

## ‘I’m not “racist” but’: Liberalism, Populism and Euphemisation in the *Guardian*

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With the resurgence of Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, and their spread to the United Kingdom in Spring 2020, the *Guardian* adopted a mostly unambiguous approach to the movement, offering broad support, whether in its editorial, news or opinion pieces. This was even the case when the statue of slave trader Edward Colston was toppled in Bristol, with an editorial stating that it was ‘a long time in going’.<sup>1</sup> This not only departed from many instances of mainstream coverage and reactions, which were more cautious and warned against illegal acts for example, but also from the approach the *Guardian* itself had taken in the past when discussing racism and the resurgence of the far right in particular.

Discussions of racism, in the *Guardian* and mainstream media more broadly, are usually couched in post-racial terms, whereby racism is constructed as an extreme, and the racist as the other, the anomaly, the residue of a bygone era. Such politics are limited in time, place and ideology to precise occurrences, whether they be terrorist attacks or racist expressions of a biological nature mimicking Nazism and fascism. As such, the term is mostly used to describe what we have called elsewhere, occurrences of ‘illiberal racism’ or what Alana Lentin calls ‘frozen racism’.<sup>2</sup> This, we argue, takes us away from more liberal articulations of racism, which are not only more common, but also core to many of our institutions and systemic oppression and rarely addressed in the mainstream media, at least until the BLM protests and wider public outcry.<sup>3</sup>

Normally, liberal articulations take the form of cultural racism (or what others have called ‘new racism’), which is not based on the explicit

superiority of one race over another, but instead on the essentialisation and incompatibility of cultures.<sup>4</sup> Liberal articulations of racism are positioned in opposition to illiberal ones: if we oppose illiberal racism, we cannot be racist ourselves. This form of self-justification is used extensively in liberal societies, and even by those on the far right, to excuse their own liberal approach to racism. We see this logic replicated widely in mainstream circles, and in the media in particular. The effect of this is that it diverts attention from, conceals and even enables systemic racism by pointing the finger at extreme occurrences, as well as legitimising far right attempts to become more acceptable and mainstream.

In this chapter, we argue that liberal articulations of racism are not only core to the process of mainstreaming far-right politics, but that these tropes have become intricately linked to the production of news and the shaping of public discourse, including on the left. We contend that the limitation of racism to its extreme and illiberal forms has led to an obfuscation and deflection of its mainstream presence and systemic operation within our societies, and the impact this has on those at the sharp end. Contributing significantly to this process is the euphemisation of racism through its labelling as ‘populism’ and, crucially, what is termed the populist ‘hype’, something we turn our attention to first.<sup>5</sup> We then move on to explore the way in which the *Guardian* navigates the tensions between liberal and illiberal articulations of racism in its coverage and the effects and impact this can have on its readership, particularly in terms of euphemisation and amplification. Finally, we explore the issues of platforming, false equivalence and free speech, actively stoked by the far right and bought into by the *Guardian*, often providing coverage of the far right either on its own terms or in a positive light.

While this chapter is interested in broader trends regarding the *Guardian*’s uneven coverage of racism, it builds on our research on the *Guardian*’s series on ‘The New Populism’.<sup>6</sup> The corpus,<sup>7</sup> coupled with Brown’s methodological approach combining Discourse Theory, Critical Discourse Studies and Corpus Linguistics, allows us to explore the way in which such news coverage feeds into and sustains these harmful logics.<sup>8</sup> While examples are sourced from a range of articles, Simon Hattenstone’s piece entitled, “‘We’re reactivating the people’s army’”: Inside the battle for a hard Brexit’ forms one of the core articles

from which we draw, owing to its relevance to many features discussed here and those relating to populism in particular.<sup>9</sup>

