Racism in a post-racial Europe

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The discrediting of the category of race in post-war European societies did not abolish racism: officially endorsed cultural relativism perpetuated Eurocentricism while dismissing racism as the pathology of the individual. Critique of culturalism is, however, to be distinguished from the new wave of anti-multiculturalism, argues Alana Lentin. Ostensibly aimed at the illiberalism of multiculturalism's "beneficiaries", the latter expresses intolerance of "bad diversity".

At “the beginning of the Sixties our country called the foreign workers to come to Germany and now they live in our country [...]. We kidded ourselves a while, we said: 'They won’t stay, sometime they will be gone', but this isn’t reality.”

The confiding tone taken by German chancellor Angela Merkel in her speech to youth members of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) in October 2010 is emblematic of the knowingness that anti-multiculturalist speech has taken on in recent times. From scholars such as Slavoj Zizek [1] – “liberal multiculturalism as an experience of the Other deprived of its Otherness – the decaffeinated Other” – to political leaders like David Cameron [2] – “we need a lot less of the passive tolerance of recent years and much more active, muscular liberalism” – multiculturalism has become the cause of European handwringing across the political spectrum. Despite their distaste, Europe’s political leaders are resigned to the fact that their countries will never be the same again. In their knowingness they cordon off those who, like them, have realized the mistakes of times past but are resolved to put them right; a boundary which sets apart the knowers from those misguided in their guilt-ridden tolerance, as well as from the “beneficiaries” of multiculturalism themselves, who must no more be allowed to believe that their rights can take precedence over those of their hosts.

Multiculturalism has become a battleground in a Europe desperate to (re)discover itself and to (re)assert its hegemony. The economic crisis engulfing the continent may be pushing furores about burkas and minarets temporarily off the front pages but, as the November 2011 arson attack against the offices of the French satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo demonstrates, the issue of whether there is a space for difference in Europe is never far from the agenda.

That multiculturalism can unite in opposition as unlikely an alliance as Merkel and Zizek
is telling of the fact that, as Charles W. Mills writes, it has always been a “conceptual grab bag” and a “maddeningly spongy and imprecise discursive field”. [3] The current debate on the effects of multiculturalism benefits from this capacity to absorb anything vaguely to do with culture, race, identity, and so on. As Mills puts it, “whatever does not fit into the ‘traditional’ political map of, say, the 1950s is stuffed in here”. [4] Multiculturalism provokes knee-jerk reactions, conjuring up a decaying European culture subjugated by overly-tolerated illiberal minorities determined to destroy the continent from within. [5]

However, far from the “state doctrine” that Cameron claimed it was, multiculturalism has always inspired critique both from those it was intended to benefit as well as those repulsed by its implications. Paradoxically, many of these same critics have been forced to defend a set of loosely defined values with which they aligned themselves only with reservations in the first place. [6] The fact that some antiracists have defended multiculturalism while others laying claim to the name have sided with its critics [7] reveals that little has been done to unravel either what multiculturalism itself was attempting to respond to or what the “crisis” in which multiculturalism today is deemed to be facing indicates. The contemporary crises of multiculturalism – expressed through a matrix of “recited truths” – have to be understood as the contemporary articulation of racism in a purportedly postracial age. [8] Multiculturalism itself, in that it ever existed as more than a set of piecemeal policies and contested ideas with very different expressions across different countries, was a response to racism – albeit one that, paradoxically, has contributed to the deepening of racist exclusion in Europe.

This article unravels this idea by dwelling, firstly, on the rise of culturalism as a response to racism and the effects that this has had on a discussion of the continuing impact of race on European societies. It then relates this foundational problem to multicultural crisis as a specific expression of postracialism in a European context, using examples from two European contexts: Britain and France. My argument is that both multiculturalism itself and the current attacks on it, in a European context at least, have to be understood in terms of a deeply ingrained inability, and even unwillingness, among the dominant political class to deal with the effects of race, as a structuring political idea, on European society, on the populations it oppressed under colonialism and during the postcolonial migrations, and crucially on the idea of Europe itself.

