way. In analogy with N-VA discourse on the Wars on Terror and Drugs, Azabar calls for public servants specialising in anti-racism in order to wage a War on Racism (Azabar 2014).

Homans, De Wever and the N-VA are metalinguistically criticized for: blaming the victim; silencing racist acts and discourses; or simply disqualified as being wrong. Authors qualified their discourse as being filled with contradictions and accused the N-VA of needless polarization and stigmatization. N-VA politicians are also accused of denying reality and ignoring the problems that ail society. The list of metalinguistic or metadiscursive evaluations of N-VA discourse goes on. More uncommon but interesting accusations include: the N-VA as having a warped view on political correctness; being unrealistic and unscientific; being rude and naïve; displaying a lack of historical awareness; being irresponsible and hurtful; engaging in sloppy thinking, criminalisation and bigotry. Some voices label the N-VA discourse as stupid, dangerous, scapegoating and absurd.

The problem is not so much the quantity of critique in the racism-is-relative debate but the fact that this type of metalinguistic or metadiscursive disqualification is not necessarily integrated in discourses that destabilize the discursive patterns in which the racism-is-relative trope is embedded. Metalinguistic critiques are often directed at isolated elements of N-VA discourse and do not necessarily take the overall political context into consideration. Most voices articulating metalinguistic critiques do not explore the complex ways racist practices and statements impact on people's everyday lives.

CDI Type 5: Concretization Strategies

Concretization strategies destabilize the claims of political opponents with reference to experiences and/or assessments of social reality that provide counter-proof and/or counter-examples. These CDI's allow for the formulation of counter-arguments and can take many forms: references to facts and figures; references to personal experiences; references to statements made by knowledgeable persons; references to textual sources of authority; and/or references to experiences of authoritative others. Explicit definitions of abstract terms such as racism also belong to this category.

References to facts and figures published in national and international reports are quite common in the debate. Such references can be vague, such as in »[...] countless studies, documentaries and incidents demonstrate that Flanders has a serious problem regarding racism« (Decreus 2014). However, more concrete references are also common:

»In a 2012 report on racism and discrimination in Belgium, the European Network against Racism (Enar) says that racism is a structural reality in Belgium, especially as far as the black population is concerned. Enar knows what it is saying. In the report of the European Observatory for Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC), Belgium and especially Flanders score weakly on combatting racism and discrimination. Are Enar and the EUMC exaggerating as well?« (Unigwe 2013)

Other critics refer to social or historical events and developments linked to racism in order to render racism more tangible. Critics have referred to cases of racism in the real estate sector, in police departments, and in the media. But as Anya Topolski argued, objective facts and figures are not enough to animate a debate (Topolski 2015). Subjective accounts of experiences with racism animate the public sphere at least as much. Since many commentators in the debate are members of a white or »autochthonous« population, it should not come as a surprise that stories about racism are often second-hand, referring to accounts of real – and sometimes fictive or anonymous – others.

Writer Annelies Verbeke concluded that »racism is real, not relative« in a testimony about her black boyfriend's problems on the labour market and his daily experiences with racism (Verbeke 2015). Many critics referred to the first-hand accounts of racism collected under the hashtag #dailyracism (Lleshi 2015).

In their stories, people make racism more concrete by talking about the way selective and random controls of the police impact on the identities and feelings of youngsters (Linda 2015). They show how racism informs psychological and physical violence while providing narrative access to lived experiences of racist encounters (Afrikaans Platform 2013).

When an unidentified person painted the word »nigger« in chalk on the front door of Marie Bamutese, the black wife of journalist Peter Verlinden, the latter addressed the issue publicly (Verlinden 2014). Verlinden's outrage was not merely directed against the racist vandal in question but pointed out that politicians across the political spectrum reacted weakly when VB chairman De Winter said that the main problem of Flanders was

that it was »turning brown« a few days earlier (Jta 2014). He also expressed his hope that the N-VA would tell its ex-VB voters »that a notion such as [Flanders] ›turning more brown‹ should remain taboo and that a categorization of the population on the basis of skin colour is unacceptable« (Verlinden 2014).

Homans was quick to reaffirm racism's relativity. She claimed that the N-VA's silence was all »*strategy and certainly no silent approval*«. Moreover, she used the »pure racism« of the VB as a distinguishing feature between the N-VA and the VB (Homans 2014). This argument did not convince Bamutese. Verlinden's wife is a Belgian/Rwandese social worker who fled the Rwandese genocide. On the one hand, VB discourse reminds her strongly of the pre-genocide discourse in Rwanda:

»In the country I grew up in, differences between Hutu's, Tutsi's and Twa were strongly cultivated since the beginning of the war in 1990. Instead of stressing the wealth of difference, differences were played out against each other. You may find this too big a leap, but I am absolutely positive: this what Filip Dewinter has been doing over here for years.« (Bamutese in De Preter 2014)

Homans' denouncement of the VB's »*pure racism*« did not convince Bamutese:

»If a politician in her position says something like that, many people with racist inclinations will see this as a confirmation of their ideas. I can also see this in the reactions to Peter's piece: there are people who are not ashamed of their racism. These are people who feel legitimized by a statement such as the one Homans made. I hope I am wrong, but I fear that there is a great deal of strategy behind that statement. Politicians do not say such things just like that, do they? She also knows you can interpret a statement like that in two ways? Perhaps she said it in order to tempt VB voters?« (Bamutese in De Preter 2014)

People do not only make racism concrete with reference to their own stories and the stories told by others. Concretization strategies frequently draw on textual and institutional sources of textual, scientific or political authority. They also come in the form of implicit and explicit re-definitions of racism discussed before.

