
Post-Race, Post Politics:

The paradoxical rise of culture after multiculturalism

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Abstract

Obama's election as US President in 2008 appeared to give further support to the notion that the US has become a post-racial society. This argument has fuelled the position of the anti-affirmative action lobby since the 1980s and of those, across western societies, who oppose anti-discrimination policies for their recognition of difference in general and race in particular. Race critical theorists have consistently argued that declaring a society post-race is to ignore the persistence of racism in continuing to define socioeconomic inequality despite changing societal relationships to race over time. Despite such critiques, the notion that we are post-race has gained ground in a post-9/11 era defined by a growing suspicion of diversity. Clearly racialized, this suspicion is nonetheless couched in cultural-civilisational terms that attempt to avoid the charge of racism. Hence, policies seeking to counteract the perceived failure of multiculturalism in Europe today pose culturalist solutions to problems deemed to originate from an excess of cultural diversity (Goodhart 2004). This policy is part of a deepening culturalization of politics in which the post-race argument belongs to a post-political logic that shuns *political* explanations of unrest and widening disintegration in favour of reductive culturalist ones. This culturalization of politics is understood by relating it to the displacement of the political originating with the 19th Century ascendance of race (Hannaford 1996), thus demonstrating the importance of analysing the notion of post-race within a wider analysis of the profound rejection of politics of which it has, and continues to be, definitive.

Introduction

“Malcolm X used to say: What do you call a Black man with a Ph.D?
"N*****.”¹

“When whites – especially today's younger generation – proudly support Obama for his post-racialism, they unwittingly embrace race as their primary motivation. They think and act racially, not post-racially. The point is that a post-racial society is a bargainer's ploy: It seduces whites with a vision of their racial innocence precisely to coerce them into acting out of a racial motivation. A real post-racialist could not be bargained with and would not care about displaying or documenting his racial innocence. Such a person would evaluate Obama politically rather than culturally.”²

Although, as the quotes above reveal, the particular cadence in which the race song is sung in the US remains specific to it, the notion that we are post-racial extends well beyond the borders of that country, across the West. This paper identifies post-racialism as the dominant mode in which racism finds discursive expression today. I argue that in order to fully comprehend the way in which it functions, narrow interpretations of race need to be enlarged to encompass the ways in which race and racism, culture and culturalism have become intertwined or, in some cases, made interchangeable.

Thus, the contemporary move away from multiculturalism towards ‘integration’ should be understood, not as a critique of highly criticisable multiculturalist policies, but of *lived multiculturalism per se*; that is of the racial/ethnic/cultural diversity of post-immigration societies. The debate on multiculturalism can be understood as being inscribed in a post-racial logic because those who oppose multiculturalism see it as having been imposed by racial and ethnic minorities whose demands for recognition were prioritised over all other concerns. This is akin to the conservative variant of post-racialism that opposes any action taken to point out or alleviate discrimination against the racialised as discriminatory in itself.

¹ ‘Opening the Flood-"Gates" to Increased Animosity’, *This Week in Race*.
http://raceproject.org/2009_07_01_archive.html.

² Shelby Steele, ‘Obama's post-racial promise’, *Los Angeles Times*, November 5, 2008.
<http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/commentary/la-oe-steele5-2008nov05,0,6553798.story>.

Secondly, despite the attack on multiculturalism, solutions to societal problems said to emanate from an excess of culture, most markedly in the current climate Muslim culture, are themselves met by culturalised 'solutions'. In other words, problems of a social, economic and political character are interpreted, not on those grounds, but as cultural in origin, and therefore resolvable only in cultural terms. This is due to a general culturalisation of politics in which cultural, rather than socioeconomic or political frames such as inequality, exploitation or injustice (Žižek 2008), are "invoked to describe, analyze, argue, justify, and theorize" (Domínguez 1992, cited in Yúdice 2003: 25).

Thirdly, the hegemony of culture as a primary explanatory frame is rooted historically in the ascent of race as a political idea. The culturalisation of politics identifiable today bears similarities to the idea that 'race is all' that came to dominate European politics in the 19th century. In this sense, it is post-political, both reducing the socioeconomic to the cultural, and constraining the terms of the debate within a culturalist register that takes reified 'culture' – both 'theirs' and 'ours' – for granted.

Understanding the anti-multiculturalism backlash and the move towards 'integrationism' (Kundnani 2007) from this historicised perspective, one that refuses the analytic separation between race and culture, assists us in making sense of the apparently paradoxical culturalism of contemporary opposition to multiculturalism.

I'm not being racist but...