#### POPULISM AND THE POPULIST HYPE

The use of 'populism' to describe a range of phenomena has proliferated vastly over recent years, and we now see the term applied extensively in political commentary, public discourse and academic analysis. In November 2018, as part of 'The New Populism' series, the *Guardian* even asked, 'Why is populism suddenly all the rage?'. In the piece, they noted that '[i]n 1998, about 300 *Guardian* articles mentioned populism. In 2016, 2,000 did', and asked 'What happened?'<sup>10</sup> Despite their differences, the dominant definitions of populism, which identify it as a thin ideology or a discourse,<sup>11</sup> both acknowledge that it is only part of the bigger political, ideological and discursive picture. However, such tempering of its significance through situating it within this wider frame is becoming increasingly rare, leading to what has been termed 'populist hype'.<sup>12</sup> The concept underscores the dangers of the uncritical diffusion of 'populism', particularly as a term to describe reactionary right-wing parties and movements. Indeed, a skewing of the meaning of populism, an exaggeration of its significance and the apocalyptic way it is posed as a threat to democracy feed into the notion that right-wing populism is 'itself a disease rather than [...] a mere symptom',<sup>13</sup> with serious implications for the level of self-reflection on the current state of liberal democracy. Therefore, the overuse and misapplication of the term, and consequent skewing of its meaning, has serious implications in both exaggerating and downplaying certain aspects of politics, and has been particularly rife in media coverage.

Indeed, it is often the case that the 'populist' (far) right is discussed as if it has risen and exists in a vacuum, as if its success can only be attributed to its own political nous or the demands of the electorate *qua* 'the people' *qua* the (white) working-class. Interestingly, its defeat is often celebrated on the other hand as a victory for democracy, for all that's good in liberalism, for us *qua* 'the good people' *qua* the liberal *Guardian* readers. This of course ignores the most basic concepts within social sciences and media studies such as power structures and relations, and in particular the ability for some to set the agenda.<sup>14</sup> This

is especially the case when it comes to matters of national importance, or more precisely, those where an individual, no matter their expertise in a particular field, is required to think beyond their immediate practical knowledge and thus rely on mediated sources of information. Based on this research, what we argue here is that without the space and coverage provided by mainstream elites (media, politicians and academics), it is highly unlikely that the far right could have found itself in such a strong contending position. This is also why we turn our attention here to the *Guardian*, a centre/centre-left newspaper, rather than to the right-wing tabloid press or even Murdoch-owned broadsheets. While the latter are often seen as the mouthpiece of reaction, we argue that mainstreaming trends can be best observed in what would traditionally be thought of as opposed to such politics: if your adversaries are abiding by your rules, then you must be winning the culture wars.

To analyse the corpus, we draw on the early warnings of Annie Collovald,<sup>15</sup> whose prescient work was anchored in a particular context where Jean-Marie Le Pen of the far-right Front National (FN) had reached the second round of the French presidential elections in 2002. In particular, Collovald critiqued the increasing predominance of ‘populism’ as a descriptor for the party:

As well as offering a new way of classifying the FN, which is much fuzzier and much less stigmatising than the previous labels of fascism and extreme right that it replaces, the term [populism] legitimises extremely harmful notions that it is ‘the people’ [*groupes populaires*] who support this party.<sup>16</sup>

Here, Collovald identifies two key problems with the use of ‘populism’ in this context, relating to the euphemisation of the party and the legitimisation of its position as representing the will of the people. With fewer negative connotations than other descriptors and the blame placed on ‘the people’, she argued, our focus is deflected away from the party itself, its ideology and the system/environment that allowed it to garner some success. Although centred around a specific event, we see these trends replay frequently in various contexts, including in the *Guardian*.

As highlighted, one of the main problems with populist hype is the way in which 'populism' or 'populist' has come to replace, or euphemise, more accurate terminology and qualifications, and particularly those associated with racism. In our corpus, we see significant reluctance from the *Guardian* to call phenomena racist, frequently employing perspectivisation strategies of distancing. Indeed, in 523 instances of racism\*,<sup>17</sup> 235 (45 per cent) references were either quoted or formed part of reported speech. Of the remaining examples, 157 were within opinion pieces or letters, leaving only 131 (25 per cent) to occur in regular articles. This practice of distancing is also evidenced for instance in Hattenstone's description of Orbán: 'Farage tweeted his support for Orbán, who has been accused of Islamophobia and antisemitism'.<sup>18</sup> Despite his clear record of both, the article avoids directly stating it, instead choosing to sit on the fence through the language of accusation.

