The Epidemiology of Sinophobia

Gerald ROCHE

A Cartoon of Victoria urging the Federation to get rid of the 'Chinese pest', from the *Melbourne Punch*, 10 May 1888.

Since the outbreak of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), numerous reports have described a rise in Sinophobia and anti-Asian racism around the world, with occurrences being reported in Australia (Young 2020), France (BBC 2020), Canada (Miller 2020), and many other countries (Rich 2020).

This racism started online. Commentators zoomed in on single incidents—like a video of a Chinese influencer eating a bat in Palau, Micronesia, a few years ago—and generalised them to moralised population traits and visions of cosmic retribution. This logic suggested that the virus was caused by disgusting eating habits and poor hygiene, and that people making these 'lifestyle choices' deserved to become sick, suffer, and die. How could so many people, unable to find Wuhan on a map and completely unqualified to make any claims about the origin and spread of viruses, feel so confident in making these judgements?

In a 1985 article subtitled 'Towards an Epidemiology of Representations', the anthropologist Dan Sperber provides us with a way of better understanding this phenomenon. Sperber asks why some ideas circulate, and stick, better than others. His answer, in part, is that this happens because they are evocative. They resonate with, and bring to mind, other representations we are already familiar with.

So, when the images of bat-eating circulated online, they evoked pre-existing representations of Chinese people, and Asians in general. This enabled commentators to feel confident in claiming to understand the etiology of the virus and, in doing so, dismiss the suffering of the affected people while even suggesting they actually deserved it.

We might call the sum-total of these representations, which demote Asian lives to a plane of insignificance, 'white supremacy'.

We need to understand this broader context of white supremacy, and the way it has produced hostile indifference to people trapped in the virus outbreak, to appreciate why the reaction of some 'China watchers' (journalists, academics, and others), has been so problematic.

In response to the rising incidences of anti-Asian racism, these commentators have attempted to downplay or dismiss the significance of this phenomenon. Some have claimed that racism is not 'the real issue,' or have suggested that choosing to analyse and discuss Sinophobia is intellectually lazy. Others have claimed that denunciations of Sinophobia are only valid if they also denounce the harms of the Chinese state, such as the Xinjiang concentration camps.

None of these people deny the existence of Sinophobia, but they do dismiss its significance. We can therefore label their claims 'implicatory denialism', a term introduced by Stanley Cohen in the book *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering* (2013). Implicatory denialism, he states, does not involve the denial of facts, but '[w]hat are denied or minimized are the psychological, political, or moral implications that conventionally follow' (Cohen 2013: 8).

Understanding why this sort of denialism is a problem does not require us to understand the motivations, intentions, or rationalisations of people who engage in implicatory denialism. Racism is structural, and so are its impacts. It does not matter what people intend, it matters what impact they have. So, we need to ask who this denialism harms and helps, and how.

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To begin with, downplaying racism helps racists. In an atmosphere of pervasive white supremacy, racists love seeing people in positions of authority say that racism is not important. These statements act as a form of dog-whistle politics. Racists are emboldened by authority figures suggesting that people talk about race too much. And as the philosopher Jennifer Saul (2018) points out, these dog-whistle effects can occur whether it is the speaker's intention or not.

In addition to empowering racists and contributing to an atmosphere of white supremacy, denialism impacts people who are targeted by Sinophobia. Responding to claims of racism with implicatory denialism sends a clear message that certain people's lived experiences are not important. 'Yes, you are suffering, but let's focus on the REAL issue.'

Some people seem to understand that they are sending this message when they engage in implicatory denialism. To avoid the interpretation that they are wilfully compounding someone's suffering, they may package their statements in

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formulations such as 'I don't mean to downplay anyone's suffering but...' Once again, Jennifer Saul (2019) provides us with a useful term to describe this pragmatic strategy: she calls it a 'fig leaf', capturing the way that it acts as woefully insufficient means of concealment.

We can further think about how statements of implicatory denialism harm targets of Sinophobia by comparing them to slurs, as described by Jane Hill in her book *The Everyday Language of White Racism* (2008). For both slurs and implicatory denialism, the impact of the speech acts comes from their historicity, not from speakers' intentions. They evoke both a collective history of subordination *and* individual experiences of lived discrimination.

Like slurs, acts of denialism evoke a history. In this case, it is a history of other denials, of the sort used to uphold 'colourblind racism', which is the idea that racism is something that was overcome decades ago and has since ceased to exist as a meaningful social force. Eduardo Bonillo-Silva, in his book *Racism Without Racists* (2018), provides a vivid description of the rhetorical contortions that are needed to maintain this view. At the centre of these rhetorical manoeuvres is denial; denying the existence or significance of racism is central to maintaining it.

Therefore, reacting to accounts of Sinophobia with implicatory denialism not only negates the reality of racialised suffering, but also makes it clear that the commentator will allow that suffering to continue, by opposing anti-racist speech. This empowers racists, upholds white supremacy, and compounds the suffering of people facing Sinophobia.

We should do everything we can to stop the spread of coronavirus and to help alleviate the suffering of people who have contracted it. But we need to realise that for most of us, our capacity to do either thing will be limited. What we can do is intervene in the spread of Sinophobia and anti-Asian racism where we are, and in the contexts where our speech acts are heard and interpreted, and help alleviate the suffering of those around us. ∎