"And the libs, of course, say that minorities cannot be racists because they don't have the power to implement their racism. Well, those days are gone, because reverse racists certainly do have the power to implement their power. Obama is the greatest living example of a reverse racist, and now he's appointed one."³

The diverse set of issues summarised by the word race remains one of the major controversies in US political life. Whether the US is post-racial continues to be hotly debated, both by liberals for whom post-race means the end of racism, and for conservatives for whom to be post-race is to speak out against

³ Rush Limbaugh on Obama's nomination of Sonia Sotomayor to the Supreme Court, cited on *The Politics Daily*. <http://www.politicsdaily.com/2009/05/26/rush-limbaugh-calls-sonia-sotomayor-president-obama-racists/>

what they see as the excesses and injustices of anti-racism. The extent to which this is so is made clear by three stories that dominated the race-related headlines in the US in the Summer of 2009. The three each point to how the debate over whether race is still the issue is, due to the very fact that it is posed at all, proof of the extent to which *racism* remains integral to US-American life notwithstanding Obama's ascent to power.

The first of these stories is the Birther movement, a group of influential right-wingers claiming that Obama has no right to be US President because he is not a 'natural born citizen'. Despite evidence to the contrary, supplied by the State of Hawaii, that Obama *was* born there, the birthers claim that he was in fact born in Kenya. Although there is no support for such claims, the movement has led to 11 Republican congressmen signing a 'Birther Bill' that would demand a birth certificate from all future US Presidents. According to Gary Younge in *The Guardian*,⁴ 28% of US-Americans believe that Obama was not born in the US while 30% are unsure.

The second event of the race-laden summer concerns the recently installed member of the US Supreme Court, Sonia Sotomayor, the first Hispanic woman ever to accede to the post, and Obama's first nomination to the body. Ms Sotomayor invoked right-wing scorn and centrist 'concerns' over a 2001 lecture she gave in which she claimed that, "I would hope that a wise Latina woman with the richness of her experiences would more often than not reach a better conclusion than a white male who hasn't lived that life." The statement merely notes Sotomayor's belief, one upheld by many social scientists, that complete objectivity is impossible and that, rather, lived-experience can lend great insight into the particularities of a given subject of study or, in this instance, legal judgment.

Nevertheless, Sotomayor's opponents believe that double standards have been applied in the case of her nomination because, in their view, her statement was nothing short of racism. It invoked Newt Gingrich to say "imagine a judicial nominee said 'my experience as a white man makes me better than a [L]atina woman.' [N]ew racism is no better than old racism," thus implying that Sotomayor's statement was on a par with white racism. This disingenuously ignores the fact that no white man would ever be pulled up on a tendency to identify more closely with the concerns of a white defendant simply because to

⁴ Gary Younge, 'To engage the birther fantasists is futile; to dismiss them, recklessly', 2 August 2009.

do so is the unquestioned norm. Nevertheless, the ‘new racism’ Sotomayor has been accused of embodying has been portrayed by shock jock Rush Limbaugh as leading to “whites becoming ‘the new oppressed minority’ [with] Republicans... going along with it by ‘moving to the back of the bus’ and obliging by drinking only out of designated water fountains’.”⁵

The third, most recent, incident is the arrest of Harvard Professor Henry Louis ‘Skip’ Gates at his home by a policeman investigating an assumption that Gates was attempting to break into his own home. The police was alerted by a neighbour upon seeing Gates and a taxi driver attempting to resolve the problem of Gates’s mislaid keys. When the arresting officer came to investigate he was reassured by Gates that he was indeed the home owner. The exact interchange between the two is unclear, although Gates clearly reprimanded Sergeant Crowley. What is known is that Gates was officially arrested for ‘disturbing the peace’. Although, the notion that the sergeant was in any sense under threat from the 5’5” disabled professor has been called into question. It is more likely that Gates was arrested for what used to be known as being ‘uppity’. Obama weighed in on the case, initially calling Crowley ‘stupid’ but later retracting this and inviting both men to the White House for a chat over beer.



⁵ ‘Republicans Battle Over and About Sonia Sotomayor’s “Racism”’, *This Week in Race*, 1 June 2009. http://raceproject.org/2009_06_01_archive.html.

A number of points can be made about these three interrelated cases. Firstly, they all narrate the unease felt by many US-Americans about being led by a man who identifies as black. This would imply that the US is in no sense post-race in the way that the Obama election was taken by many to demonstrate. On the contrary, the debates raised by these three cases are inscribed precisely in the discourse of racelessness (Goldberg 2002) that seeks to relativise racism and downplay the salience of its experience for non-whites. The post-race argument is not equivalent to one that would advocate for a post-racist society. The proponents of the post-race stance do not claim that race is no longer an issue because racial equality has been attained. For many among them, racial equality is well off their list of priorities; for others, including anti-affirmative action lobbyists such as the Republican African-American Ward Connerly, it is actually hindered by ‘harping on’ about race. Both dismiss the claims of the racialised as invalid ‘political correctness’. Furthermore, they see these claims as hegemonic, superseding those of the (for some more legitimate) white majority and leading to a situation of ‘reverse racism’ of which Barack Obama’s election is the ultimate proof.