Clearly racist phenomena, as defined per academic standards, are often defined 'populist', and the ambiguity associated with the term induces further euphemising effects. Although 'The New Populism' series attempts to address the issue of definitions, particularly in Peter C. Baker's intervention which problematises the overuse of populism,<sup>19</sup> we see that this is often lost in the content of many articles. Again, Hattenstone's piece provides an illustrative example through positive framing and actor-led definitions. Indeed, of Farage the journalist asks, 'Is he Britain's greatest populist politician?', using positive predication which encourages similar sentiment to be expressed in the response from the participant. Equally, he states, 'I ask Peter Bone what populism means to him. "Doesn't populist mean what most people want?" he says', thereby inviting involved actors to define the term for themselves, inevitably manipulating its meaning towards positive connotations and directly reinforcing the Brexit Party's claim to represent 'the people's army'.<sup>20</sup>

As evidenced in the above examples, by referring to such phenomena as 'populist', a simplistic narrative is constructed which places the demands of the electorate as the driving force. Within the corpus, we see these tropes of illiberalism limited to the working class played out time and time again. It is presented as an undeniable truth, despite much evidence to counter this narrative.<sup>21</sup> For instance, in a *Guardian* comment piece, the former prime minister and leader of the Labour

Party, Gordon Brown claims that '[t]he basic building blocks should be self-evident: radical measures to end the economic insecurity that is the breeding ground for populism; no truck with divisive nationalisms or with intolerance and racism from whatever quarter it comes.'<sup>22</sup> Here, we see this simplistic topos played out as common sense, deflecting attention from the normalisation of these discourses by figures such as Brown himself, for instance in his far-right inspired slogan, 'British jobs for British workers', used during his leadership. In placing illiberalism and racism almost exclusively among the working class, the message is that it is 'theirs' not 'ours', creating dangerous false distinctions: if it was not for the working class, we would not have racism and could achieve enjoyment of our liberal democracy – something which of course, borrowing from psychoanalytic theory, is simply unachievable. It is to this distancing that we now turn.

#### I'M NOT ILLIBERAL BUT. . . LIBERAL VS. ILLIBERAL RACISM

In the previous section, we noted that the way in which the *Guardian* referred to racism and racist ideas, euphemistically or overtly, was usually through distancing, whether it was in a quotation or attributed to an individual, such as Nigel Farage. While this raises the issue of platforming, which is examined in the next section, it also ensures that the racism that is articulated and amplified is anathema to the paper's liberal identity and discourse. This can take the form of the illiberal masses ('the people', often the white working class 'left behind') or far right 'populists'. It depends on the distinction between illiberal and liberal articulations of racisms, and more precisely, the ways in which liberals deny their racism by displacing it onto more overt and unacceptable illiberal forms.

Illiberal racism is what is commonly defined as 'real' racism in hegemonic discourse. It is represented by traditional or historical forms of racism, such as slavery, segregation, Nazism and race science, which have been defeated and rejected by the post-war and post-civil rights liberal order. When it does appear in our contemporary context, it is usually represented by the extreme right as a remnant of this old order: extreme, unacceptable and often individualised, as is the case for example after white supremacist attacks. In the corpus, we see the use of 'racist' as a descriptor (free from quotation or reported speech) often

in limited contexts epitomising illiberalism, such as South African apartheid, Nazism, blackface, Jobbik's discourse in Hungary, Trump's racist comments towards four congresswomen, racist chants in football stadiums, etc. These are generally condemned unequivocally, but there are some exceptions. When historical icons and institutions are accused of illiberal racism, they are often excused as 'of their time'. This allows for the affirmation of the unacceptability of their racism today, and division between the bad past and progressive present, but paradoxically does not require their rejection.

This has been most obvious in the case of Winston Churchill. In February 2019, *Guardian* columnist Simon Jenkins not only defended Churchill (and Gladstone), but, using a current reactionary talking point, criticised identity politics and anti-racists who rejected his legacy:

The current cult of identity politics is to rifle through the past careers of great men and women, not to ascertain accuracy but to sort them into friends or foes. Churchill has been accused of racism. He undoubtedly expressed racist views but they were uttered in very different times, in which such ideas were deemed acceptable by many.<sup>23</sup>

