A Yogācārin approach to Collective Illusions:
Cultural Unconscious, Implicit Bias and
Racism without Races.

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Caveat: This is my first foray into using specifically Yogācāra thought, whose study I have been undertaking for several decades, to engage contemporary issues. But I have been thinking about these issues for longer than that, so I hope this will be a useful dialogue. First, some basic background and methodological considerations.

According to most Indian religious traditions, liberation comes about through an acute awareness of the constructed nature of our identity. This implies that that constructed nature is not patently obvious, but rather needs to be disclosed. That is to say, we are usually ignorant of the constructions that deeply inform our lives and that uncovering or disclosing these constructions allow us to be free from them. This is a large part of what the practice of yoga entails.

There is a way in which this quintessentially Indian view converges with the view of the social sciences. All the social sciences claim to 'explain' what is really happening in a society or culture, regardless of the self-awareness of the people involved. Psychology, sociology, anthropology— they all make the claim "*this* is really why people do this". Hence, in effect, they may be considered a 'hermeneutics of suspicion.' As Victor Turner put it: "What is structurally 'visible' to a trained anthropological observer is psychologically 'unconscious' to the individual member of the observer society." (Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 176)

This is not primarily an issue, in my view, of superimposing 'Western' models upon non-Western traditions (although one must always question this). It is an issue of overcoming ignorance and becoming aware of various, nonobvious, dimensions of people's lives. People are notoriously unaware of their own motivations, their own assumptions, their own stereotypes. To understand human behavior all these need to be 'uncovered' or disclosed and we need all the help we can get.

Social scientific theories do challenge our notions of agency, of self-awareness, of our professed reasons for behaving the way we do. The Indian Buddhist traditions also argue that we ought to challenge the very notion of agency, the idea that people are patently aware of their own presuppositions, or of the various structures - metaphysical, social, gendered, psychological - that underpin and govern their lives.

Yogācāra
At the outset, I find three specific Yogācārin ideas that are most directly relevant to our times. The first two ideas—a cultural unconscious and implicit bias—are based on the classical Yogācāras idea of *ālaya-vijñāna* or, as I like to gloss it, a concept of our unconscious construction of our common worlds, and the *kliṣṭa-manas*, our unconscious sense of self. The third point addresses the paradox of fighting against illusions, in this case, the illusion of identity.

The paradox is that, in the process of addressing the real world problems of racial and ethnic conflict, we can also easily but inadvertently end up reinforcing the very illusions that inform them—that there are *in fact* truly discrete, essentially distinct, groups of people who are mistreated by other truly discrete groups. If we do this, then we risk reinforcing rather than rectifying the very framework—the very illusions—that instigated these problems in the first place. This is the dilemma that we face when we address such 'social facts' as race, gender and ethnicity: they have no 'real' referent apart from the collective illusions of those who believe in them; but to attempt to resolve the social problems these illusions help bring out requires that we refer to these very illusions—since they are part of the conditions that lead to these problems—without at the same time reinforcing the false and pernicious misunderstandings they depend. This requires a careful analysis of how illusions are *falsely imagined*, at both the individual and collective levels—without losing sight of their effective reality as 'social facts.'

Our Common Cultural Unconscious, teeming with names, categories and marks.

It does not seem that the original Yogācārin thinkers from the 3-5th c. CE were particularly concerned with social and cultural transformation when they were formulating the complex notion of *ālaya-vijñāna*. At least, none of the basic arguments supporting this level of cognitive processes address any of these issues directly. Rather, the arguments were couched in logical or meta-psychological terms: the unbroken continuity over time of our karmic potentialities and latent dispositions—such as anger, greed and ignorance—only makes sense if we posit, in the context of momentariness, an underlying and subliminal level of cognitive processes wherein these potentialities may persist. From the point of view of modern psychology and cognitive science, this is hardly revolutionary or even controversial.

Nevertheless, these processes—summarized in two of Yogācārin's most innovative ideas *ālaya-vijñāna* and *kliṣṭa-manas*, our afflictive sense of self—do explicitly include the categories of language and culture that, over time, come to impress themselves upon our psyches, our mental streams, to such an extent that they amount to something like a cultural unconscious. Hence they lend themselves to a broader, psycho-sociological reading.