Moreover, liberal opponents of this right-wing stance nonetheless sustain the post-race argument by using Obama’s election, the nomination of Sotomayor, or the fact of the existence of a black middle class to downplay racism. Their belief in the equality afforded by the ideal of meritocracy and the proof that (some) non-whites have now benefited from it blinds them to the fact of racist discrimination as it continues to plague the lives of most racialised people, unaffected by the social mobility of a few of their numbers. As argued on *This Week in Race*,

“If the disproportionate levels of success in the White community are not rooted in hard work and merit, then what could possibly account for the discrepancy? The answer, of course, is systemic imbalance and a fundamental lack of justice, which, naturally, is difficult for Whites to embrace, since it calls into question their privilege.”⁶

And as the rapper Jay Smooth lets it be known on Ill Doctrine.com,⁷ in a post-Obama era, “as we make progress, we get more comfortable, and as we get more comfortable some of us get extra comfortable. We start acting as if

⁶ Op. cit.

⁷ http://www.illdoctrine.com/2009/05/asher_roth_and_the_racial_cros.html

coming closer together means not having to care how our words affect each other.” The post-racial ideal may be laudable, he implies, but the persistence of racism should not be masked either by wishing too hard for its fulfilment or using the arrival of a handful of non-white people to the corridors of power to say, as Enoch Powell once did, that it is only a matter of time before “the black man [has] the whip hand over the white man.”

‘Too diverse’: the *real* problem with multiculturalism

“Nas @43 where have I mentioned the word ‘genetics’ or the word ‘race’? My problem is with Somali culture not Somali genes.”
Cauldron — on 21st August, 2009 at 11:41 am⁸

Both the conservative and the liberal readings of post-racialism are inextricable from the current debate over the future of multiculturalism. The notion that multiculturalism is in profound crisis has been peddled extensively since 9/11. It has been sustained by events such as the Madrid and London bombings, the shooting of Dutch filmmaker Theo Van Gogh, the Mohammed cartoons protests, and the 2005 riots in the French *banlieues*.

However, the unease around multiculturalism, which has led governments across Europe to ban hijabs, install citizenship testing, and promote ‘national values’, is not so much with multicultural policies, but with the very fact of multiculturalism, or with what to do when there is, as David Goodhart (1994) put it, “too much diversity.” In this sense the furore over multiculturalism as leading to segregated societies, promoting the growth of Islamic extremism, or enabling the success of the extreme right is not separate from the story of racism. On the contrary, it is merely its contemporary manifestation, a riff on the old story that blames different others for the ills suffered by the societies in which they find themselves.

Those who have sought to delineate ‘old’ biological racism from ‘new’ cultural racism (Taguieff 1991; Stolcke 1995) have unwittingly contributed to the idea, sold now by those who oppose multiculturalism, that to do so is in no sense racist. In reality however, racism has always adapted to the circumstances (Balibar 1991a), adopting biological as well as culturalist arguments to make its case: that there are immutable differences between groups of human beings.

⁸ Comment on the Pickled Politics blog: <http://www.pickledpolitics.com/archives/5603>

While European antisemitism constituted the Jews as a race apart, the tropes of their difference were cultural as often as they were 'biological', just as in the case of Muslims today. Because it has become taboo (beyond the natural sciences where it continues to be commonplace) to refer to race in biological terms, culture has become the means through which difference is now most commonly marked. Whereas this is often merely descriptive (although, one might ask, descriptive of what?), the reference to cultural difference also implies a hierarchy in societies that are stratified along ethno-national and often colour-coded lines.

Despite the fact that so-called culturalist racism (Taguieff 1991) is by no means new, multiculturalism (and cultural relativism before it) have, paradoxically perhaps, provided a language for discussing the problem of difference when race becomes taboo. For example, as part of a recent spate of books and articles on the crisis posed by multiculturalism, Christopher Caldwell's offering, *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe: Can Europe be the same with different people in it?*, makes this very clear. By using the language of ethnicity and culture, Caldwell explicitly claims that he cannot be accused of racism. Discussing Spain's policy of 'ethnic filtering' whereby immigrants are largely recruited from Latin America for the sake of compatibility, Caldwell (2009: 52) writes,

“[I]t is not racist. Spain is less concerned that its immigrants be white than that they have similarities of worldview with the people already established there, starting with knowing what the inside of a church looks like.”

Caldwell's statement proposes that race and racism are still exclusively linked to skin colour and phenotype. Any other grounds upon which someone may be discriminated against cannot, under this narrow but widespread view, be said to have been confronted with racism. The seriousness of the charge of racism coupled with the commonsense understanding that it refers exclusively to skin colour mean that all other bases for discrimination can be seen as being relative to it. According to such a reading then, for an act to be considered racist it would appear that it must be provable that the victim did nothing nor possessed any attribute other than a dark(er) skin colour. As soon as the victim can be found to follow practices or have other characteristics that set her apart from the society in which she lives, any negative reaction she is met with may be considered something other than racist. This 'something other' is, in the

language of Caldwell and his fellow travellers, mere commonsense. Cultures are incompatible; races, at least officially, do not exist. Hence neither does racism.