Here, mitigation strategies are used consistently to diminish Churchill's racism, attempting to depict him as a mere reflection of society at the time and to discredit those challenging his legacy as lacking commitment to accuracy in pursuit of a Manichean agenda. Central to the piece is the idea of balance and rationality in the approach to history, which Emmy Eklundh identifies as an exclusionary logic: 'rationality is used as a proxy to devalue or exclude certain groups from the political sphere, and [...] when we are discussing emotions, we are simply using a euphemism for describing groups who are not deemed worthy of inclusion.'<sup>24</sup> Eklundh highlights the development of rationality as a mode of exclusion within democratic theory, so we can see how core features of liberalism are used here to defend illiberalism. Another mitigation strategy frequently used in defences of Churchill, is his role in defeating the Nazis,<sup>25</sup> the symbol of illiberal racism, and ushering in the post-war liberal order against which it and liberal racism are defined.

This brings us to liberal racism, which includes those articulations of colour-blind, post-racial racism that distinguish themselves and deny being racist in contrast to ‘illiberal’ forms of racism. Liberal racism does not see itself or liberalism as being racist, instead evoking illiberal racism to justify its self-appointed non-racist position. In fact, it treats liberalism as the antidote or bulwark against racism. Yet, at the same time, it weaponizes liberalism and liberal tropes, such as freedom of speech, women’s rights and LGBTQ+ rights, against racialised groups, something most notable in the case of Muslims.<sup>26</sup> In doing so, it not only denies the racism often core to liberal practice, but justifies the lack of action on structural inequalities and the continuity of less overt forms of systemic and coded racism. In fact, it often uses the threat of the far right to push ‘moderate’ politicians and policies. This includes structurally racist ones about Islam and immigration because such illiberal actors are seen as far worse.

For example, on 22 November 2018 the *Guardian* published an interview with Hillary Clinton asserting that ‘Europe must curb immigration to stop rightwing populists’.<sup>27</sup> Not only did the paper give a platform for this particular analysis legitimising xenophobia, but this was the eye-catching headline in an already reactionary and racist political landscape. A day later, the *Guardian* published another article in which Clinton ‘criticised the US media over its coverage of Donald Trump, calling on the press to “get smarter” about holding to account a president who is a master of diversion and distraction’.<sup>28</sup> The irony that anti-immigrant politics, and the illiberal threat of the far right, were the diversion and distraction that were bought into and legitimised was lost. A few days later, on 26 November, left-wing columnist Paul Mason argued that ‘Liberals must learn the politics of emotion to beat rightwing populists’, and that ‘[a]ttachment to place and identity can be part of a radical democratic project that speaks to people’s hearts’<sup>29</sup> – an implicit acknowledgement, of the need to engage with (rather than agitate against) the racial, national and even nativist politics the right have weaponised.

Critically, liberal platforming and the push for moderate versions of far-right ideas, even if only to fend off a challenge, play a role in legitimising and mainstreaming such ideas. It became even more explicit when, in a September 2019 article, the former US Ambassador to the UN, Samantha Power, was interviewed and blamed the same refugees



targeted by the far right and racists, for the illiberal backlash against themselves: 'The exodus of refugees has destabilised the region and Europe, prompting a racist backlash exploited by populist politicians'.<sup>30</sup> The topos of backlash here places refugees as the instigators and politicians (also note the use of 'populist' here) as only responding to the reaction prompted, thereby completely obscuring the power dynamics at play.

With such arguments, the lines between illiberal and liberal articulations of racism become blurry and difficult to maintain. Despite this, the *Guardian* and other mainstream media partake in openly reinforcing these distinctions, which in turn legitimise the positions of those who attempt to straddle the mainstream-extreme divide. For instance, in December 2018, as Nigel Farage gained more mainstream legitimacy and the more illiberal far/extreme right exerted greater influence in UKIP, *Guardian* columnist Martin Kettle urged readers to: '[l]ook at the lurch to the racist right within Ukip, which has driven even Nigel Farage to resign from it'.<sup>31</sup> With this argument and the hyperbole of 'lurch' to intensify the distinction, Kettle effectively affirmed Farage's own strategy to define himself as the more liberal, acceptable alternative to the old, illiberal far/extreme right, which he outlined in a 2016 interview:

I destroyed the British National Party – we had a far-right party in this country who genuinely were anti-Jew, anti-Black, all of those things, and I came along, and said to their voters, if you're holding your nose and voting for this party as a protest, don't. Come and vote for me – I'm not against anybody, I just want us to start putting British people first, and I, almost single-handedly, destroyed the far right in British politics.<sup>32</sup>

We see this argument replicated in Hattenstone's piece, with an embedded video entitled, 'How Ukip normalised far-right politics', which effectively distances Farage and the party from the label of far right and suggests that it is only since his resignation that UKIP have shifted to this position. In the video, as an image of Farage in front of the 'Breaking Point' poster appears, the narrator states: 'Yes, they had some off-piste moments, but their actual policies were mainly about low taxes and bashing Brussels'.<sup>33</sup> The casual dismissal of this racist

poster as an ‘off-piste moment’ serves to minimise its importance, play down the power of discourse as opposed to ‘actual policies’ and deny the centrality of racism within the party long before Farage stepped down.

It may seem to be a paradox or contradiction that liberals would platform and amplify the ideas of those they denounce and displace racism onto, but it is this very process that is necessary for liberalism, centrism and liberal racism to function and flourish. We can see how the two work together through the alignment of liberals, the establishment and far right around defending statues of slave traders and racists during the BLM protests in the summer of 2020.

‘ACTIVISM’: LIBERAL PLATFORMING, FALSE EQUIVALENCE  
AND FREE SPEECH ON THE FAR RIGHT

As already noted, the *Guardian* has repeatedly given voice to racist and far-right figures and ideas in interviews and articles. This platforming and the resulting amplification do not only fulfil the function of deflecting from liberal racism, but also allow the paper to represent its journalism as adhering to liberal principles of objectivity, balance and free speech. This is based on the belief that it needs to represent the democratic ‘will of the people’ and promote a diversity of ideas – something that is skewed by populist hype and its exaggeration of the prevalence of far-right support amongst ‘the people’. That is not to say that the *Guardian* does not take a negative position on matters of racism and the far right. However, when it does, its commitment to liberalism seems to matter more and requires platforming ‘bad’ ideas, even if this leads to their legitimisation in order to affirm liberal virtues and deflect from their sins.

This has been particularly striking in the context of Brexit and a reactionary culture war, which includes attacks on the media and demands for ‘free speech’, and has targeted the *Guardian* for representing the ‘woke’ left *and* liberal metropolitan Remain elite. This is something that the newspaper often tries to reject and overcome through a variety of methods such as self-defence, self-parody and self-flagellation. Prior to Brexit, perhaps reading the signs, the *Guardian* published the quiz: ‘Are you part of the dreaded metropolitan elite?’<sup>34</sup> In 2019, post-Brexit, it published a piece headlined: ‘The left-behind

v the metropolitan elite? That's a lazy, harmful cliché'.<sup>35</sup> Between these two events, some *Guardian* writers have also tried to address this, as we have discussed in the previous two sections, through perpetuating 'populist hype' and reaching out to the 'white working class' as they have constructed it. In one example, the paper published an op-ed by pro-Brexit *Spiked!* associate Joanna Williams which argued: 'Liberal elite, it's time to strike a deal with the working class'.<sup>36</sup> They have also reported on and engaged with far-right ideas and figures, often using euphemisms and more neutral language, that they may assume, in their elitist minds, are representative of the white working class.

One of the ways that the *Guardian* addresses such criticism is through the representation and platforming of racist and reactionary ideas and figures in what they may see as objective, neutral and balanced ways in line with their liberal centrism and journalistic identity. This can be done through euphemisms, and the use of less stigmatising language such as 'populist' (as highlighted earlier) and 'activist' to describe racists and the far right. The *Guardian's* coverage of the German state election in Thuringia, where the far-right AfD finished second, provides a clear example of this process.<sup>37</sup> Populist hype can already be witnessed in the headline – 'Far-right AfD surges to second place in German state election' – and body of the article, which focuses far more on the AfD than it does on the actual winner, Die Linke, its radical left opponent. Despite the fact that the leader of the Thuringian section of the AfD, Björn Höcke, is well known to be on the more extreme right of the party, the opening line states that '[a]nti-immigrant populists beat Angela Merkel's Christian Democrats (CDU) to second place'. In September 2019, Höcke threatened a ZDF journalist who compared his quotes to those of Adolf Hitler with 'massive consequences', something the *Guardian* itself reported on.<sup>38</sup> The court in Thuringia eventually threw out the case, ruling that Höcke 'could legally be termed a "fascist", saying that such a designation "rests on verifiable fact"'.<sup>39</sup> Despite the evidence, the *Guardian* steered clear of such language which not only euphemised Höcke's politics but demonstrated a lack of solidarity with their German colleagues.