Conclusion: On Reflexivity and Critical Discursive Interventions

The discourse on racism's relativity does not so much represent a discursive shift as a crystallization of culturalist and neoliberal logics embedded within a genre of new realist political discourse deployed in the political project of the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA). The N-VA assertion that racism is a relative concept or phenomenon has triggered an intensely debated controversy in Flanders. We are dealing with a discourse that restricts the definition of racism to a matter of discrimination on the basis of skin colour or decent. Cultural forms of discrimination do not fall under this understanding of the term. The

N-VA naturalizes and depoliticizes racism as a deplorable but normal response to problems caused by specific minority members who do not ›take their responsibility‹ in society. According to the N-VA racism is not something that can or should be dealt with through politics (Zienkowski 2017b).

N-VA assertions on racism being [a] relative [concept] triggered a great deal of response. At the same time it should be noted that many critical discursive interventions got stuck at a relatively superficial mode of critique. The boundaries of interpretation in any debate are defined by the interpretative space opened up by critical discursive interventions but not all modes of critique are equally effective in doing this.

The success of a critical discursive intervention depends both on qualitative and on quantitative criteria. A CDI can be said to be successful in quantitative terms as it is being picked up and rearticulated by a wide range of sympathetic voices across the political spectrum. The extent to which it contributes to the hegemonic status of a particular idea is essentially a matter of intertextuality and interdiscursivity. The spread of a CDI across different types of media, spanning distinct times and places, is key to a successful dislocation of the targeted discourse. The most important qualitative factor contributing to the counter-hegemonic success of a CDI rests on the question whether it is capable of dislocating the internal logic or rationality that informs its target discourse.

Powerful CDI's do not merely disqualify a specific feature of the discourse or practice at hand, but dislocate the interpretive logics informing it. In this sense, there is a qualitative difference between the five types of CDI identified above: intellectual analyses; hegemonic claims; ideological disqualifications; metadiscursive disqualifications and concretization strategies. Even though structural intellectual analyses may make use of all other forms of CDI, their number remains small compared to the other types of critique articulated in the debate. Debates can be understood as language games played by those who engage in CDI's and those who respond to them in conservative or reactionary ways. Throughout these games, our understandings of symbols, identities, practices, and entire societies are shaped.

CDI's that successfully attack the underlying logics and rationalities of racism-is-relative discourse in Flanders have been published almost exclusively in alternative media. The lack of theorized understandings of racism articulated in mainstream media is problematic to anyone seeking to challenge the underlying logics informing the N-VA stance on racism and the reproduction of racially or culturally informed inequalities in society. All too often critique gets stuck at the level of metalinguistic or ideological disqualification in mainstream media. Let us now return to the research questions. What functions do CDI's into assertions of racism being [a] relative [concept] perform in relation to: the implicit and explicit definitions of racism used; the interpretive repertoires and logics informing Flemish nationalist assertions on racism's relativity; and to the political project of the N-VA?

Not all CDI perform the interpretive function of offering implicit or explicit definitions of racism that counter N-VA assertions of racism as [a] relative [concept]. People who criticize politicians like Homans and De Wever for being polarizing or populist do not necessarily undermine the logic of N-VA discourse on racism. Neither do they nec-

essarily articulate an alternative political project. Alternative definitions of racism are mostly to be found alongside or within CDI's that make use of concretization strategies, hegemonic claims and structural intellectual analyses. Only counter-hegemonic claims and structural intellectual CDI's problematize the logics, rationalities and repertoires that inform the N-VA discourse on racism and the associated political project. This is not to say that other modes of critique are irrelevant but in order to challenge assertions of racism's relativity, one needs to articulate the problematic of racism with (in) repertoires that do not treat assertions of racism's relativity as isolated discursive elements.

The way institutions and hegemonic actors reflexively respond to CDI's is a good index for evaluating the health of a democratic debate. Throughout the debate on racism's relativity, the N-VA stuck to its message and systematically depoliticized any notion of racism that could constitute a threat to its ideal-typical Flemish subject. In its positive self-representation of Flemish identity there is no room for notions such as every day or cultural racism that help actors to understand racism as a structural problem.

Many actors in the debate articulated CDI's marked by high degrees of reflexive awareness. Discourse analysts are not the only actors engaging in critical modes of analysis. The notion of critical discursive intervention outlined here has implications for the modes of critique critical scholars of discourse engage in though. If the success of a CDI partially lies in its successful dispersal across a variety of genres and media, one could argue that even relatively superficial critiques articulated in public media bear more critical weight than elaborate (discourse) analyses in peer-reviewed academic journals. If critical scholars of discourse want to live up to their name, they will therefore have to address such logics outside of academic journals and the micro-cosmos of alternative media.

Academic intellectuals cannot claim a monopoly on critical practice. At best, they can claim a mode of critique grounded in a more rigorous analysis of public discourse that adds to the battery of critique already animating the public sphere. If critical scholars of discourse are to live up to their name they need to consider how different modes of critique shape the boundaries of a public debate and articulate their own critiques publicly across a range of media. I would therefore argue for an understanding of social scientific and discourse analytical critique as a mode of public metadiscourse that allows subjects to partially recognize, rearticulate and/or reconfigure the political rationalities that legitimate the inequalities and injustices informing social suffering.

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