An important passage from the *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra* describes the *ālaya-vijñāna*, the 'mind with all the seeds', in terms of its internal conditions (inner appropriation or substratum; *upādāna*):

> The mind with all the seeds (*sarvabījakaṃ cittam*) matures, congeals, grows, develops, and increases based upon the two-fold substratum (*upādāna*), that is:
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> (1) the substratum of the material sense-faculties along with their supports (*sādhiṣṭhāna-rūpīndriya-upādāna*),
> (2) and the substratum which consists of the predispositions toward conceptual proliferation in terms of conventional usage of names, concepts and identifying marks, (*nimitta-nāma-vikalpa-vyavahāra-prapañca-vāsanā-upādāna*).[1]

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[1] *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra*. V.2 Translated from Tibetan; Sanskrit terms reconstructed. Waldron, 2002, p. 39, based on Schmithausen.

The *Sūtra* is stating that the conditions for our subliminal processes (it later describes *ālaya-vijñāna* as being too subtle, *sūkṣma*, for ordinary people to observe) are both our ongoing bodily processes and what can only be described as cultural influences: names, categories, etc., derived from conventional terms—both of which are 'taken up' or appropriated by (*upādāna*) by these underlying processes. We shall return to this point presently. In the same chapter, the *Sūtra* also states that the specific form our ordinary perceptions take "occur supported by and depending upon" the subliminal level of awareness that 'appropriates' these predispositions.

The implications of this are clear: our ordinary sense perceptions and ideas are not fully formed anew with each and every stimuli. Rather, there are various conditioning influences, various cognitive conditions, operating at subliminal levels, that serve to pre-structure the way that we perceive 'objects' and ideas. We do not first perceive 'raw data' and then afterwards construct images out of them; rather, a selective process occurs in the perceptual process itself, since the sense faculties are structured to respond to only certain kinds of sensory and cognitive stimuli. And prominent amongst these structural influences are our tendencies toward runaway thoughts, conceptual proliferations and extrapolations in terms of conventional names, concepts and identifying marks (*nimitta*).

This is explicitly stated in a commentary by Vasubandhu to a passage (I.58) in the *Summary of Mahāyāna* (*MSg.*) by Asaṅga, the two great classical Yogācārin thinkers: The "predispositions or impressions of speech" (*abhilāpa-vāsanā*) have the "special power" (*śakti-viśeṣa*) to give rise to cognitive awareness in regard to expressions of selves, *dharmas*, and actions, etc. (Waldron, 2003, 166)

It is clear here that, despite most Indian Buddhists' traditional orientation toward the workings of individual minds, many of our unconscious processes are imbued with the products of our collective, social and cultural upbringing—i.e. the very terms, concepts and images that influence how we experience things. Indeed, we could hardly operate in the world were this not the case. And these continuously, unconsciously and automatically influence the way that we experience our worlds day in and day out.

These both reflect and collectively help construct what traditional Indian Buddhists have called the 'shard world'(*bhājana-loka*; typically but misleading translated as the 'receptacle' world). In the next passage in the *Summary* (MSg. I.59), Asaṅga first distinguishes the 'common' or 'shared' world from the individual characteristics of people's subliminal processes (*ālaya-vijñāna*), and then declares that those aspects of our subliminal processes that are shared (or which we have in common) are the seed of our common or shared world (*bhājana-loka*). Indeed, he states in yet another Yogācāra text, *Compendium of Abhidharma*[2], that our shared 'worlds' come from the common or shared actions of sentient beings. It is well accepted among many scholars, though often overlooked, that 'world' (*loka*) here means our life-worlds (*Lebenswelt*) in a phenomenological, rather than in a realist, ontological, sense.

The Yogācārin thinkers are here declaring that our common 'life-worlds' are mutually, collectively and largely unconsciously constructed; in more precise Buddhist terms, the way that things appear to us in our ordinary perceptions and thoughts are largely *preconfigured* at an

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[2] *Abhidharma-samuccaya* (T 31.679b24–7, P 102b6–8 f.: *las thun mong ba zhes kyang 'byung/las thun mong ma yin pa zhes kyang 'byung /... thun mong ba gang zhe na/gang snod kyi 'jig rten rnam par 'byed pa'o//thun mong ma yin pa gang zhe na/gang sems can gyi 'jig rten rnam par 'byed pa'o*).

unconscious level due to the formative, yet subtle (*sūkṣma*), influences of the "conventional usage of names, concepts and identifying marks." And these constitute our collective, shared reality, our shared world (*bhājana-loka*).

Identifying with Our Cultural Unconscious.

Again, this might not be breaking news in our day and age, but the Yogācārin Buddhists added a more critical twist to this: it is our deep and mostly unconscious identification with the processes informed by these influences that brings about the discrimination between self and other that is at the heart of unwholesome actions.