The rise of culturalism

Multiculturalism, a series of accommodations made for the perceived needs of ethnic minority groups according to the principle of “unity in diversity”, cannot be disconnected from its avowed culturalism. In multiculturalism, culture is seen as vital for the self-identity of groups and integral both to their internal organisation and external representation. [9] No European country to which non-European immigrants have settled has been immune to culturalism; even France, which has defiantly eschewed multi culturalism as alien and antithetical to the universalist values to which it lays claim. Once the initial period of post-war labour migration (often singularly masculine) came to an end, to be followed by a period of family settlement, the association of immigrant groups with their cultural traits, rather than as individuals or by class, political alignment, gender and so on, became universal. Whether or not intentional on the part of the state,
essentialist ideas about non-Europeans as groups, defined by specific cultural traits, came to dominate, in some cases with the help of policies further compounding the view that culture above all else was what defined and set “immigrants” apart from Europeans.

To a certain extent there is little of interest in this observation – the significance of culture is true for all human societies which have developed a multiplicity of languages, customs, practices, rituals and values, some of which remain and some of which have receded over time. Noteworthy in the European context, however, is that the specific emphasis on culture marked the absence of another, now discredited indicator of difference: race. In post-war Europe, the idea of race as a schema for governing those who, as Michel Foucault put, were to be allowed to live and those who were to be “let die” was vigorously and justifiably repudiated. [10] As I have written elsewhere, [11] the idea of culture as a way of describing and defining people emerges in part as a consequence of the vehemence with which an overt language of race was rejected. As Stuart Hall noted in his 1997 lecture, “Race, the floating signifier”, [12] the big problem for the discussion of human difference is that variations exist and cannot help but assault the eye, especially if they are markedly obvious, such as the physical markers of “colour, hair and bone” that evoke the now taboo signs of race. [13] A discourse of “equal but different” culture enters the scene as a purportedly better way of qualifying the differences previously thought of as racial. Culture and ethnicity trumped race because they were considered non-hierarchical – each culture was different but equal – and not immutable; culture did not evoke the naturalness, and thus the fixedness, that racial categorisation did.

The role played by the UNESCO project on race and racial prejudice, which began in 1950, demonstrates well how a cultural (as opposed to racial) language comes to dominate attempts to describe societies transformed by migration and to prescribe solutions to the problems raised by this “new” heterogeneity. Anthropology, acknowledged as the “handmaiden of colonialism”, played a significant role, through the work of scholars such as Claude Lévi-Strauss for UNESCO, [14] in influencing the ascent of the idea of cultural relativism. Scientists who wished to reserve a role for race within biology or genetics used their involvement with UNESCO to argue for race to be depoliticised. The need nonetheless to be able to explain human difference, especially in the light of growing societal conflict as began to be the case in Europe in the 1950s, made culture an attractive alternative to the racial classifications which had dominated until at least the end of the War.

Building on the work of Lévi-Strauss, the “UNESCO tradition” [15] compounded the idea that ethnicity, which encapsulates a group’s cultural characteristics, rather than race, which focuses on their spurious genetic ones, is a superior means for encapsulating human variation. Lévi-Strauss proposed ethnocentrism as a more accurate term than racism to describe discrimination on ethno-cultural grounds. It was therefore suggested that intercultural education be encouraged as a means of combating the persistence of ethnocentric attitudes.

