

If tackling racism is just a box-ticking exercise, the urgent imperative to change our ways is lost

The Azeem Rafiq affair shows how we can be alert to racism in one context and blind to it elsewhere



Azeem Rafiq apologised immediately for sending antisemitic texts a decade ago, but critics used the affair to downplay his allegations of racism.

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For some, it was a gotcha moment. For others, an occasion to parade their own prejudices. Yet others celebrated the end of the “attempt to destroy English cricket”. On Tuesday, Azeem Rafiq gave devastating testimony to a parliamentary committee about the racism he had faced as a Yorkshire cricketer. On Thursday came revelations of antisemitic texts he had exchanged with a fellow cricketer a decade ago.

Rafiq apologised immediately, an apology acknowledged by leading Jewish figures. Critics, however, saw in the affair only Rafiq’s “double standards” and the tawdriness of his original allegations. In fact, the exposure of Rafiq’s previous antisemitism, ironically, strengthened one of the core arguments in his story: the way people can be blind to bigotry in one context while alert to it in another.

What stood out in Rafiq’s testimony was not just his account of racist bullying, harrowing though they were, but also his comments about the current England Test captain, Joe Root, a fellow Yorkshireman. Root, Rafiq confirmed, was a “good guy”, who “never engaged in racist language”. What “hurt”, though, was Root’s insistence, after the scandal broke, that he could not recall any racism at Yorkshire despite, according to Rafiq, being present when the abuse occurred. “It shows how normal it was that even a good man like him doesn’t see it for what it was,” Rafiq suggested. That could be said of Rafiq’s antisemitism, too.

One reason Rafiq's allegations feel so shocking is the degree to which Britain has changed. Had he spoken out 40 years ago, few would have cared. Then, "Paki-bashing" was a national sport and racism viscerally woven into the fabric of society. Today, racism remains embedded – witness everything from discrimination in employment to the Windrush scandal – but it is of a different character and threat from that of the 1970s and 80s. Most people today abhor what Rafiq had to endure. There is a long history of passing off racism as "banter". That it should still be happening is particularly dispiriting given the broader decline of racism. If someone had abused Rafiq as a "Paki" on the streets, most of his teammates would probably have recognised it as racist and sprung to his defence. In the dressing room or in a social setting, however, what they may elsewhere have acknowledged as racism becomes invisible, transformed into banter.

Dressing-room culture, designed to enhance team bonding, is necessarily insular and often forbidding to outsiders. In the past, such insularity frequently took a racist form. That it should still do so in many dressing rooms and that players and management – even the "good guys" – seemingly cannot distinguish between racist bullying and dressing-room joshing is troubling.

The drive to root out racism has in recent years become as much managerial or administrative as moral or political. A determination to tick the right boxes, a desire to appear diverse, a resolve to undertake training – it's an exercise in looking right more than in being right. And in this process, the moral imperative on individuals to challenge real racism where they see it has diminished.

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Many sports people, from Colin Kaepernick to Marcus Rashford, have taken a public stance against iniquities both inside and outside sport. But, too often, as the Rafiq case and others reveal, the voices that should restrain unacceptable behaviour are silent, even complicit.

If the dismissal of racism as "banter" is one form of blindness, the refusal of many, including many anti-racists, to recognise antisemitism, even when it smacks them in the face, is another. The week before Rafiq gave his parliamentary evidence, London's Royal Court theatre had to apologise for naming a money-grabbing billionaire, modelled allegedly on Elon Musk, in Al Smith's play *Rare Earth Mettle*, "Hershel Fink". The character was hastily renamed (to Henry Finn) and the theatre blamed the gaffe on "unconscious bias".

It is difficult to know how anyone could fail to see that "Hershel Fink" was an archly Jewish name or that giving such a name to an unscrupulous capitalist would be to play on deep-rooted racist stereotypes. Yet, as writer Jo Glanville pointed out, it is plausible in the sense that "the association of Jews with power and money is so deeply entrenched in our culture that it isn't even questioned".

Antisemitism is not an issue simply on the left. It is a core ideology of the reactionary right. There has, however, emerged in recent decades a particular form of leftwing antisemitism. As racism has come to be seen as a problem of whiteness and of white privilege, and Jews viewed as both white and privileged, so not only is bigotry towards Jews frequently ignored, but Jews are often portrayed as the villains.

Important, too, is antisemitism within Muslim communities, an issue many liberals feel reluctant to broach. “As a community, we do have a ‘Jewish problem’,” the journalist and activist Mehdi Hasan has observed. Polls bear this out, though we should not exaggerate the problem. A 2017 report by the Institute for Jewish Policy Research warned that “broad stigmatisation of all Muslims is neither accurate nor helpful” and that most Muslims are not antisemitic. Nevertheless, a significant proportion hold bigoted views about Jews and to a greater degree than does the general population. It behoves us not to be blind to this, any more than to anti-Asian racism or anti-Muslim bigotry.

Such blindness is often aggravated by the politics of identity, by the tendency to see “good” and “bad” in terms of the group to which someone belongs and the privileges they are supposed to possess. It has led many to target Jews for being Jews and to hold all Jews responsible for the actions of the state of Israel. Judging an individual by the group to which they are imputed to belong is a trait of racism. The more tribal, identity-driven politics of today has made many blind to the growth of such traits on the left.

It was inevitable that, as soon as Rafiq made his explosive allegations, his own past would be scrutinised. There is, though, something dysfunctional about a culture in which many seem more eager to dredge the past of someone who exposes wrongdoing to find material to publicly shame them than seek to put that wrong right. That, too, is a form of blindness.

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