

## REVIEW

Lentin, A. (2020). *Why Race Still Matters*. Polity. Cambridge.

Eda GUNAYDIN

*Department of Government and International Relations,  
University of Sydney, Australia*

Alana Lentin's *Why Race Still Matters* (2020) carries out the important act of taking stock, asking its readers to engage with the myriad ways in which we have learned to think erroneously about race in the modern era. If we correct our thinking about race, Lentin argues, and develop critical racial literacy, then we come closer to making it matter less. Rather than turning away from it and denying its centrality, or emphasizing its status as a matter of 'mere' social construction, she proposes that achieving our end-goal of abolishing race as it exists 'as a technology for the management of human difference' (Lentin 2020, 5) requires that we close in on it, unpick it by understanding its contours, its recency, its situatedness in history and geography, and ultimately pull it apart from within.

The book is structured such that each chapter addresses one recent 'trend in the politics of race' (Lentin 2019, 14), across international case studies. First, Lentin tackles the revival of race realism, pushed by individuals who believe that if we put aside politically correct moral hand-wringing, we can all agree that there are distinct races of human, as well as biological differences between them that science can discover, and which explain their better or worse social outcomes, for example wealth, health, criminality or intelligence. Lentin identifies that rebuttals to race realists often take the form of debunking, sometimes using the very same science upon which race realists ground their arguments. For example, genetic studies may be used to show that racial classifications account for only 5–10 percent of human difference (Lentin 2019, 38). The thrust of much of this work is to argue that race is a social construction. However, as Lentin effectively demonstrates, denying the reality of race by identifying it as socially constructed does not mean race does not have real-world effects – for example, that racial hierarchies imposed upon society do lead to differential health and wealth outcomes for differently racialized populations – and does nothing to quiet race realists, who may cloak themselves in science, but who will find in science whatever it is they are already looking for. By itself, this insight would be traversing territory already covered by thinkers like Stuart Hall and Patrick Wolfe, of which Lentin is aware. A valuable addition that she makes to the argument that identifying race as socially constructed is not a powerful enough tool to challenge racism comes through her argument that race can and does interact with biology: race 'resides in the body' as trauma and can have ill impacts on, for example, health. Lentin (2019, 41) writes: 'Diversity...is not the problem; the problem is the persistence of white supremacy based on the belief that diversity is hierarchical.' In this chapter, then, Lentin makes an important point about the ontology of race: discrediting race as biology arguments, either by turning to science as if it were 'real' or turning to the social

world as if it were ‘not-real’, cannot do all the work required, because racism continues to find its footing and prolong its life as a practice.

Chapter 2 demonstrates that another mode by which racism prolongs its life is through the monopoly that those who lack racial literacy have come to hold over what ‘counts’ as racism. In other words, those who often ask the question, ‘How can that be racist?’ have a working definition of the concept that is restrictive, defining itself against the Holocaust as an act of racism without rival, or as a morally wrong attitude based on bad science, and articulated by aberrant individuals, rather than as a structure. Racism is therefore defined, and defined out of existence, from a white perspective: both in a frozen way, a historical relic, as well as so disembedded from structures of power that it becomes possible to debate that any person can be racist against any other. Readers may have appreciated a deeper account of the origin and function of individualization in this discussion, which may have presented a further opportunity to interrogate the influence of colonial domination upon our understanding of race and racism. Chapter 2’s argument links neatly to the book’s fourth chapter, which shows how, post-World War II, the Jewish identity’s growing closeness to whiteness – fueled, in part, by this focus placed on the Holocaust – is used for the purposes of neo-racism in the form of Islamophobia. This chapter is particularly compelling, demonstrating how accusations of anti-Semitism are often used as a racist cudgel, with Muslims and other groups that advocate against the settler-colonial activities of Israel deemed the ‘real racists.’ Lentin’s demonstration of the inter-connectedness of anti-Semitism, Zionism and Islamophobia is a powerful one, and the means she offers out of this hegemonic formation is to advocate for Jewish and Muslim solidarity through the figure of the ‘Bad Jew’, who rejects any association with whiteness and aligns themselves instead with Muslims.