Three main problems can be identified in the UNESCO approach that relate to how a conceptualization of culture as an elision of the deep structural problems left by race has in part determined the nature of contemporary racism. First, by proposing that racism is
a wrongheaded attitude based on misleading, pseudo-scientific information, the UNESCO approach implies that it can, therefore, be overcome at the level of the individual without questioning the role of the state. This approach forms part of the post-racial consensus that, today, ascribes analyses of “institutional racism” to the paranoia of “minorities” or the extreme-Left. Racism, according to the commonsense stance, is the pathological problem of ignorant individuals who “know no better”, an analysis based on an inherent classism that equates racism mainly with lower class ignorance. This interpretation of racism psychologises and individualises it, making it impossible to propose political analyses or solutions. Slavery, colonialism, the Shoah and contemporary discrimination against immigrants and the racialized can therefore only be interpreted as aberrations, and not as composites of the politics of modern nation-states.

The second problem in the UNESCO approach is that proposing culture as an alternative to race does little to refute the widely accepted, Eurocentric view that, globally, human groups can be organized hierarchically according to differential levels of “progress”. While theoretically accepting the validity of “different but equal” cultures, Lévi-Strauss insisted that the principle of cultural relativism could only work if “cultures” were kept in isolation from each other. When cultural practices that had been uprooted from their geographical groundings and transplanted in an often wholly alien landscape were confronted with those of the “host” nation, potentials for conflict were naturally engendered. Facile comparisons based on essentialised and mediated readings of the Other’s customs either compounded a sense of cultural superiority or evoked a process of doubt that was as unsettling for the “hosts” as it was for their so-called guests.

Lastly, the idea that people can be assigned to different groups according to culture can do nothing to avoid the essentialism implied by race. Whether or not it is as pernicious as an idea, culture is no less reifying than race. Indeed, it is on these grounds that the concept of multiculturalism has been critiqued by scholars and activists who have claimed that seeing cultural groups as internally homogeneous and static ignores the hybridization that comes about as populations originating in various parts of the globe share space in the urban metropole. Simplistic readings of culture as unifying and homogeneous almost always refer to the cultures of the unknown; the dominant culture is accepted as the norm yet rarely applied blanket-fashion to all its members: Utøya killer Anders Behring Breivik is immediately understood as an extreme outlier among Norwegians while 7/7 bomber Mohammed Sidique Khan is seen as representative of a trend among Muslims in general. Political leaders evoke unqualified “European values” as at once internally shared and externally separating. Such is the nature of cultural certainty, a privilege which, if engaged in by minorities, earns them the label “fundamentalist”.

Good and bad diversity

The well-meant move to drive a wedge of acceptability between culture and race has resulted in the fact being obscured that “the racial was always cultural”. [16] Scholars such as Barker, Stolcke, and Taguieff, [17] noting a marked rise in the acceptance of extreme right discourse in European politics in the 1980s and 90s, theorised the advent of a “new culturalist racism” that eschewed biological explanations in favour of a “differentialism” paradoxically inspired by cultural relativism. The importance of culture as a mode of justification, bringing as it did previously unpalatable ideas such as
immigrant repatriation (now called deportation) into the political mainstream and leading to the electoral success of parties such as the Front National, should not be underplayed. However, by insisting on the newness of cultural neo-racism, these authors negated the fact that biology and culture have always been interchangeable as justifications for exclusion. [18] Explanations of cultural incompatibility may foreground difference rather than inferiority, but the effect for the marginalised denizen or the detained asylum seeker fails to capture the subtlety. Nevertheless, what the theorists of the new racism did pick up on were the new possibilities for racism enabled by the discursive shift towards culture. While fascist parties in the 1990s remained careful to steer clear of public talk of cultural or moral superiority, twenty years later the anti-multiculturalism of the mainstream – from the political Right to the Centre Left – has no such delicacy. The post 9/11 consensus has brought judgment back in, with culture declared to be the battleground for the “hearts and minds” of groups reified along moral lines.

