

On the West's Moral Panic Over 'Multiculturalism'

Tuesday 12 July 2011, by [YOUNGE Gary](#) (Date first published: 7 July 2011).

Editor's Note: This article is adapted from the preface to *The Crises of Multiculturalism: Racism in a Neoliberal Age*, by Alana Lentin and Gavan Titley, published by Zed Books on July 14, 2011.

On February 15, 2006, in Strasbourg the head of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso, delivered a stout defense of freedom of speech, democratic values and modernity on the continent. With the embers from heated exchanges over a Danish newspaper's decision to publish cartoons of Muhammad still glowing, Barroso laid out the consequences of privileging sensitivity towards "others" over core values that define "us." If Europe failed to defend its principles in the face of such an onslaught, he argued, "we are accepting fear in our society.... I understand that offended many people in the Muslim world but is it better to have a system in which some excesses are allowed or to be in some countries where they don't even have the right to say this.... I defend the democratic system."

On the very same day in the House of Commons the British government employed fear of terrorism to limit existing freedoms, expanding state power to make "glorification" of terrorism a criminal offense. Laying out the consequences of privileging freedom over security, then prime minister Tony Blair later explained that the law "Will allow us to deal with 'those' people and say: Look, we have free speech in this country, but don't abuse it." For certain groups the price for belonging and conditions for banishment have shifted dramatically in Western nations, particularly but by no means exclusively in Europe, in recent years. Citizenship is no longer enough. The clothes you wear, the language you speak, the way you worship, have all become grounds for dismissal or inclusion. These terms are not applied equally to all—they are not intended to be. The intention of this series of edicts (popular, political and judicial) is not to erase all differences but to act as a filter for certain people who are considered dangerously different.

To achieve this, certain groups and behaviors must first be pathologized so that they might then be more easily particularized. The pathologization has been made easier over the past decade by the escalation of terrorist acts or attempts in the US and Europe in the name of radical Islam. "Terror is first of all the terror of the next attack," explains Arjun Appadurai in *Fear of Small Numbers*. "Terror...opens the possibility that anyone may be a soldier in disguise, a sleeper among us, waiting to strike at the heart of our social slumber."

But in truth terrorism, and the wars and conflicts that exacerbate terrorism, sharpened this social pathologization and focused it on Muslims and Islam—but terrorism did not create it. The notion that the presence of certain groups represents an existential threat to a mythological national cohesion was present in Enoch Powell's infamous 1968 speech in which he prophesied violent consequences to non-white immigration in the UK: "As I look ahead, I am filled with foreboding; like the Roman, I seem to see 'the River Tiber foaming with much blood.'" It was there in 1979 in Margaret Thatcher's sympathy with Britons who feel they are being "swamped by an alien tide." And it was front and

center in Jacques Chirac's 1991 "Le bruit et l'odeur" speech. "How do you want a French worker who works with his wife, who earn together about 15,000 francs and who sees next to his council house a piled-up family with a father, three or four spouses and twenty children earning 50,000 francs via benefits naturally without working...If you add to that the noise and the smell, well, the French worker, he goes crazy."

For these threats to gain popular traction, however, these "others" have to be distinguished in the popular mind from other "others." So when black people attack other black people it is no longer crime but "black-on-black-crime;" if a young Muslim woman is killed over a romantic relationship it is not a murder but an "honor killing." In a country like England that has been embroiled in virtually continuous terrorist conflict for the last forty years in Northern Ireland, the notion that there are "home-grown" Muslim bombers is supposed to represent not just a new demographic taking up armed struggle but an entirely new phenomenon. Even as the Catholic Church is embroiled in a global crisis over child sexual abuse and the Church of England is splintered in a row over gay priests, Islam and Muslims face particularly vehement demands to denounce homophobia.

