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Racism in public: why the majority will be silent no longer

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DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

Amelia Johns is affiliated with the Centre for Citizenship and Globalisation, Deakin University.

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In response to a number of highly publicised events where people from minority religious, ethnic or other cultural backgrounds have been approached on public transport and subjected to a tirade of racist abuse in Melbourne, columnist Tim Soutphommasane wrote in The Age earlier this month that while racism cannot be entirely eradicated from society, it is time that onlookers confronted acts of public racism as a matter of civic responsibility.

Video recorded on cameraphones, such as this from a Melbourne train, is proof that people are willing to shame racism in public and no longer be the ‘silent majority’. Fairfax Media
In particular, he pointed out that some of the most harmful long-term effects of racism on individuals is not the hate-filled intent of the minority who engage in racial abuse. Though such experiences are rightly terrifying, the real harm is caused by the silence of the majority, who do nothing to stand up for victims but instead look away. The effect of this for the abuser is a sense of entitlement that they are representing the majority view. For the victim, it is a feeling that the majority somehow condone these acts, or at the very least are unmoved by them.

In the events depicted by Soutphommasane – including a recent verbal attack on a French tourist on a Frankston-line bus – the majority of passengers captured on mobile phone footage did not challenge the perpetrator, but merely watched on.

The more recent case of a woman who racially abused a man of African background on a Melbourne train, however – telling him that her grandfather had gone to war to keep the country free of people like him – was met with a very different response. Instead of remaining silent, a large number of angry passengers confronted the woman, rejecting the version of Australia that she claimed to represent and supporting the victim.

The exchange, which was captured on mobile phone and later distributed through mainstream media outlets shows the woman’s surprise when her views are loudly denounced by the majority, including by a man who tells her: “If this is your country then I don’t want to live here”. The victim of the abuse later claimed that it was “beautiful” that the train stood up for him and supported his right to travel freely through the city without being subjected to racial abuse.

So, what does this tell us about racism in Melbourne, and how does this reflect on the “silent majority”? Firstly, we can no longer assume that the “majority” belong to a dominant ethnic or cultural heritage. Rather, the people that we sit next to on public transport more often than not come from a wide range of ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds. The natural outcome of this is that for the perpetrators of racial abuse and violence, they can no longer seek the cover of the silent majority.

Public manifestations in Australia of racism and xenophobia reached its zenith with the 2005 Cronulla race riots. AAP/Paul Miller

Also, the majority is silent no longer. This has a lot to do with the access that people now have to camera phones and social media channels, meaning that incidents of racial abuse and violence in public space are no longer visible only to the few who are present in that time and place. Instead, these instances are broadcast to a mass audience that is increasingly angry and vocal about such incidents and the way it portrays Australia as a reflection of ourselves and to other nations.
Thinking positively, incidents such as these can often lead to much needed debate about the kind of Australians we want to be, and the kind of country we want to live in. Much to the surprise of the woman on the train, the majority didn’t support her version of Australia – one that she claims her grandfather fought to protect.

As Anzac Day approaches, it is a good reminder that the kind of jingoism, racism and xenophobia that this day unfortunately inspires for some does not represent the majority view. Instead, we should be heartened that this woman while projecting her own racist and exclusionary version of Australia was shouted down by the majority. The actions of this new majority, who refused to remain silent when confronted with racism, contribute to the building of new legacies, inclusive of all Australians.

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