This is very clear in the work of one of the soothsayers of multicultural decay, the journalist Christopher Caldwell. His latest book [19] may echo the rabid “Eurabianism” of his less careful colleagues, but it has been shrouded in respectability because he is thought to “dispense a sharp common sense that many liberals find salutary”. [20] Caldwell’s is a treatise on Europe’s undoing at the hands of an increasingly confident and demographically growing Muslim minority, undeterred in its objective to undo a decadent continent erring blindly into self-destruction. The fight for the high ground is both moral and material: Muslims are overtaking “Europeans” (as though the former were not European) demographically, but also philosophically because of the very “fundamentalism” that European liberality (again portrayed as an intrinsic quality) has eschewed. Stereotyping and historical and sociological inaccuracy are mere inconveniences in Caldwell’s persuasive argument that only renewed certainty and a sense of common purpose will save Europe from the revolution that the presence of Muslims within portends. This is clear when he warns that,

Europeans know more about Arabic calligraphy and kente cloth because they know less about Montaigne and Goethe. If the spread of Pakistani cuisine is the single greatest improvement in British public life over the past half-century, it is also worth noting that the bombs used for the failed London transport attacks of July 21, 2005, were made from a mix of hydrogen peroxide and chapatti flour. Immigration is not enhancing or validating European culture; it is supplanting it. [21]

Most opposition to multiculturalism today is not grounded in a well-founded critique of prescriptive multiculturalism such as has existed in – patchy – multicultural policy. It is, rather, an attack on what some have described as the lived multiculture that has come to shape the experience of many, if not most, Europeans, whatever their cultural background. This rejection of multiculturalism does not express a critique of culture as adequate lens through which to see society, politics or the economy. Rather, it has a problem with cultural excess, or too much culture of the wrong kind, what one might call “bad diversity”. [22] If diversity is considered a sine qua non of neoliberal life, without which choice and the autonomy to operate freely would be impossible, causing the free market to stagnate, it nonetheless has to be the right type of diversity. To its opponents, multiculturalism is antithetical to diversity because its laissez-faire principles make
culture unmanageable. The accuracy of this vision of multiculturalism aside, the management of diversity (now an industry in itself) allows for the contours of good and bad diversity to be defined.

Good diversity presents us with more cultural choices, like items on a menu to be sampled, but does not upset the balance of power in unequal societies; bad diversity is potentially transformative, not only because it is not marketable, but because it challenges the very precepts upon which the terms are set. The growth of “minority white cities”, an alarmism beloved of the anti-immigration Right, is a fact (less rapid, certainly, but nonetheless a good characterisation of a handful of European cities). However, whether this is approached with panic or acceptance depends on whether the transformation entailed is seen as an implantation of “bad diversity” or a fact of social change that reflects the increased globality of the contemporary world. [23]

**Post-multiculturalism, post-racism**

An appreciation of the opposition to multiculturalism as an aversion to “bad diversity” allows us in turn to relate the “crisis of multiculturalism” to the idea that we are now “post-race”. Mainly mobilised in the US by both liberals and the right, post-racialism refers, in the case of liberals, to the triumphant vanquishing of racism in the Obama era. For rightwingers, we are not post-race as such; rather, racism is either an overblown fiction or a stick used to beat a beleaguered white majority, now at the mercy of a new elite of “uppity” people of colour. While the politics of race in Europe are of a different quality, post-racialism exists in the denial of racism across the mainstream political spectrum. Racism is now seen as confined to the far-Right, and hence mainly a thing of the past, or conversely, now setting white Europeans in its sights.

The facile reduction of the political struggles that produced multiculturalism – an imperfect and flawed response to racism – to the straw man of cultural relativism has facilitated the powerful idea, at the core of anti-multiculturalism, that objecting to another’s culture is wholly different to a rejection on “racial” grounds. Culture is rhetorically separated from the individuals who practice it, while paradoxically made to stand for everything they are. Care is always taken by the “Eurabianists” to separate between Muslims and “Islamism”, for example. Yet the slippage from generalised cultural critique to the targeting of particular populations associated with unpalatable cultural practices is easy. The effect is to make these practices intrinsic to groups such as Muslims, whom this essentialization and resultant marginalization racializes.