However, the source of the multicultural discourse Caldwell and others oppose is not illiberal minorities with the power to impose a moratorium on debate of their way of life upon the rest of society (although undoubtedly there are those who would like to be able to). In fact, the language of cultural relativism to which the anti-multiculturalists object is rooted in the elite project to excise race, and consequentially racism, from the lexicon.

The roots of this excision are to be found in the early post-war period when the revelation of the horrors committed in the name of race – the Nazi Holocaust – were revealed (Lentin 2008). It was felt that the only way to treat race was to relegate it to history, as a faulty experiment resulting from bad science. Anyone who continued to harbour racist ideas was thus pathologised or infantilised. The problem with this view of race as Goldberg (2006) makes clear, is that it associates it exclusively with the Holocaust in Europe, and slavery in the US. Once these eras have passed and the *mea culpas* recited, it is possible to return to being ‘race-free’ (Goldberg 2002). However there is no such race-free age to which to return because racism is not bound exclusively to specific regimes such as Nazism or Apartheid, no matter how acute an example of organised state racism they undoubtedly are. Race is a product of modernity, rising in tandem with the nation-state (Bauman 1989; Balibar 1991b), the expansion of capitalism and colonialism.

The refusal to acknowledge the centrality of race to modern political formation did not conflict with the belief, following the Holocaust, that it was necessary to combat racism. However, by not naming race because, in essence, it would be racist to do so, influential thinkers such as Claude Lévi-Strauss (1961), who was involved in the UNESCO project on race and racism, were in fact denying both the significance of racism in the lived-experience of millions of people and the persistence of the racism embedded in institutions that did not change simply because the word race could no longer be uttered. The difference here is between what Goldberg (2008: 10) calls antiracism: “to take a stand [...] against a concept, a name, a category, categorizing [which] does not itself involve standing (up) against (a set of) conditions of being or living...” and antiracism. Antiracism in contrast *does* mean standing up to those conditions. In extreme circumstances, it is “the risk of death” (ibid.) in the name of refusing the “imposition and constraint, [...] the devaluation and attendant humiliation”

(ibid.) caused by being raced. For Goldberg (ibid.) “there is clearly no evidence of antiracism ever commanding that sort of risk.”

Official antiracism, therefore, coexists unproblematically with the current resistance to multiculturalism that is radically opposed to antiracism. What the anti-multiculturalists oppose is the demand for equality by those still considered to be outsiders and the right, as equals, to point out and stand up against racist oppression. Opposition to multiculturalism grows with the few inroads made by antiracism into politics through the introduction, for example, of anti-discrimination legislation. However, because the language of race and racism has been abandoned for that of different but equal culture, the terms of the debate fail to incorporate both the experience of racism and the struggle for equality and justice that antiracism involves. It is this that enables the right and liberals alike to claim that we are post-race. Due to the force with which the experience of racism is dismissed from the right and the idealism that inspires liberal post-racialism, both those who oppose multiculturalism and crucially those who are seen to promote and benefit from it – the racialised – are bereft of a vocabulary to adequately describe what they are either opposing or upholding. The struggle for equality and justice therefore becomes indeed a fight for the recognition of cultural identity. Similarly, the opposition to ‘too much diversity’ can be dressed up as a commonsense questioning of ‘political correctness gone mad’ in an age when sensitivity to an-Other’s culture seems, according to this logic, to have superseded any common universalist ideal.

Culturalized Politics

“The communication lecturer, who was there, blurted out that infamous remark: ‘When I go to Morocco and I go into a Mosque, I take off my shoes, so you can take off your veil!’. I am so used to hearing this remark that I quickly respond, ‘Good for you, but excuse me, I am French, I have my rights and you cannot deny them.’⁹”

In what way can it be argued that culture has become the dominant framework for analysing what would once have been considered problems of social inequality, exploitation, power – in short of politics?

⁹ Fatima, 20, in *Les Filles Voilées Parlent* (2008: 171-2). Translated from the French original.



Slavoj Žižek (2008) links the culturalization of politics to what he calls the ideological category of tolerance. He blames ‘liberal multiculturalists’ for proffering tolerance as a remedy to problems of injustice that should be seen as political. Tolerance is responsible, according to Žižek, for the “failure of direct political solutions such as the Welfare State or various socialist projects” (ibid.: 119). Its flipside – intolerance – is formulated in arguments such as Huntington’s ‘Clash of Civilizations’ which reduces politics to the incompatibility of cultural groups on a global scale. For Žižek, the rise of tolerance as the primary ideological frame for the discussion and settlement of grievances is the result of the ultimate equation of liberalism with fundamentalism. Although liberals and fundamentalists appear on the surface to disagree with each other, on the issue of freedom of speech for example, they are united in viewing tolerance as a solution to political problems. Politics become culturalized for Žižek (ibid.) when,

“differences conditioned by political inequality or economic exploitation are naturalised and neutralised into ‘cultural’ differences, that is into different ‘ways of life’ which are something given, something that cannot be overcome.”

