
Swiss voters decide to ban the construction of minarets after a campaign stoked fears of an imagined threat of ‘Islamicisation’. French public discourse is periodically churned by politicians attempting to regulate or ban clothing, such as headscarves or burqas, associated with Muslim immigrants. In the Netherlands, Muslims are singled out for their supposed homophobic violence. Throughout much of Europe, immigrant groups, including many second and third generation European citizens, are understood by a broad cross section of right, left, and center to present challenges to ‘integration’, if not a more existential threat to European ways of life. Such is the context in which Alana Lentin and Gavan Titley intervene in *The Crises of Multiculturalism: Racism in a Neoliberal Age*.

Much academic work on multiculturalism is framed as either a defense or a critique of its aims and effects. Another important set of literatures, particularly associated with geographers, usefully contrasts discourse about multiculturalism with the experiences of actual multicultural interaction in everyday life. Taking a different tack, Lentin and Titley set out to examine the curious currency of *attacks* on multiculturalism long after multiculturalism, as a state policy or ideological program, has been largely abandoned in much of Europe. As such, this is less a book about multiculturalism per se, than a critical analysis of racist and racializing arguments about the failure of multiculturalism and the problem of ‘integrating’ Muslim immigrants in Europe. In this sense, Lentin and Titley are not especially concerned to defend multiculturalism—as a state practice of recognizing and governing cultural difference—from these attacks. Instead, they analyze the racializing and exclusionary effects of these attacks. To do this, they draw on a long tradition of anti-racist critiques of multiculturalism to argue that multiculturalism itself helped to set the stage for the contemporary forms of racialization articulated in an ostensibly ‘post-racial’ idiom of cultural difference. In short, multiculturalism has become “a central site for coded debates about belonging, race, legitimacy, and social futures in a globalized, neoliberal era” (p.
12). While clearly situated in a European context, the book, provocatively, seeks to understand the transnational flow of the ‘recited truths’ about multiculturalism in ‘the West’ more broadly.

In covering so much ground (a recurring strength and weakness of this book), there is a danger in missing the specificity of particular situations. For example, reading this book, one could come away with the impression that multiculturalism, as policy or ideology, is in fact dead across ‘the West’. This analysis, while convincing, perhaps, in some European contexts, would seem to fall at least partially flat in Canada or Australia where multiculturalism remains quite alive as a state project, albeit one that may have changed in significant ways in recent years.

While tracing the connections through which ideas about multiculturalism travel, I would have liked to have seen more about how those transnational connections were made. The authors do offer a useful account of the mediatization of assertions about multiculturalism and suggestively borrow the term ‘circuits of belief’ to describe them. This, at the very least, usefully sets the stage for additional research to explain how multiculturalism travels and is differentially taken up in varied contexts.

Methodologically, the book asks politically important questions and draws on an uncommonly wide range of critical perspectives from across academic disciplines, as well as more activist-oriented contributions. Its main value lies less in any startling new empirical contribution than in a wide-ranging and politically engaged synthesis of contemporary events and critical scholarship. For all of its strengths, the authors’ own arguments do occasionally get lost among the myriad of concepts and frameworks that they synthesize. For having as many balls in the air as they do, it is astonishing, however, just how few of them drop.

In a world where cultural differences are constructed in ways that racialize immigrants, this book offers an engaging critique and an impressive array of conceptual tools and empirical insights. For example, it engages anti-racist critique in order to provide a framework for understanding how exclusion is achieved through constructions of cultural difference. That is, despite, or perhaps because of, a tendency to avoid explicit recourse to discourses of race in public debate, race, as analytical tool, remains vitally important to understand contemporary forms of anti-immigrant sentiment and exclusion in Europe (and beyond). Liberalism, as the dominant paradigm for understanding political communities, is usefully unpacked. Specifically, the authors show how liberal norms are being mobilized to exacerbate exclusion, precisely when these are the norms of tolerance or humanitarian inclusion (for related accounts of liberalism see
Neoliberalism, however, while frequently referenced, is mobilized in a more uneven, and, at times, in a less compelling fashion. The authors introduce their chapter on neoliberal racisms by noting the danger of treating neoliberalism as a “totalizing device” and suggest that neoliberalism needs to be understood as “articulated in conjunction with different political logics” (p. 162). They are, however, less successful in fully living up to their initial analytical cautions. That is to say, neoliberalism, throughout much of the book, becomes an unproblematic background through and against which the action unfolds. In this sense, its differentiated qualities are rarely noted and its status as a hegemonic force is generally taken for granted. By contrast, many geographers have underscored the variegated nature of neoliberalization and highlighted the many “other-than-neoliberal trajectories” relevant in the contemporary moment (Larner et al. 2007; Leitner et al. 2007; McGuirk and Dowling 2009: 176; Brenner et al. 2010). A deeper engagement with such discussions could have enabled a more nuanced understanding of the diversity of processes and logics at work across ‘the West.

While the book critically examines racist attacks on multiculturalism emanating from the right, it is most engaging and effective when it examines the role of traditionally left-leaning or progressive movements in facilitating these racializations. It attends to now well-documented (Fekete 2006; Razack 2008) tendencies in which constructions of cultural difference are often articulated through gender and sexuality, where understandings of Islam, as monolithically oppressive to women, become bound up with civilizational discourses that sets up a progressive, liberal, and tolerant ‘West’ standing in opposition to an illiberal-ness and intolerance associated with ‘Islam’. Further, Lentin and Titley also join recent scholarship (Puar 2007; Butler 2008; Mepschen et al. 2010) in examining how discourses associated with LGBT rights becomes similarly bound up with these racializing discourses, as when, for example, Muslim immigrants are singled out for their supposedly culturally ingrained homophobia. In this context, Lentin and Titley’s call for imagining alliances across difference that challenge multiple and intersecting processes of differentiation, exclusion, and violence is critically important.

This is a passionate, timely, and, at times, polemical intervention. For those interested in familiarizing themselves with ongoing controversies over multiculturalism and immigration in Europe, as well as an exciting set of anti-racist critiques, this book offers a useful framework with which to orient oneself. For those already deeply involved in these questions, the book offers a productive synthesis of research and an archive of compelling materials that could be
useful pedagogically. While such a wide-ranging account is always vulnerable to charges of insufficient contextualization or specificity, the book’s faults are, at most, a minor blip on the radar of a compelling and important invitation to reconsider and resist emerging forms of racialization in the interest of creating more inclusive forms of belonging and more just futures.

References


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