Nevertheless, the avoidance – or indeed the outright rejection – of discredited race thinking, expunged from the public discourse of even the most outspoken opponents of multiculturalism, immigration and Islam in Europe, creates a neat separation between sensible resistance to multicultural excess and the irrational racism of a bygone era. This post-racial consensus allows a new, non-racial racism to cement itself and become part of acceptable rhetoric among many who see themselves as opponents of racism, reduced to the “colour line” alone. [24] Caldwell, discussing Spain’s policy of “ethnic filtering” – a preference for more compatible Latin America migrants – is therefore able to write: “It is not racist. Spain is less concerned that its immigrants be white than they have similarities of worldview with the people already established there, starting with knowing what the inside of a church looks like.” [25] Racism has to be performatively rejected even while being reproduced in and through the political mobilization of bad diversity.
I end with two illustrations of how post-racial anti-multiculturalism is played out in contemporary Europe. Christian Joppke, in his attack on the Muslim veil dressed up as a treatise on political liberalism, notes that each western European country has taken markedly different approach to dealing with its immigrant population. [26] In each, however, newly avowed opposition to a multiculturalism deemed responsible for societal disintegration has become the orthodoxy.

Racializing “sexularism”

Joan W. Scott, in her 2007 book *The Politics of the Veil*, coined the term “sexularism” to refer to the way in which in France the ideals of secular European modernity are interpreted as leading directly to sexual liberation and gender equality. [27] The dogma of sexularism allows for facile comparisons to be made between presumed western libertarianism and eastern – Muslim – backwardness in matters of gender equality and gay rights. Several critics have noted the participation of liberal feminists and gay rights activists in lending legitimacy to the ideological embedding of a “clash of civilizations” logic post-9/11. [28]

In Spring 2011, this was highlighted by the furore caused by plans to organise a Gay Pride march in London’s East End in protest at stickers emblazoned with the words “Gay Free Zone”. The stickers had appeared in the district of Tower Hamlets, noted for its sizeable Bangladeshi minority. Anti-racist and gay rights activists uncovered that the march’s organizers had links to the militantly anti-Muslim English Defence League (EDL), and the event was called off to be replaced by an inclusive march endorsed by officials from the East London Mosque. [29] The attempt to portray East London as a no-go area for LGBTQI people, as argued by the discredited columnist Johann Hari [30] in the irresponsibly titled “Can we talk about Muslim homophobia now?”, [31] was shown to be a fiction of “sexularist” liberals but also the significantly less acceptable EDL and its 600-strong “gay wing”. Nevertheless, the framing of the East End Gay Pride (EEGP) debacle from a sexularist perspective by veteran gay rights activist Peter Tatchell is revelatory of the post-racialism I argue is fundamental to European anti-multiculturalism. Tatchell publicly condemned the EEGP once its far-right connections had been established, but insisted on admonishing “both the Islamists and the EDL [who] menace Muslim people” and protesting that “East London is not and never will be a ‘Gay-Free Zone’”. He relates on his website how, on the day of the march, he was a victim of abuse from Muslim “hotheads”, claiming that “there were moments when I thought I was going to be physically attacked”. [32]

The equalization of the EDL and Muslim extremism in Tatchell’s discourse purposefully glosses over the critique of the political utility of sexularism at a time when gender and sexuality have become faultlines in the battle between western “civility” and Muslim “backwardness”. As succinctly analysed by Decolonize Queer, [33] the participation of privileged white LGBT people in the gentrification of underprivileged urban spaces such as Tower Hamlets, often leading directly to the dispossession of migrant and poor communities, is absent in Tatchell’s simplistic equalization of rightwing racism and Muslim fundamentalism. As in similar cases in Germany, [34] the heightened policing of “Muslim” neighbourhoods, often at the request of new residents (including white, middle class queers), has perpetuated the association of Muslims with threat, both global and personal. The repeated distancing from racism in Tatchell’s opposition to
multiculturalism, which he says “has resulted in race and religion ruling the roost in a tainted hierarchy of oppression”, [35] and his pride in “count[ing] many leading Muslim and black activists among my friends and political comrades”, [36] both questions the validity of anti-racist critique and reduces racism to the equally extremist politics of the far-Right and fundamentalist Islam. The institutional racism that enables the caricaturing of multiculturalism as responsible for societal disintegration and resultant intolerance for a silenced white majority (including white women and queers) goes unquestioned.