This is described in a crucial chapter of another Yogācāra text traditionally attributed to Asaṅga, the *Yogācāra-bhūmi*. This section (1.b.) reiterates and rephrases all the points made above about the formative influences of false discrimination (*parikalpita-svabhāvābhiniveśa-vāsanā*) both on our unconscious constructive processes (*ālaya-vijñāna*) and their influence on our collective or shared world (*bhājana-loka*) (Waldron, *Buddhist Unconscious*, 2003, 179). It then (4.b) describes how we identify, through the processes of 'I-making' (*ahaṃkāra*) and the conceit 'I am' (*asmimāna*) with these subtle, constructive processes, "of taking *ālaya-vijñāna* as [its] object and conceiving [it] as 'I am [this]' (*asmīti*) and '[this is] I' (*aham iti*)." (*ibid.*, 182; Sanskrit reconstructed). According to the commentary on MSg. I.58 by Vasubandhu, cited above, the 'conceit 'I am' is what creates the very discrimination between 'self' and 'other.'

These processes of identifying with the names, concepts and identifying marks of our cultural conventions are also subtle in the sense that they do not overtly affect the karmic nature of our actions (4.b.)B.4; ibid, 185). However, as long as these processes of identification are still operating then so long will we remain 'bound' to the appearances (*vijñapti*) of the signs and marks (*nimitta*) of our culture. This term here translated as marks, '*nimitta*,' is usually understood as the mark by which any phenomena is known and identified. (Apperception, *saṃjñā*, occurs when we re-cognize the mark, *nimitta*, of a phenomenon, that is, which category it belongs to; the classic example is recognizing that something is yellow or blue.)

In other words, to the extent that we are accompanied by such deep-seated, unconscious identifications, then none of our moments of mind will ever be entirely free from the bonds of perceiving all phenomena in terms of our conventionally and collectively operating categories, within which lay our most basic distinctions between self and other. And all these discriminations are both the result of as well as formative influences upon our common worlds.

This outlines, in short, a theory of *implicit bias* that operates at both the individual and social or cultural levels, and between the nonconscious and conscious levels.

Combatting Collective Illusions

Now, one might think that this too is not exactly news. Studies of implicit bias, etc., all accept that most of this goes on below the threshold of consciousness. That is why social scientists design specific kinds of tests that do not depend on verbal responses to stimuli, but instead measure things that do not depend on conscious choices, such as the relative speed of responses to stimuli depending on whether or not they accord with specific stereotypes. But what Buddhists in general and Yogācārins in particular bring to the table is a more trenchant approach

to deconstructing these unconscious stereotypes, first by analyzing their enabling schemas in terms of the categories and marks mentioned above, and second by more thoroughly and *more consistently* analyzing the origination, the dependent arising, of these assumptions.

Our third and last point therefore addresses the issue of discrimination in terms of illusions. For the very categories we use to discriminate against others—categories that we unconsciously appropriate and take as our own (the etymology of *ap-propos*)—are themselves nothing but *false* constructs, fabricated out of fear and delusion. They have no underlying reality. They are illusions in the specific sense that they *do not exist in the way they appear*. Overcoming illusions, especially collective illusions, is trickier that we might think, because we need to both point out the real world consequences of our collective illusions without at the same time reinforcing the deeply entrenched sense that these refer to real entities. This is quite evident in paradoxical ways that we address the construct of 'race.'

Virtually all contemporary biologists agree that the human species cannot be biologically categorized according to something called 'race.'[3] We are all part of the human race. Nevertheless, many societies are structured in terms of fairly fixed racial categories, *falsely imagining* that these refer to something real. However illusory in a biological sense, these categories nevertheless reflect 'real' social facts, the belief in which helps bring about real suffering in the empirical world. So the problem is: how do we affirm the social 'reality' of these illusions while at the same time insisting on their illusory, that is, false, nature? Our attempts to take the social facts seriously often paradoxically end up reinforcing the sense that they are based 'real', not fabricated, categories. As Kwame Anthony Appiah asserts:

> If you try to say what the whiteness of a white person or the blackness of a black person actually means in scientific terms, there's almost nothing you can say that is true or even remotely plausible. Yet socially, we use these things all the time as if there's a solidity to them.
> https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/oct/18/racial-identity-is-a-biological-nonsense-says-reith-lecturer .

