Review: The Crises of Multi-culturalism — Racism in a Neoliberal Age

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In November 2011, the Fine Gael mayor of Naas, Darren Scully sparked controversy when he announced on national radio that he would no longer represent "Black Africans", due to their "aggressiveness and bad manners" and their tendency to "play the race card". Ultimately, the controversy caused by Scully's blatant and unambiguous racism forced his resignation as mayor.

However, as Crises… co-author Gavan Titley pointed out, the mistake, from Scully's point of view, was not in being racist per se, but rather that he "played the wrong race card".[1] While overt racism is still experienced by people of colour both on the streets and within institutions, in public discourse the language and tactics of racism have become more subtle (to some extent, in response to significant victories by anti-racist, anti-apartheid and post-colonial movements worldwide, and the demise of scientific racism as an ideology). Racist speech is no longer concerned (explicitly at least) with racial superiority and inferiority, or even with race per se, but rather with the supposed impossibility of the harmonious co-existence of different cultures within a single society. Scully's blunder was his lack of political sophistication, not his racist intent.

Multiculturalism in crisis

In Crises…, Lentin and Titley discuss similar themes, exploring the dynamics of racism in contemporary public discourse in the era of neoliberalism. Specifically, they discuss various narratives around 'the failed experiment of multiculturalism', which function as a means of 'laundering' racist ideas and policies. These narratives have a fairly familiar form: For the past number of years we have been living in the era of multiculturalism, whose noble aspirations were pursued by state institutions across the Western world. However, despite the good intentions of its left and liberal proponents, multiculturalism has proved to be an utter failure and must be abandoned.

These narratives, while often presented by their narrators as someone finally speaking up on behalf of the silent majority in the face of repressive political correctness, in fact crop up regularly in public discourse, with everyone from newspaper columnists to mainstream political figures such as David Cameron, Nicolas Sarkozy and Angela Merkel, to far-right figures such as Nick Griffin or Geert Wilders clamouring to sound the death knell for multiculturalism.

Crises… challenges those narratives, by questioning whether a coherent multicultural era ever existed. They argue that multiculturalism was never seriously embraced by the establishment beyond the rhetorical, nor by left anti-racists, who saw it as a liberal retreat into culture (but who have been forced somewhat reluctantly into the position of defending multiculturalism against attacks from the right). Instead, the spectre of multiculturalism is erected as a target for the racial anxieties of everyone from liberals to the far-right.

This thesis is elucidated by combining theoretical analysis with discussion of various recent controversies: moves to ban or regulate the wearing of Islamic headscarves or burkas by Muslim women, the Swiss ban on minarets, the 'free speech' controversy around the Jyllands Posten cartoons, the 2004 Citizenship Referendum in Ireland, and others.

[1] www.multiculturecrisis.com

Free speech and white privilege

Of particular practical significance for the Irish left, specifically those involved in anti-fascist organising, is the discussion of the Jyllands Posten cartoon controversy, which has a number of parallels with the free speech debates that regularly result when fascist leaders are invited to speak on university campuses.[2] In such controversies, the substantive issue at stake (in this case the racist content of cartoons of Muhammed in a newspaper with a right-wing anti-Islamic agenda and historical links to fascism) is subsumed into a meta-debate about the principle of free-speech and its limits. This reflexive reframing of the issue serves a particular political function: to apparently invert the power structures of a white-privileged society so that the white racist becomes the victim of oppressive multiculturalism – an ontological inversion that functions to delegitimate the complaints of the oppressed and cast the oppressor as a symbol of Western liberal values.

"Organised around this abstraction is a 'threefold cast of characters' beginning with the protagonist who breaks a taboo in pursuit of freedom, who is subsequently supported by principled defenders of the open society, and both of whom triangulate with the subject who has taken offence… Muslims are cast as this intolerant apex, and thus positioned, 'end up being treated as deficient in comparison with the evident open-mindedness of those who tolerate transgression'".[3]

A similar dynamic exists in the case of fascist speakers on university campuses, with anti-fascists being drawn into a liberal-idealist discussion about what rights exist, how far they extend, and which rights take precedence when they conflict – a discussion which ultimately benefits fascists and racists. The more materialist analysis found here of how such events and the controversy surrounding them actually impacts the subjects of racism is perhaps a more useful way to frame discussions around applying a No Platform For Fascists policy.

Liberal racism, feminism vs. Islam, homonationalism

Also of interest is the authors' exposition of the various forms of racism embedded in liberal approaches to understanding race and to governance, which are significantly more subtle than those of the right and far-right. Multiculturalism itself is exposed as an effort to depoliticise racism, rendering invisible structures of racialised power through constructing an imagined post-racial landscape, and in doing so functioning both as an adjunct to the post-politicism of neoliberalism generally and as a liberal mirror to the far-right's shift in focus from race to culture. This post-racialism deprives racialised groups of the right to challenge discrimination as they experience it. Multicultural diversity is exposed as a coded language for certain acceptable ways of performing minority cultures – good diversity — which is counterposed with kinds of cultural performance less palatable to the white majority – bad diversity.

The co-optation of feminist and queer struggles by racist agendas is also discussed in-depth. Contemporary racism often employs the language and concerns of feminist and queer struggles in order to position Muslims and other racialised groups as a threat to the gains made by these movements, even though many of these gains are recent and heavily contested within even the

[2] This is discussed explicitly by Titley in relation to the recent invites of Nick Griffin to speak at UCC and TrinityCollegehere: www.guardian.co.uk…

[3] pp. 138

most progressive of Western societies. This was a particularly significant dynamic in debates about Islamic headscarves and veils across Europe, where veiled Muslim women were presented as a threat to the position of all women within European societies. The actual views and experiences of veiled women were in practice excluded from these debates, which were more concerned with white people's particular racialised vision of what a free woman looks like.

The authors draw from Jasbir Puar's work on 'homonationalism' in discussing the use of queer issues towards racist agendas. Queers, particularly those who fall into the category of 'homonormative' (those that closely mirror heteronormative sexuality and heterosexual identity: upholding monogamy, binary gender etc.), are able to "enact [previously barred] forms of national, racial or other belongings by contributing to a collective vilification of Muslims".[4] This dynamic is particularly significant in relation to the struggle for Palestinian national liberation, as Israel uses its relatively progressive position on LGBT rights to project itself as the ally of Western queer people in a region dominated by homophobic Muslim states and thus help to justify (pinkwash) its continued oppression of Palestine.

Conclusion

As an academic text, rather than an anti-racist handbook for activists, Crises… is somewhat lacking in direct practical insights for anti-racist activists, and often requires significant effort to parse the analyses presented into a useful form (a problem that is compounded by the dense writing style of the authors). However, a sophisticated understanding of how racism works under neoliberal governance is key if we are to win the 'battle of ideas' against those who would use racism to divide and control us in the interests of the ruling class. As such, the depth and incisiveness of analysis in Crises…make it an important text both for those seeking a better theoretical understanding of race, and those who work to combat racism in society.

[4] Puar, Jasbir (2007) Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times, Durham, NC: Duke University Press pp 21

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