The equation between liberalism and fundamentalism relates to the well-established critique made by postmodern and postcolonial scholars that so called universalism is in itself a particularist (Eurocentric) position. While Žižek accepts this, he complexifies it by suggesting that universalism is not straightforwardly illusory. Rather, the notion of “*égaliberté* is a symbolic fiction which [...] possesses an actual efficiency of its own” (ibid. 129). It thus can indeed act as a force for driving political mobilisation and motivating actual change. Therefore, it is not simply that universalism is put into question by its own particularism, but that the reverse can also be true: each particular standpoint can be undermined by its shared aspects, its universality. Žižek equates the way in which capitalism has become universal for itself, cutting the cord to its Eurocentric origins, with the struggle for emancipation. From their own point of view, the problem for particularist struggles is that their very universality denotes “*the inadequacy-to-itself of a particular identity*” (ibid. 133, italics in the original). The ultimate implication of this for what Žižek calls revolutionary solidarity is not mutual tolerance but the possibility for joining *intolerances* in emancipatory struggle. In such a struggle,

“it is not the cultures in their identity which join hands, it is the repressed, the exploited, the suffering, that ‘parts of no-part’ of every culture which come together in a shared struggle” (ibid. 133-4).

The problem with this is that, in the current climate, both the dominant liberal ideology and particularist identities appear to reject such an ideal. This is because the hegemonic culturalist frame not only essentialises individuals seen as belonging to ‘cultural groups’, a common critique of multiculturalism, but also reifies culture itself to the exclusion of all other modes of explanation. Even those who expound the contemporary backlash against multiculturalism do not try particularly hard to assert the universality of their own position. Vague invocations of the universal do little to mask the force with which liberal campaigners and commentators claim the superiority of their culture over that of others. This is evident in Christopher Caldwell’s (2009: 17) claim that “immigration is not enhancing or validating European culture; it is supplanting it.”

The power of culturalism today therefore exceeds the potential for universality to become the type of force Žižek suggests it can be. This is because the backlash against multiculturalism does not express a problem with culture, but rather with its excess. That excess is to be found always in an-Other’s culture,

and not within one's own. On the contrary, accompanying the current attack on multiculturalism is the call for more of 'our' culture; more 'citizenship' events, nationalist commemorations, and the like. In this sense the anti-multiculturalist stance mirrors the racism of whiteness which sets itself up as race neutral while racing others. To understand how it has become possible for lip-service paid to multiculturalism to be supplanted by its active rejection today, it is necessary to look to the origins of prescriptive multiculturalism itself.

Prescriptive multiculturalism refers to multicultural policies and the discourse they create rather than to descriptive multiculturalism: the coexistence of peoples of diverse origins in a single society. What is actually under attack by those who decry the 'crisis of multiculturalism' is the fact of this diversity. Moreover, the multicultural policies they see as pernicious are believed to be the result of a bottom-up call for recognition by 'minority groups' (Taylor 1994). The complaint of the anti-multiculturalists is that minorities have imposed a multicultural approach onto societies which encourages inter-communal division and an undermining of the value of the 'dominant national culture', its language, traditions, and so on. Insidious minorities and their left-wing allies have straightjacketed us into a political correctness that shuts down any possibility for debate by naming all criticism as racist. Were this to be true, we would have to assume that the members of 'minority groups' have a disproportionate degree of power in society where in fact they are consistently underrepresented in politics, the media, and business and overrepresented among the poor, the imprisoned and the mentally ill. Furthermore, the anti-multiculturalists ignore work such as that done by Finney and Simpson (2009) that reveals that most scaremongering about the proliferation of 'parallel lives' in multicultural societies is not borne out by the statistical evidence which is interpreted selectively "by those pursuing the pessimistic perspective" (ibid.: 3).

Rather than being chosen and imposed by minorities on a guilt-ridden majority, therefore, prescriptive multiculturalism, originated as a mechanism for curbing the autonomy of descriptive multiculturalism. The current concern with the damage to social cohesion caused by cultural splintering is rooted in western discomfort, not only with the growing diversification of its populations, but with the idea that those "in but not of Europe" should demand recognition and equality. In other words, the problem of multiculturalism begins with the movement against racism.