We will address this paradox through the Yogācāra schema of the Three Natures, which outlines the path from ignorance to awakening. Briefly, the first nature, the Falsely Discriminated or Falsely Imagined (*parikapita-svabhāva*; mentioned above as one of the informing influences on our subliminal processes), refers to the fact that we typically reify the contents of our experience: we *imagine* that the things, names and categories of our conventions, for example, actually refer to independent entities rather than interdependent processes. In short, we essentialize them. The second, the Dependent Nature (*paratanta-svabhāva*), explains how these essentializing tendencies arise in our most basic cognitive processes, much as described above in relation to *ālaya-vijñāna* and *kliṣṭa-manas*. The last, the Perfected Nature (*pariniṣpanna-svabhāva*), refers to the absence of these reifying processes within our cognitive processes. This is effectively the end of the Buddhist path. One no longer discriminates phenomena based on reified categories, but rather sees "things as they are."[4]

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[3] Cohen, *Culture of Intolerance,* Yale University Press. See esp. chapter 2, 'Human Scapegoat, Human Biological Variation and "Race,"' pp. 11-59.

[4] *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra* , VI.4, 5, 6.

In other words, both the deconstructive analyses carried out toward what we Falsely Imagine and the more constructive analyses carried out in the Dependent Nature serve as *remedies* to our tendencies to imagine that the world actually operates in the conventional terms and categories of any particular culture. This eventually frees us to see reality without such obscurations. This sequence follows the common Buddhist dictum that the teachings, the Dharma, are useful and relevant only insofar as they serve as remedies for any particular disorder. They are not describing reality so much as rectifying illusions. However, insofar as we take these remedies as realities in and of themselves, then we inadvertently revert to our tendencies to falsely imagine the world in terms of reified entities rather than dynamic processes. And insofar as we do this, then we seriously risk undermining the purpose of these analyses in the first place—to deconstruct our reifying tendencies.

Stuck in False Imagination, Endless Essentializing.

If we apply these approaches to the reigning social categories operative in contemporary American society and culture, then Yogācārins might point out the same drawbacks that social scientists do: essentialism is pernicious between it falsely imagines that people have a single, unitary and unchanging identity that defines who they 'essentially' are. Essentialism thus denies that people have the ability to grow, change and mature in response to their experiences and environment. It asserts that the characteristics of individual human beings are fixed and determined by their race, gender, ethnicity, or social status. Essentialism is thus closely allied with the notion of *social determinism*. Accordingly, Indian Buddhist thinkers have long argued against the essentialist positions articulated by Hindu thinkers in defense of the caste system.[5]

Such essentializing rests upon a truncated sense of identity, one that, in the words of Nobel Prize winner, Amartya Sen, encourages us to falsely imagine that people can be "uniquely categorized according to some singular and overarching system of partitioning."[6] What he calls a "'solarist' approach to human identity… sees human beings as members of exactly one group." Complexity is reified into singularity, interactive processes into static categories and, voilà, 'identity' is forged. Such an approach, Sen continues, is "a good way of misunderstanding nearly everyone in the world." It is, however, difficult to avoid these consequences when ones' conceptual and analytic tools are based on the very notions one is attempting to undermine: essentializing race-based categories, such as 'whiteness' and 'blackness.'[7]

Dependent Nature: explaining the cognitive underpinnings of our essentializing tendencies.

The concept of False Imagination helps us to identify the essentializing concepts that categorize people into distinct social groups, attributing to them unchanging or enduring characteristics. But many of us, in the American case, are tempted to claim that this occurs *because* the majority population belong to their own essentialized category, 'white' (and whose racist actions are instigated by the abstract, reified entity, 'whiteness'). As alluring as this approach may be, it simply replicates in opposing terms the same mode of thinking that maintains the problem in the first place. It has the unfortunate effect of reinforcing the

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[5] Eltschinger, *Caste and Buddhist Philosophy*, Motilal Banarsidas, 2012.

[6] Sen, *Identity and Violence: the Illusion of Destiny*, 2006, xii.

[7] This is called pragmatic self-refutation, in which, roughly, the rhetorical means used to attain a certain end contradict the stated ends. http://www.nyu.edu/gsas/dept/philo/faculty/malink/Review%20Castagnoli%202012.pdf.

essentialist's basic argument—that racial categories are not only real but are the most fundamental part of our identity.[8]

To remedy this we can call upon the second nature, the Dependent Nature, which describes how such reification occurs in terms of our deep-seated cognitive processes: We *falsely imagine* that the world is populated by fixed, unchanging entities, our fabricated social categories, because *these are the formative influences that inform some of our deepest cognitive processes*. This includes, we recall, the ways in which our underlying cognitive processes (*ālaya-vijñāna*) are formed in large part by our unconscious "tendencies to proliferate in terms of conventional usage of names, concepts and identifying marks." Liberation from False Imagination requires that we understand and counteract the dependently arisen processes through which we tend to reify our collectively constructed 'worlds.'