In October 2018, the *Guardian* published Arwa Mahdawi's criticism of the *Sunday Times'* use of the term 'Hipster Fascists' to describe Generation Identity.<sup>40</sup> However, there are many examples of

similar approaches within the corpus; for instance, we see headlines such as ‘Meet Thierry Baudet, the suave new face of Dutch rightwing populism’,<sup>41</sup> descriptions like that of Brexit Party chairman Richard Tice ‘with his Dr Kildare good looks’<sup>42</sup> and no fewer than four articles on Steve Bannon on the second day of ‘the New Populism’ series portraying him as a key shaper of European politics despite much evidence of his failure to do so.<sup>43</sup> Beyond humanising these figures, such generous descriptions and coverage feed into the legitimisation of their ideas.

We see this particularly in the way in which English Defence League founder ‘Tommy Robinson’ (Stephen Yaxley-Lennon) is framed. Concordance analysis revealed that ‘activist’ was among the top two collocates (second to ‘right’) of ‘Tommy Robinson’ within the corpus, signifying a dominant mode of reference with euphemising effects. This is also evident in Hattenstone’s piece where Robinson is referred to as a ‘far-right activist’.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, in an article in which he is described as an ‘anti-Islam campaigner’, the reporters state that Robinson ‘frequently complains of being smeared as a racist, insisting he does not care about skin colour and that his objection is to Islamist political ideology rather than people’. The article then attempts to challenge this by listing some of the illiberal racist things Robinson has been recorded as saying, such as: ‘Somalis are backward barbarians’, British Muslims are ‘enemy combatants who want to kill you, maim you and destroy you’, and refugees are ‘raping their way through the country’.<sup>45</sup> Not only does the *Guardian*’s euphemisation and sanitisation of language help serve this self-image, but its revelations about racism and corruption reinforce Robinson’s claims about persecution. This is best illustrated by the piece ‘Tommy Robinson: from local loud mouth to international far-right poster boy’,<sup>46</sup> in which he is promoted as the latter, an ‘international brand’ and ‘global cause celebre’ throughout the article.

The coverage of Tommy Robinson, and in particular his ‘activism’, introduces a further key element of the *Guardian*’s engagement with the ‘other side’, through the construction of false equivalences, as if ‘two sides’ must always be voiced in a polarised social and political landscape. The two sides may be Brexiteer and Remainer, right and left, or racist and anti-racist. In the context of the latter, Tommy Robinson is merely another activist in a democratic battle over ideas and beliefs (Islam)

as opposed to targeting racialised people (Muslims). This distinction feeds off both defences of Islamophobia and an ideologically loaded free speech debate which has been weaponised by reactionaries as a way of getting platforms and airing their ideas in the mainstream.<sup>47</sup>

We believe that this has been one of the most significant methods through which the far right has been legitimised and mainstreamed by liberals, libertarians and conservatives such as *Spiked!* and *Quillette*. In this discourse, the inclusion in debate of racists and the far right represents the true 'diversity of ideas'. For concerned liberals, airing these views is seen as both necessary for a truly free society and the most effective way to defeat them through exposure to the 'market-place of ideas', as if speech and power was equally distributed and as if the far right comes to such debates with an open mind. For the far right and racists, who normally hate 'diversity' and whose aims are a direct threat to diverse communities, this is a blessing as it allows them to attack and shame opponents on the left for being illiberal and fascistic for their refusal to engage in debates about whether the humanity of some should be up for discussion. This reversal of 'illiberal' and 'liberal' corresponds directly to the construction of reverse racism, when white people are claimed as victims because of an alleged anti-racist hegemonic power structure, where anti-racists and anti-fascists are the real racists and fascists. In this free speech narrative, dominant ideas are claimed to be from the 'woke' left and thus reactionaries must fight bravely for the representation of their ideas. Robinson's representation of himself as an activist and censored victim trying to expose Islam's 'bad ideas' fits within this narrative and is dangerously echoed and thus legitimised by the *Guardian*.

