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digital counter speech and reactance: critical potentials for teaching about racism

Julian Ernst

Digital counter speech has become an element of the task of educating about racism, aiming to promote critical engagement with racism and hateful discourses on the internet. However, addressees of the pedagogical efforts often show affective-defensive reactions towards the applied counter speech: reactance. Whereas the occurrence of reactance can be considered an obstacle to educational processes, from a subjectivation-theoretical perspective this essay aims to shed light on its potentials for teaching about racism: to reflexively approach the entanglement of one's own subjectivity and that of others in powerful discourses of racism.

Keywords: counter speech, education, hate speech, reactance, subjectivation

Digital counter speech in education

Whether it is a hateful posting in which a minority is disparaged or a propaganda video that combines resentment with fragments of conspiracy-theories, racist hate speech articulated via digital tools and platforms such as YouTube, TikTok or Instagram has become everyday life for many media users, especially for the younger ones (Deutsches Institut für Vertrauen und Sicherheit im Internet [DIVSI], 2018; Geschke et al., 2019; Landesanstalt für Medien Nordrhein-Westfalen [LfM NRW], 2016; Medienpädagogischer Forschungsverbund Südwest [mpfs], 2021; Reinemann et al., 2019). This development has not gone without response: besides judicial steps, state institutions and civil society actors are trying to oppose hateful articulations by launching video campaigns and publishing pictures and memes. With digital *counter speech* they aim to counter hostilities on the net by deconstructing ideological modes of argumentation or – from the perspective of the publishers – by countering them with "positive" images (Briggs & Feve, 2013; Tuck & Silverman, 2016). Facets and forms of racism have long been addressed by disciplines such as Intercultural Education, Civic Education or History Education. Correspondingly, the digital articulation of the phenomenon has also become the focus of pedagogical efforts, finding expression in didactic materials applying counter messages to critically approach (digital) racism (Asisi et al., 2019; Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung [bpb] & Schmitt, 2019; Ernst et al., 2020; turn, 2019; Zentrum für Islamische Theologie [ZIT] Münster, 2017). Empirical studies evaluating such pedagogical attempts indeed show critical engagements with hate speech and the phenomenon of racism as well as signs of empowerment, especially among those personally affected, by using digital counter speech (Braun et al., 2020; Ernst, 2021; Materna, 2019; Materna, Lauber & Brüggen, 2021; Schmitt et al., 2020; Seyferth-Zapf & Grafe, 2020). However, resistance is also registered among the addressees of the pedagogical efforts: reactance in contact with counter speech articulations (Ernst et al., 2020; Ernst, 2021; Frischlich et al., 2017). In educational settings these reactions – especially if they occur in combination – can lead to polarizing discussions which not only have the potential to thwart

pedagogical ambitions but, in the worst case, might even reinforce opposing positions and racist attitudes (Holzkamp, 1994). At the same time, as this essay wants to argue from a subjectivation-theoretical perspective, the occurrence of reactance towards counter messages also holds critical potentials for teaching about racism: *to reflexively approach the entanglement of one's own subjectivity and that of others in powerful discourses of racism*. Before I set out to explain what "reactance" actually is and what it can mean for teaching of educating about racism, I would like to briefly discuss the relationship between racism and (digitally articulated) hate and counter speech.

Racism, digital hate and counter speech

Following the thoughts of Stuart Hall (1994), *racism* can be understood as an ideological discourse. As such, racism constructs specified social groups as "biologically" resp. "culturally" defined, and explicitly or implicitly as inferior to a dominant, also constructed, group. By doing so, racism provides a means to legitimize discrimination of and violence against people who are identified with the inferior group (and in reverse resulting in the betterment of the dominant reference group regarding the distribution of resources and social accessibility). Understood as a form of discourse, racism is not synonymous with an "idea", a mere ideology, but refers to established power relations whose gradients are maintained and reproduced by means of racist practices. A crucial practice for restoring and actualizing racist power differentials is *hate speech*.[1] Judith Butler (2016) can be regarded as a central theorist* of hate speech. Butler summarizes hate speech as a performative speech act. As such, in the moment of utterance, hate speech realizes its primary[2] effect (Butler, 2016, p. 35): devaluating, silencing, hurting, socially defining, and thus *subjecting* people. Where does hate speech draw this power from? Hateful articulations do not recreate themself situationally, they do not build up upon a "reason". As Butler points out, hate speech is more a kind of "citation": it derives its power from traditions of devaluation and pre-existing power relations (Butler, 2016, p. 81). In the case of racist hate speech, racist images, bodies of knowledge and historical experience of devaluation are reiterated and ensure the subjectifying impact of the articulation.