This, of course, is no easy task. As Michael Gazzaniga, a leading neuroscientist, explains why this is so in terms of our innate notions about the physical world.

> [Our essentialist] assumptions about how the physical world works are so entrenched and unconscious that it takes some effort to articulate them. Indeed, one of the main goals of psychology and philosophy is to define our most basic assumptions, to make explicit our naïve metaphysics, our understanding of the fundamental nature of reality.[9]

In short, this is a hermeneutics of suspicion: the world is not what its seems. There is ongoing social scientific research that extrapolate these insights to our social and psychological lives, identifying the origins and effects of our innate ('born with') essentializing tendencies.[10] These analyses flesh out in more specific terms the interdependent psychological and social processes underlying social categorization, stereotyping, etc.

On the '(Ir)reality' of Illusions: Racism without Races.

Our social 'illusions' then are real enough, but not in the way we imagine they are. Such collective 'illusions' as social hierarchy, ethnicity, gender, and race, as well as, Buddhists insist, our sense of unchanging identity, are both real and unreal. They are 'real' in the sense that they lead, through behavior that is dependently conditioned, to measureable, experienced effects. But they are 'unreal' in the sense that they do not have, nor refer to, unchanging, essential characteristics. This is the paradox of 'real illusions' mentioned at the start of this paper. In Buddhist terms, this effectively defines the problem: there is a discrepancy between how reality *is*, its ontology, and our *understanding* of it, our epistemology; our understanding of the world is flawed *epistemologically* because we fundamentally misunderstand how the world works *ontologically*.

This is often taken to the next logical level: once we have pointed out the illusory nature of these 'social facts'—once the illusion of separate, discrete and independently existing races, ethnicities and other social categories has been deconstructed—then what, indeed, does a 'racial

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[8] This implicit essentializing is not just contrary to nearly every perspective in the social sciences, it is also self-defeating. How can we expect people to get out of their boxes if at the same time we insist that they are caught in their boxes?

[9] Gazzinga, *Human: The Science Behind What Makes Your Brain Unique*, Harper, 2009, 5.

[10] Blood, *Descartes' Baby*. Mlodinow, *Subliminal*.

feature,' an 'ethic group,' really refer to? That is, the critique itself largely depends upon the reality of the object being critiqued. If there are no real racial differences because there are no real races, then what does it even mean to say that "racial differences are illusory"? It is like pointing out the differences between the two unicorns in the room. To critique something as illusory thus depends on the continued cogency, or common acceptance, of the thing being critiqued, that is, it depends on the illusion. It does *not* depend on the ontological existence of that illusion. So, yes, *races do not exist, but racism does*—and that, of course, is the problem.

As important as these psychological and logical analyses are, however, they are still insufficient. They need to be incorporated into yet larger analyses of structured social, economic and political inequality—which unfortunately tend to operate in much the same way as our cultural unconscious. That is, these further analyses are necessary because our essentializing categories are not just ensconced in the minds and hearts of multitudes of people, they are also implicit in very social institutions that are constructed upon them. And these function most efficiently when hidden beneath the cloak of one ruling ideology or another. As sociologist Peter Berger avers, "the institutional order must be so interpreted as to hide, as much as possible, its constructed character."[11] And this is precisely where such concepts of 'whiteness' and 'white privilege' are usefully applied as *critical tools—not ontological realities*—to disclose the hidden structural inequalities that pervade American, indeed most Western, institutions.

Hence, a multi-pronged approach is necessary:

1) we need to recognize that our collective, yet unconscious construction of our common realities—which is not easy since most of these processes occur outside of conscious access. This is a perspective shared by Yogācārins and cognitive scientists alike.

2) We need to recognize the unconscious grasping onto our discrete, reified sense of identity, at both the personal and group levels, as a constant source of discrimination and practices of inclusion/exclusion and work together to counteract these tendencies.

3) And in forging the tools necessary to overcome these very processes, we need to simultaneously recognize the provisional, remedial nature of such critical concepts as 'whiteness,' 'maleness,' (not to mention 'blackness,' 'foreignness,' etc.) If not, we end up 'fetishizing' whiteness, as Thomas Williams recently put it,[12] keeping us trapped in further layers of False Imagination.

4) Last, given the above, we must continue the trenchant, historically informed analyses of institutionalized discrimination that operates at nearly all levels of American society.

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[11] *Sacred Canopy*, 1967, 33.

[12] *How Ta Nehisi Coates Gives Whiteness Power*. By Thomas Chatterton Williams Oct. 6, 2017. New York Times. "so long as we fetishize race, we ensure that we will never be rid of the hierarchies it imposes. We will all be doomed to stalk our separate paths."