As Paul Gilroy (1987) demonstrated in a by-now classic text on the rise of multiculturalism in Britain, multiculturalist policies were a response to the anti-racist movement that sought to appease it rather than deal with its concerns. While anti-racists called for racial justice, multiculturalists – an alliance of bureaucrats and often unrepresentative community leaders¹⁰ – interpreted the problems experienced by the racialised as cultural in origin. They believed that a greater valorisation of cultural specificities would dampen the flames of anti-racist protest. This would have the effect of reigning in the type of protest witnessed in the 1970s and 1980s in post-immigration societies such as Britain and France where an angry second generation began to assert itself as citizens rather than ‘guests’. Across the West, policies aiming to take ‘ethnic minorities’ under the state’s wing, a step forward from seeing ‘immigrants’ as temporary guest workers soon to return home, extinguished the fires of dissent lit by a generation coming to political consciousness in the 1980s.



¹⁰ as Kundnani (2007) has shown for the British context, multicultural policies were most often the result of a two-pronged attack on autonomous anti-racism by both government and self-styled community leaders whose agenda was to present a homogeneous view of a unified ‘ethnic minority community’ in return for funding and status.

Rarely recalled, these origins do not nevertheless deny the fact that prescriptive and descriptive multiculturalism have become enmeshed due to the processes I am categorising under the culturalisation of politics. This is true both for the opponents of multiculturalism and for anti-racists who now rush to defend it precisely because multiculturalism has often become indistinguishable from radical anti-racist politics. The attack on anti-racism and the reinterpretation of the response to racism in multicultural terms was so powerful in its ability to appropriate and co-opt the 'movement' that it left activists bereft of a vocabulary.

As George Yúdice (2003: 48) notes, the rise of 'identities' in the US since the civil rights struggle have been "incorporated into a range of governmental (in the Foucauldian sense) mechanisms." These identities are performative and serve a particular function, not only for their performers, but more importantly for the "state institutions and media and market projections that shape, respectively, clients and consumers" (ibid.) that require these identities to be performed. Given this, Yúdice questions the utility of culture and identity as frames for struggle. We should not blame those who perform these identities because, as my brief tracing of the trajectory of multiculturalism reveals, their choice was limited. Rather, Yúdice argues, the problem with performing identity as a political strategy is that it is impossible to disentangle using "the identitarian ticket" (ibid. 49) from the management of populations because this too operates according to a logic of culture/identity.

Using a Foucauldian framework, Yúdice proposes that '*cultural power*' (ibid., italics in the original) is added today to the biopower implicit in governmentalisation because anthropological understandings of groups as cultural have become so widespread. Here he concurs with Žižek on the role played by those he calls 'liberal pluralists' who have created a fantastical space in which all marginalised groups are equivalent to each other and can be "visibly represented as parallel forms of identity" (Warner 1993: xix, cited in Yúdice 2003: 50). The problem with this is that it clearly rejects any discussion of the uneven power relations that may exist among and between such groups; between white homosexuals and black women for example. It is precisely the visibility of these identities, purposefully conceived of as attached to groups, that makes it easy to governmentalise (manage and police) them as such.

More significant, in terms of the current backlash against multiculturalism, is that a situation is created in which those left out of this fantastical space – the

heretofore unproblematised majority – wish now to be included in it by asserting their own culture or identity. However, this culture is not equivalent to that of the marginalised. Rather it conceives of itself as superior, because more entitled, than them. As Arjun Appadurai (2006) argues, in an era of hegemonic economic globalization, the ‘fiction of the ethnos’ in nation-states has become a cultural resource for the performance of full sovereignty. This is often expressed, not outwardly, but rather against minorities within the state, against those ‘other cultures’ who have usurped our hegemony. Therefore, where the culturalisation of politics can most acutely be observed is on the culturalised solutions being proposed to the very problems purported to be posed by the ‘crisis of multiculturalism’.

The 2004 French law banning the wearing of ‘ostentatious religious symbols’ in schools and public offices, but in practice targeting only the Muslim *hijab*, is an example of this. The debate that preceded the passing of the law was dominated by a discourse that contrasted the particularist religious fundamentalism of religious Muslim women with the universalist secular neutrality of the French state. However, as Pierre Tévanian (forthcoming) argues, the law marked the transition from an egalitarian conception of secularism to an ‘identitarian’ one. In principle, egalitarian secularism, while ensuring the separation between Church and State, recognises the right of everyone to practice their own religion/culture/tradition. ‘Identitarian secularism’, in contrast, makes it a matter of national(ist) culture thus excluding those who demand the right to be considered full citizens regardless of their origins or religious affiliations. This interpretation of secularism was summed up in President Nicolas Sarkozy’s proposal to those who “do not like France” to “get up and leave the country that they don’t like.”¹¹ The banning of the veil and the exclusion of girls from school if they refuse to comply is repackaged as being consistent with French culture, and those who do not agree with it as insufficiently French. In essence, the assertion of Appadurai’s ‘fiction of the (national) ethnos’ in France as a reaction to Muslim demands for equality has taken precedence over hard-fought principles such as the right to public education and the very meaning of the maxim ‘*liberté, égalité, fraternité*’.