The emergence of digital media, especially the broad accessibility of the internet, does not change the (ir)rationalities of racism – but it adds scope for its appearance and sustain. Scholars like Ruha Benjamin (2019) or Safiya Umoja Noble (2018) show how racist practices and knowledge deeply intertwine with algorithms, data sets, and digital technology in general, extending structures and subtly penetrating spheres of everyday life in which computing power is required. On a more superficial, but not negligible level, racism can draw from a wide range of audio-visual and low-threshold participatory elements such as user comment functions that digitality has to offer. *Digital* hate speech uses the same channels and comprehends the same key features and styles as possibly any other expression articulated through digital media, from explicitly devaluating hate comments or more encrypted vlog-style videos by right-wing-extremist groups. Moreover, in comparison to its expression, face-to-face hate speech via digital media enables potentially infinite re-reciprocity and tends to be anonymous (especially in the case of hate comments). However, digital racist hate speech also opens up spaces for resistance resp. *counter speech*. Due to its digital codedness, digitally articulated hate speech can be re-articulated: it is open to be re-combined with other "cultural material" (pictures, music, video snippets etc.), and thus to be re-contextualized and changed in its effect (Butler, 2016, p. 150 ff.; Stalder, 2017, p. 97 ff.). State actors as well as actors of civil society use this subversive opportunity to counter the performativity of digital hate speech in the same channels and by the same means in/with which it occurs. A rough distinction can be made between so-called counter narratives and alternative narratives (Briggs & Feve, 2013, p. 8 ff.). Whereas counter narratives focus on deconstructing racist modes of argumentation, for example

using humour and irony as stylistic devices, alternative narratives try to send, from the perspective of democratic theory, "for-messages", so to speak. In particular, the counter-speech activities of state actors are critically discussed – not least because of the involvement of state institutions in racist power structures, which makes counter messages against racism, for example, appear not only contradictory but even to be a camouflaged instrument of governance (Qasem, 2020; 2022).

Digital Media not only offer racist devaluation but also provide mediatized sites for multi-layered fights over hegemony. Those fights are not only the users' utterings on platforms. Recipients also participate in the discursive process, experiencing hateful articulations and counter speeches, possibly communicating about them, and being emotionally involved through their effects as media. Towards digital counter speech one central effect is *reactance*, which – as will be explained – is of great importance for the pedagogical debate on countering racism.

Reactance towards counter speech

What is "reactance"? Reactance can be understood as *an affective reaction to* "resist or act counter to attempted social influence" (Brehm & Brehm, 1981, p. 4). It can occur when a subject is feeling threatened in its freedom(s) and manifests itself as "behaviour directed toward restoring the freedom in question" (Brehm & Brehm, 1981, p. 4). Reactance should not be confused with intentional, planned action. Rather, reactance has pre-reflexive character, is emotional and cannot necessarily be put into words by a subject experiencing it. Possible triggers of reactance can be persuasive or emotionally involving media. Empirical studies show that counter speech can provoke such reactions (Ernst et al., 2020; Ernst, 2021; Frischlich et al., 2017). For instance, in an experimental setting Lena Frischlich et al. (2017) investigated the impact of digital counter speech. The test persons evaluated counter messages predominantly positively. However, reactance also arose: satirical elements especially seemed to be triggers (Frischlich et al., 2017, pp. 145–146, 155–156). And reactance occurs not only under controlled conditions: there is also evidence for reactance in educational settings applying counter messages (Ernst et al., 2020; Ernst, 2021). Qualitative studies of discourses in educational settings show that the (assumed) author or the speaker appears to play a significant role for defensive reactions. Not every actor who voices a counter speech is considered credible: depending on the aspect addressed (e.g., anti-Muslimism racism), the assumed belonging of the author is taken into account, as are any commercial motives (Ernst, 2021, pp. 261 ff.).

The brief remarks on reactance towards digital counter speech show that education about racism that applies counter speech must not only deal with an extremely sensitive topic. It also seems to have to deal with the possible side effects of digital counter speech. Against the background of decades of reflections on and pedagogical-practical experiences of educating about racism, this finding is no big surprise. Since the 1990s, scholars of intercultural education research have been critical of attempts to address racism primarily through countermeasures (Cohen, 1994; Holzbrecher, 1997; Holzkamp, 1994; Hormel & Scherr, 2004; Machold, 2011; Roth, 2002). The problem with this is recognized in the fact that pure countermeasures are mainly aimed at changing the attitudes, ways of thinking and inner images of learners – thus, to "exert social influence" (Brehm & Brehm, 1981, p. 4) – and presuppose learners as passive addressees and not as actively learning subjects (Holzkamp, 1995). Nevertheless, from a subjectivation-theoretical perspective, critical potentials for education about racism can also be identified in the reactance to digital counter speech – how is that?

Reactance as critical potential for teaching about racism

The concept of reactance is especially used in social psychology. Nevertheless, due to its reference to "freedom" and its restoration, the concept is also compatible with subjectivation theory considerations, such as those made by Judith Butler (2019). Some essentials in a nutshell[3]: firstly, the becoming of a subject (subjectivation) is not solely individual, but an intersubjective and societal process. This process is characterized by ambivalence: an assigned social category limits agency and provides it at the same time (Butler, 2019, p. 19) – even in the case of a racist assignment (Butler, 2016). The becoming of a subject requires maintenance; subjectivation relies on repetition in discourse. Due to its constitution in discourse, a subject occurs in power relations – it is an effect, as Butler says: the "recoil" of power structures. As previously pointed out, the effects of racist hate speech can therefore be seen as a form of subjectivation. Paradoxical as it may seem, racism provides social identity and a certain form of agency within power relations. For Butler, resistance means turning against a social attribution. By turning against its own social assignment and, in a sense by turning against one's own assigned social existence (Butler, 2016, p. 17), Butler sees not only the chance to individually overcome an attribution and to realize a new form of self-empowered agency, Butler also recognizes the subversive possibility of depriving pejorative invocations of their efficacy, of shaking up power structures and thus possibly changing them. How does the phenomenon of reactance fit in here?

