A variational analysis of the concept of 'racism'.

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At least since Lakoff (2008), it has been widely recognized that cognitive linguistics can throw analytic light on issues that have been incompletely understood in prevailing patterns of political thought (not least in the progressive tradition). One of the ways in which this can be done is through a variational approach to key political concepts (cf. also Lakoff (2006) on the concept of freedom).

In this paper, I argue that the concept of racism should be subjected to a thoroughgoing variational analysis. Although there is a sense in which the struggle against racism has achieved near-universal support, there is also a sense in which certain manifestations of racism have become more salient and widely acceptable in recent years.

The proposed analysis begins with a 'classic' cognitive-linguistic analysis of conceptual variation with metonymic extension in a key role. The point of departure is 'full-blown' racism, understood as a comprising a social configuration in which an ideology involving the assumption of the superiority of 'the white race' goes with institutionalized practices that reflect this assumption. The argument then traces the (partly historical) extension towards the ethnic dimension, and towards discriminatory practices that do not rely on explicit ideological assumptions about racial superiority ('structural racism'). The ending point is the specifically anti-racist understanding of the concept whereby individuals can be classed as racists if they passively comply with a social pattern that involves discriminatory practices.

Reflecting the foundations laid out in Harder (2010) it is then argued that this analysis of conceptual variation needs to be supplemented with an analysis in terms of the social anchoring of this pattern, as well as the element of contested conceptualization that is manifested in political arguments over racism.

On the basis of this account, I am going to argue that more precise awareness of the contested and variational coverage of the concept of racism is necessary in order to pursue a successful struggle against the wide range of undesirable phenomena that the term is currently applied to. The issue has the following related, but different dimensions:

The conceptual-variational dimension: the metonymic extension from 'full-blown racism' to 'passive compliance with discriminatory practices' makes overall communication about the issue difficult.

The social-variational dimension: the differential social distribution of conceptual variants may reinforce already existing difficulties of understanding among social groups/subcommunities.

The referential dimension: the conceptual variants subsume areas of social reality with different causal structures. The concept of racism, used across these differences without awareness of the variation,is a blunt instrument for understanding what is going on out there.

The implementational dimension: successful action against racism requires knowledge about causal structures - otherwise the consequences of the measures taken will also be unknown. If such measures do not differentiate, efforts will be unsuccessful against phenomena whose causal structures are not taken into consideration.

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