The combined effect of these flawed distinctions and sweeping demonization is to unleash a series of moral panics. In 2009 in Switzerland, a national referendum banned the building of minarets in a country that has only four; in 2010, 70 per cent of voters in the state of Oklahoma support the banning of sharia law even though Muslims comprise less than 0.1 per cent of the population; in the Netherlands parliament seriously considered banning the burka—a garment believed to be worn by fewer than fifty women in the entire country. Disproportionate in scale and distorted in nature, these actions cannot be understood as a viable response to their named targets but rather as emblems of a broader, deeper disruption in national, racial and religious identities. At a time of diminishing national sovereignty, particularly in Europe, such campaigns help the national imagination cohere around a fixed identity even as the ability of the nation-state to actually govern itself wanes. It is a curious and paradoxical fact that as national boundaries in Europe have started to fade, the electoral appeal of nationalism has increased; fascism, and its fellow travelers, is once again a mainstream ideology in Europe, regularly polling between 5 and 15 per cent in most countries. Their success suggests that modernity, as it has been framed and presented, poses a challenge not only to Islam and that the demographic group finding it most difficult to integrate into modern society is a section of white society that feels abandoned and disoriented.

But such assaults are by no means the preserve of the far right. Many who consider themselves on the left have given liberal cover to these assaults on religious and racial minorities, ostensibly acting in defense of democracy, Enlightenment values and equal rights—particularly relating to sexual orientation and gender. Their positioning rests on two major acts of sophistry. The first is an elision between Western values and liberal values that ignores the fact that liberal values are not fully entrenched in the West and that other regions of the world also have liberal traditions. Nowhere is this clearer than with gay rights, where whatever gains do exist are recent and highly contested. Thirty American states have constitutional amendments banning gay marriage, and only a handful of states have passed gay marriage through the popular legislative process. Not only is gay equality not a Western value, it's not even a Californian value. The second is a desire to understand Western "values" in abstraction from Western practice. This surge in extolling Western virtues has coincided with an illegal war that has been underpinned by both authorized and unauthorized torture and a range of other atrocities and a spike in the electoral and political currency of racism and xenophobia.

The contradictions inherent in these trends and tensions found their full expression in the existence of a gay rights chapter within the openly anti-immigrant and Islamophobic English Defence League. "This is the symbol gay people were made to wear under Hitler," one member told the *Guardian*, explaining the pink star he was wearing. "Islam poses the same threat and we are here to express

our opposition to that.” Unable to come up with a single, coherent new term that both encapsulates the atmosphere of fear, threat, panic, disorientation, confusion, contradiction and paradoxes and unites both far right and liberals, the opponents of this diverse, hybrid reality resurrected an old foe—“multiculturalism.”

The beauty of multiculturalism, for its opponents, is that it can mean whatever you want it to mean so long as you don’t like it. It has the added advantage of being a political orphan. Since it never had consensual support among the left—many of whom were wary of the attempt to replace anti-racism with a retreat into culture—there are few willing to give the term their full-throated endorsement. The announcement of its imminent death has concerned many not because they honored its life but because they do no care for its assailants or the manner in which they aim to murder it. For some it clearly means the mere coexistence of “other cultures;” for others the state promotion of “other cultures” (although the ability to point to a time when this was ever an official policy pursued with either force or effect seems elusive); and for yet others it represents any resistance to assimilating racial, religious and ethnic cultures into national ones.

There are legitimate philosophical arguments in there somewhere. The trouble is that when applied to the specific communities they are reserved for in this specific context the term “multiculturalism” more often than not simply becomes a proxy for “difference.” But for all the angst invested and ink spilt about it multiculturalism is less of an ethos than a simple statement of fact. It emerges not from government edict but the lived experience of people, and at different times may be untidy, vibrant, problematic, dynamic or divisive.

The nation-state is in crisis; neoliberal is in crisis; multiculturalism is simply in situ.

Gary Younge, July 7, 2011

P.S.

From The Nation:

<http://www.thenation.com/article/161858/wests-moral-panic-over-multiculturalism>

* Who Are We—And Should it Matter in the 21st Century? by Gary Younge is published by Nation Books.