Coming from the theoretical branch of subjectivation that has been presented, reactance can be understood as the subject's reaction to the experienced attempt of subjection, as an affective reflex that rejects a (potentially) defining influence. Reactance as a defensive reaction against socially determining media is thus obviously not a kind of media analysis that lifts an ideological veil or anything similar. Rather, reactance comes close to what Michel Foucault described as "the art of not being governed in such a way" (Foucault, 1992, p. 12, translation by the author): as the resistance of a subject against a category constituting it. Subjectivation-theoretical reactance can be interpreted as *a subtle form of critique that emerges from subjectivity and the same time turns against it*. What distinguishes reactance from more "rational" forms of critique is that it does not reveal too much about the stimulus that triggers it. Nevertheless, reactance reveals something: in a certain way, it expresses one's own "responsiveness" as a subject.

At this point lies the critical potential of reactance for educating about racism: reactance reflects one's own subjectivity and that of others entangled in racist discourses, laying the trail to grasp subjectivity as embedded in power structures (Ernst & Roth, 2022). It offers the educational opportunity to consider subjectivity and the becoming of a subject not just as an individual but as a structural phenomenon. To put it in Butler's words, to grasp yourself and others as "recoil" of powerful discourses rather than fully sovereign subjects (Butler, 2019, p. 12).

To mobilize these reflective potentials, educators need to understand and anticipate those responses as part of the task of addressing racism in educational settings. Therefore, educators must be communicatively prepared to put reactance into words, to actively make it a topic and thus "visible". In the context of digital counter speech, the central question is, "What triggers me?" Following the empirical studies and pedagogical considerations outlined earlier, the reflection of potential trigger points regarding counter speech might lead to feelings of being manipulated, overwhelmed, or angered by an expected consensus about the proposed model of society in an articulation. The central task of an educator would be not to regard these feelings as purely individual but to reflectively tie them back to discourses, be it to media discourses (Jäger, 2017), historical traditions

(Holzbrecher, 1997) or, for instance, also to the local classroom discourse with its powerful relations (Holzkamp, 1994, 1995).

The occurrence of reactance is a volatile and sensitive moment in teaching about racism. Recognizing one's own entanglement in discourses already means taking a stand against their subjectivising effects and a potential shaking of existing power relations – a burgeoning of critique. At the same time, people can have painful experiences when they approach and explore their own powerful entanglement. Especially for persons affected by racism, this can mean partially re-living hurtful experiences of racialization (see contributions in Berendsen, Cheema & Mendel, 2019). Also, finding oneself partially sharing racist ideas or exploring resistance to anti-racist messages in counter speech can be hurtful, and reactance can already be an expression of this (Messerschmidt, 2010).

This raises the following questions: should reactance really be explored further? Isn't the risk of painful experiences too high? What is the educational value? What is an alternative? When the affective facets of racism need to be addressed, it would be illusory to want to completely exclude the possibility of being affected. Moreover, the attempt to avoid and set aside the affective facets of racism and to approach the phenomenon entirely rationally falls into the long-known trap of overestimating the possibilities of "rational-symbolic enlightenment", as formulated by Hans-Joachim Roth (2002, p. 430, translation by the author; see also: Cohen, 1994; Holzbrecher, 1997; Holzkamp, 1994). It is not only the abstract knowledge of racist power structures, but above all the reflection of one's own entanglement with the discourses maintaining them that makes an examination of racism in the narrower sense critical. Teaching about racism can have the effect of externalising racism as exclusive to right-wing extremists or as a historical episode (Messerschmidt, 2010). Addressing reactance towards digital counter speech offers the educational opportunity to avoid this relocation of one's own involvement, because it already *is* involvement. Instead, racism can be approached as a discourse shared and maintained by the so-called middle of society (Zick, Küpper & Berghan, 2019) – not only *by others*, but also *by oneself*.

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1. Hate speech is a variable practice not only applicable to "race", but e.g., also to "gender". Furthermore, in respect to racism, hate speech is also not the only element to maintain and reproduce power relations. Talking about "systemic" or "structural" racism points to the depth of the penetration of racist ways of thinking and discriminatory practices, which may find expression in the form of hate speech but are by no means exhausted in it (see the following elaborations).
2. The ideological function of legitimizing its own utterance as well as e.g., violence towards a societal group can be seen as a "secondary" effect of hate speech.
3. This cannot possibly do justice to Butler's extensive and complex theorising. For a condensed, concise presentation of the central elements of Butler's theory of subjectivation, please refer to the introduction in "The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection" (Butler, 2019).