Lentin is most compelling when she turns her lens upon thinkers who might consider themselves anti-racist or members of the left. Chapter 3 (‘Making It About Race’) makes a series of complex, significant, interconnected points about the tendency of parts of the left to reject race and characterize it as a middle-class distraction that is less important than the concern of socio-economic class, or an overly-negative analytic that emphasizes victimhood over organizing. First, Lentin reminds us that the majority of the world’s working class is composed of people of color, and that racism matters very much to ‘ordinary’ folk. Lentin also reminds us not to mistake grassroots, lived anti-racism for its co-optation – such as that cynically performed by figures such as Hillary Clinton, who go on to enact racism. Second, Lentin asks us not to romanticize a non-existent perfect activist past during which the left was not moribund but rather flourishing. Blaming ‘identitarianism’ for problems that plague the left again misplaces blame. Finally, and most potently, Lentin questions those thinkers who critique people of color for focusing ‘too much’ on their grievances, trauma and victimhood, to the detriment of focusing on material transformation of their external surroundings (see for example Dean 2019). To this Lentin provides a compelling response, asking us to consider that perhaps these grievances are not performances, but rather genuinely held, and not a distraction from but perhaps a means of achieving material redress and galvanizing resistance.

I also appreciated Lentin’s rejection of the fetishization of newness, and found she demonstrated the way that it can facilitate racism very skillfully. Academic publishing

models and trends in scholarship are increasingly coming under fire for their endless ‘turns.’ The intellectual environment shifts like the weather, with new research agendas blooming and waning in the form of a series of short-lived trends. A premium is placed on novelty – new concepts, unique coinages – in a fast-paced, profit-driven publication environment. *Why Race Still Matters* provides a potent rejection of this ‘churn and turn’ model, making clear that we need not turn away from such an old and well-mined concept as race, but must instead turn towards it in all that we do. For example, I admired that rather than proposing an entirely new definition of race, Lentin instead adeptly synthesizes Alexander Weheliye, Stuart Hall, and Barnor Hesse, paying tribute rather than seeking to erase the knowledge that precedes her, and demonstrating that thinking about race is often a collective, and not a competitive, act. Lentin also demonstrates the tendency in modern scholarship, in particular in the fields of migration studies and studies of populism, to generate euphemistic or race-free analysis and justify it by deeming it more ‘precise’ or more scholarly – as if analysis of race were in some way frivolous or too obvious, a low-hanging fruit. For example, rather than calling Islamophobia racism, Lentin notes it is sometimes dubbed ‘anti-clericalism’ instead. Likewise, racist opposition to migration is often dubbed ‘economic anxiety’ or ‘ethno-traditionalism.’ Whether well-intentioned or not, calling racism by another name, Lentin shows, is tied up with relations of power: attempts to replace race with other terms functions to both obfuscate but also legitimate racism, for example when anti-immigration stances are re-framed as valid working-class rejections of neoliberalism.

*Why Race Still Matters*’s great strength lies in its ability to speak not only to popular discourse on race articulated by racists – adeptly skewering far right publics who, it should be noted, are unlikely to ever read the book – but also to ask its probable readership, who in all likelihood consider themselves to be race-critical, race-literate or anti-racist, to engage in greater reflexivity about whether they are mis-apprehending or under-estimating race. It is a significant work for those seeking to be better anti-racists in their day-to-day lives; for anti-racist activists, who may be encouraged to question their assumptions about identity politics, victimhood and trauma, Islamophobia and anti-Semitism; and for scholars who use and do not use race in their work alike.

Dean, Jodi. 2019. *Comrade: An Essay on Political Belonging*. London: Verso Books.