A similar trend is at play with the way in which both Brexit and Trump have been commonly represented as a white working class revolt as opposed to a white, elite-driven consolidation of conservative power. It is a mistake for the *Guardian* to buy into these narratives and to attempt either to achieve balance between, for example, Brexit and its opponents or to overcompensate for a liberal reputation in a manner which ultimately benefits the status quo. One example of this is the paper's response to a letter condemning 'cancel culture' in *Harper's* magazine in August 2020.<sup>48</sup> Instead of merely reporting on or challenging the letter's argument that free speech is under threat, particularly one signed by major authors on a prestigious platform, it

presented ‘both sides’ of the debate in the piece: ‘Is free speech under threat from “cancel culture”? Four writers respond’ that featured short articles by Nesrine Malik, Jonathan Freedland, Zoe Williams and Samuel Moyn.<sup>49</sup> While Malik expressed clearly why the letter was a mistake, the *Guardian*’s decision to adopt that language and to pursue a pseudo-debate in a media landscape already saturated by the reactionary view only served to legitimise a false equivalence that not only served the right’s attack on anti-racism and trans rights, but was now being aired on yet another high-profile platform.

## CONCLUSION

In a media landscape tilting ever increasingly in favour of reactionary forces and interests, it should be of great concern for democracy to see one of the major mainstream centre-left newspapers react so naively and irresponsibly to the culture wars waged by the right. This is not to say of course that there does not remain some solid quality journalism in the *Guardian*, as demonstrated by its investigative reporting in particular and some of its opinion pieces from important, anti-racist contributors such as Nesrine Malik, Gary Younge, Afua Hirsch, Angela Saini and Priyamvada Gopal.

However, in a context where the balance of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ opinions has become an apparent norm, the lack of a clear stand on issues such as racism and immigration risks creating some dangerous false equivalences and feeds into the mainstreaming of far-right ideas. As the reactionary hold on the political system tightens and much-needed media reform aimed at providing real democratic dissemination of information appears increasingly unlikely, news outlets like the *Guardian* have a crucial role to play. This rests on a choice between the kind of democracy it wishes to support: a reactionary democracy, where racist, sexist, transphobic and classist voices are afforded the same space as their opponents or a democracy that does not tolerate that the humanity of some can be debated or treated as a matter of discussion.

## NOTES

1. *The Guardian* (2020) ‘The Guardian View on Colston’s Statue: A Long Time in Going’, *The Guardian*, 8 June. <https://www.theguardian.com/>

- commentisfree/2020/jun/08/the-guardian-view-on-colstons-statue-a-long-time-in-going (accessed 29 September 2020).
2. Aurelien Mondon and Aaron Winter, *Reactionary Democracy: How Racism and the Populist Far Right Became Mainstream* (London: Verso, 2020); Alana Lentin, *Why Race Still Matters* (Cambridge: Polity, 2020).
  3. It is still unclear whether the latest shock to white supremacy will last or whether the hope generated by widespread protests and replicated in countless statements by organisations, both public and private, acknowledging their role in upholding racist hierarchies, will be swallowed up by the news cycle as a new crisis could quickly take our attention away from longer term issues.
  4. See amongst others Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists: Color-blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006).
  5. Jason Glynos and Aurelien Mondon, 'The political logic of populist hype: The case of right-wing populism's 'meteoric rise' and its relation to the status quo'. In Paolo Cossarini and Fernando Vallespín (eds) *Populism and Passions: Democratic Legitimacy after Austerity* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019).
  6. Katy Brown and Aurelien Mondon, 'Populism, the media and the mainstreaming of the far right: The Guardian's coverage of populism as a case study', *Politics*, online first, 2020.
  7. This is composed of any article containing populis\* in the year following the start of 'The New Populism' series (20 November 2018-19), in total 1548 articles.
  8. Katy Brown, 'When Eurosceptics Become Europhiles: Far-right Opposition to Turkish Involvement in the European Union', *Identities*, 27:6 (2019), pp. 633-54.
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