The apparent separation between compliant Muslims - those who do not wear the veil or who agree to remove it at school – and non-compliant ones facilitates the governmentalisation that Yúdice rightly shows is an unavoidable

¹¹ ‘Sarkozy et les immigrés «qui n'aiment pas» la France’, 24/04/2006.
http://www.rfi.fr/actufr/articles/076/article_43254.asp

implication of identity politics. But what the French example reveals is that identity politics are a two-way street, practiced both by those “construed as minorities” (Yúdice 2003: 48) and by the state. The difference from the perspective of those who oppose multiculturalism is that the ethnonational variant of culture promoted by the state is both legitimate and neutral, while the assertion of minoritarian cultural difference, on the contrary, has no place in the public sphere. This presents ‘minorities’ with a double bind, however, because even being compliant and integrating into a prescribed national ‘way of doing things’ is rarely sufficient to ensure their equality. As the final section of the article demonstrates, the strongly racialised notion of culture with which anti-multiculturalism operates means that a seamless passage to a post-racial era in which multicultural provisions would be deemed unnecessary is as fictitious a proposition as the neutrality of national culture.

Conclusion: the displacement of politics

“Why is a book that makes you ashamed for its author, even occasionally ashamed to be reading it, still worth reading? Because for all its bigotry and paranoia, all of its ill-informed dismissal of Islamic history and culture, “The Rage and the Pride” is a bracing response to the moral equivocation, the multi-culti political correctness, the minimization and denial of the danger of Islamo-fascism that dogs the response to Sept. 11 and to the ongoing war on terrorism.”¹²

I have ascertained, firstly, that the notion that western societies are post-race, whether this comes from a right-wing or a liberal perspective, is in fact a denial of the experience of the lived-experience of racism. Secondly, the attack on multiculturalism is presented as disconnected from racism which is associated solely with the crimes of Nazism or Apartheid and with race as biological, and hence outdated. Moreover, multiculturalism is blamed on minorities who are seen to have promoted their identitarian agenda to the detriment of social cohesion and/or the values and traditions of the ‘indigenous’ group. In this sense the post-racial argument and the one advocating that multiculturalism is in crisis mirror each other: they both mobilise the notion that racist discrimination is a thing of the past and that racial/cultural minorities have in fact gained the upper hand. Not only does this position imply that there is no

¹² Charles Taylor, ‘Oriana Fallaci declares war on radical Islam’, <http://dir.salon.com/story/books/feature/2002/11/16/fallaci/index.html>

longer a need for anti-racism, it also advocates for reinstating the hegemonic status (as if it were ever displaced) of the cultural/white majority. Thirdly, despite the fact that the elevation of identity politics did indeed benefit both culturally conceived minorities and the state in their management, they did not originate as a bottom up call for recognition. In fact, they replaced potentially more radical movements against racism for a variety of politically expedient reasons. Lastly, the proliferation of discourses of culture/identity as the only viable frame both for political mobilisation, but also for governmental and market control has infected society in general. The culturalisation of politics effectively means that the solution proposed for dealing with the cultural excess of the crisis of multiculturalism *is in itself cultural*. What we are left with is a pitting of 'minority cultures' against 'universal values' which deny their own cultural particularism.

The final part of this argument brings us back to race. If we accept that post-racialism and anti-multiculturalism both deny the salience of racism, we must reassess what precisely we mean by race. If, as I have argued extensively (Lentin 2008), an understanding of race is fundamental for our understanding of the state in modernity and that a failure to appreciate this significance has contributed to the persistence of racism after the Holocaust and colonialism, what are the implications of the post-racial idea for politics?

I want to propose that just as culturalism should not be seen as a radical break with racism, neither should culture itself be seen as separable from race in political terms. These are of course simple extensions of the same argument. Balibar's (1991a) point in questioning the newness of the 'neo-racism' was that insisting on the biological character of racism ignores its ability to attach meaning to any signifier of difference, and crucially, to naturalise it as immutable. The difference between racism as racial science or under Nazism and today's cultural racism is that, whereas the former imputed an unseen genetic 'racial code' (Hall 1997) from cultural signifiers, the latter doesn't need the genetic argument to essentialise cultural differences. However, culturalization is merely a continuation of racialization because the latter is not characterised by any specific relation to some biological category called race. Rather, both culturalization and racialization are imbricated in the 'management of life' (Puar 2007), in the disciplining of non-normative bodies by the state and the market.¹³

¹³ It is in this sense that Puar uses racialization in relation to queerness and the emergence of 'homonationalism': "[T]he rise of these nonnormative national subjects is linked in non uncertain terms to the racialized populations that come into being through the assignment of queerness,

Foucault's understanding of race and modern racism helps compound this point. The rise of modern racism is identified by Foucault (1997) as the state's cooptation of the discourse of race struggle – the struggle between competing groups within territories – and the equation of race with nation, with the state's role being to expunge the nation's internal and external racial enemies. Foucault's reading of racism, with which he is only concerned because of what he felt it taught us about the state and politics, is inextricable from his theory of biopower. Biopower refers to the state's role in fostering life or letting die. This stands in contrast to the old sovereign power who administered death, but did nothing to promote life. The biopolitical state, thus, is concerned with the life of its population, seeing it as a single organism that must be kept alive. It therefore disciplines individual bodies within it and regularises the population in general.