Souschiens or sous-chiens?

Another snapshot from France further illustrates the post-racial rewriting of racism as universal, deracinated from its origins in European political culture and oppressive structures and enabled by an overly tolerant multiculturalism that has facilitated the tyranny of the bigoted (Muslim) minority.

In 2007, the spokesperson for the French de-colonial anti-racist group, the Mouvement des indigènes de la République, Houria Bouteldja, during a discussion on a popular TV chat show, insisted on the need to educate the white French population about the history of racism and colonialism. She used the term souschien, an ironic neologism that makes reference to the category Français de souche, first employed by Front National leader Jean-Marie Le Pen in 1979 and later taken up by French demographers to refer to “indigenous” (white) French people, thus distinguishing them from the black and Arab population. The philosopher Alain Finkielkraut chose to add a hyphen, thus rendering the word as sous-chien, or “sub-dog” (mongrel), and accused Bouteldja of anti-French or anti-white racism. [37] Finkelkraut’s provocative re-punctuation provided an example to those, among them the “Republican” magazine Marianne, keen to demonstrate how France’s postcolonial citizens had been allowed too much leeway. The French Interior Minister, Brice Hortefeux, who knew well “that Houria Bouteldja was being ironic”, [38] was one of the first to take up Finkelkraut’s call to arms. “He declared that foreigners whom France ‘welcomes, hosts and feeds do not have the right to insult French people’, thus effectively denying French citizens of immigrant origin the right to “to bandy words about or make puns like any other French person”. [39]

In May 2010 and again in October 2011, Bouteldja was summoned before the courts on charges of anti-French racism, the result of a case prepared against her by the General Alliance Against Racism and for the Respect of French and Christian Identity (AGRIF). That the AGRIF emerged from agents of the Vichy regime and the murderous OAS in Algeria, and has strong contemporary links to the Front National, illustrates the centrality of “anti-white racism” to a right-left consensus premised on the threat posed by a rising movement of autonomous anti-racist intellectuals. This case points to a structuring irony of the contemporary politics of difference; being able to prosecute something touted as anti-French racism depends on the now hegemonic view of western societies as post-racial.

If the dominant case against multiculturalism is understood as cementing separateness and universalising intolerance from a post-racialist perspective, then it becomes impossible to treat contemporary attacks on multiculturalism as politically neutral. The persistent distancing from racism both by liberal critics as well as heads of state reveals the way in which opposing multiculturalism masquerades as common sense while racism
is placed squarely in the domain of the historical and/or the pathological. The contemporary discrediting of multiculturalism should therefore be understood as continuous with elite racism since the end of the Second World War; in discursively rejecting it while insisting on seuils de tolerances in matters of immigration and euphemistically-termed “cultural diversity”, elites have not only compounded the divide between Europeans and those “in but not of Europe”, [40] but have also blurred the boundaries between the realms of the acceptable and the unacceptable, so that the tenets of postracial anti-multiculturalism become unchallenged truths. The consequences are not the much touted integration and social cohesion but greater alienation and division in a deeply troubled continent.

Footnotes


12. Stuart Hall, Race, the Floating Signifier, Media Education Foundation Film, 1997.

13. W.E.B Du Bois, Dusk of Dawn: An essay toward an autobiography of a race concept,


22. Alana Lentin; Gavan Titley, Crises.


31. Johann Hari, "Can we talk about Muslim homophobia now?", Attitude.


35. "Not all cultures are equally valid and commendable", 3 November 2009.

36. "Academics smear Peter Tatchell".


38. Ibid.

39. Ibid.


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