Racism enters the picture in order to explain how a state whose function it is to promote life can nonetheless be responsible for killing. Racism has the function of dividing between those who have the right to live and those who must be let die for the survival of the organism as a whole. Letting those considered inferior die is justified because it allows 'me' – as both the individual and the species – to live. It is construed as a sacrifice for the greater good. This is the core idea of the crucial shift that Foucault identifies from a political understanding of conflict to a biological (racial) one. Before biopower replaced sovereign power, the death of enemies ensured the survival of the population. Now their death permits the population to flourish. As Shein (2004: 6) notes, "viewing enemies as biological dangers is crucial to Foucault's argument regarding racism and biopower because it explains the identification of external and *internal* threats to the population." Killing one's enemies is therefore no longer only a right, as it was under sovereign power. Rather, it is an obligation to eliminate those within or without the state who impede the survival of the organism.

Foucault's explanation of modern racism in the Collège de France lectures may not go far enough (ibid.) and certainly does not attempt to analyse race beyond the European context.¹⁴ However, for my purposes here, it is useful because it shows that what is brought about by the move to biopower in the 19th century

an assignment disavowed by the queer subject embraced by biopolitical incitement to life" (Puar 2007: xiii).

¹⁴ For that we have to rely on Stoler's (1995) use of Foucault's work in relation to colonialism.

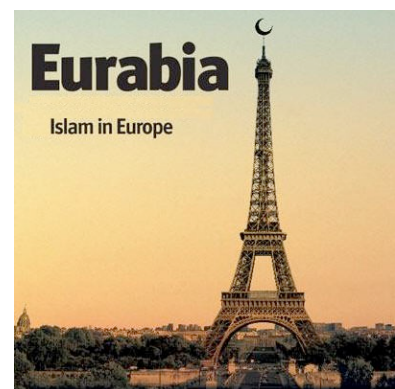
is a new relationship to enemies or outsiders that is no longer political but biological. For Ivan Hannaford (1996), this new understanding is not only externally oriented, it comes to infect and shape the running of European societies in the 19th Century. At this time,

“all aspects of legal right, feeling, justice, treaty, compromise, settlement, conciliation, arbitration – the essential components of political society – were eclipsed, and then obliterated, by a doctrine of force that saw each matter primarily in terms of its natural evolutionary course” (Hannaford 1996: 276).

This constituted a new understanding of politics in which the interests of the state became subsumed to that of the race, a model for conceptualising society which enhanced the state’s power both in internally rationalising its population and in justifying the rampant fight for imperialist (capitalist) domination (Hannaford *ibid.*).

Now, despite the official renunciation of the racism of the 19th and early 20th centuries, I want to propose that because there has never been a serious attempt made to address, not only the perniciousness of race, but its centrality to modern political formation, this displacement of politics continues to be a problem. This becomes clear if we accept that today’s culturalisation of politics, as expressed in the solutions proposed to the crisis of multiculturalism for example, is a continuation of the shift from a political to a biopolitical/racial understanding of conflict. Biopower too has expanded, as Yúdice has claimed, from being associated with the purely biological to including the cultural. Therefore today, interchangeable racial and cultural frames inform interpretations of belonging, rights, equality, citizenship, and yes, life and death.

Curtailing the right of hijab-wearing French citizens to attend school because it is incompatible with state culture follows the same logic of excising that which purportedly impedes the population from flourishing. When Christopher Caldwell falsely claims that “Muslims now either dominate or vie for domination of certain important European cities” (2009: 96) and that “Europe finds itself in a contest with Islam for the allegiance of its newcomers” (*ibid.*: 286), he is



mobilising the language of race war identified by Foucault. Whether or not Muslims are conceived as genetically or culturally incompatible is irrelevant to the choices made about how to deal with them. Similarly, when governments propose a 'return' to national values as a response to the fissuring of the nation into apparently uncohesive cultural enclaves, isn't what they are advocating a regularisation of society according to the logic of 'cultural power' (Yúdice 2003)? Isn't the concern with the lack of social cohesion inscribed in the same logic as fear for the fitness of the race nation?

If we accept that the two discourses bear similarities at least, we have to ask what purpose would cultural uniformity have and at what cost should it be achieved? The effect of these considerations on politics is as important as it was in the 19th century. The surety with which the need for cultural compatibility is being expressed today denies the negotiation, challenge and conflict which is essential to politics. It is in this sense that the post-racial, post-multicultural moment is also a post-political one. It remains to be seen whether the force of difference can adequately resist the power of regulation.

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