Bringing Race Back in

Racism in "Post-Racial" Times

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Abstract: In the last decade German society and state have developed a self-conception in which the understanding as an ethnic nation has been weakened. While multiculturalism never really thrived in Germany, neo-liberalism serves as a catalyst for embracing diversity today. As in other European countries as well, this has had consequences for the ways in which racism is understood and can be addressed. The developments in the last months have furthered this shift even more: While we are seeing new populist racist movements forming and an unprecedented rise in racist violence, it has never been easier to frame these developments and actions as unrelated to German society and the state. The official Germany represents itself as a nation of diversity, of humanitarianism, even as rejecting the idea of the border as such. In this Germany racism can only be imagined as the actions of extremists, not as something that is deeply rooted within structures, institutions and discourses of state and society. Juliane Karakayali talked to Alana Lentin in January 2016 to further the understanding of these developments.

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In your work the relation of racism and an apparent post-racial society has been central. Could you explain the ways in which you have been conceptualizing race and racism for such an analysis?

In general, the existence of racism today is being acknowledged, but it is seen as something of the past. Most people now agree that being a racist is a bad thing. But many would never agree that they live in a racist society and state. This has a lot to do with the way racism has been explained and the way those explanations have failed to address what race is within racism. It's this issue that I have been addressing in much of my work: The way race was approached mainly in Europe and I think in Germany in particular was to simply not talk about it. This was a consequence of the holocaust and the way in which race has been rationalized in its aftermath. Race became reduced to what it did in the holocaust. So, if we say that race is something

incorrect, if it's a bogus pseudo-scientific concept and it's something that should never have been applied to the division of human groups, then the best thing to do is to strive to find other ways of conceptualizing the differences between human beings. And this is where notions of culture and ethnicity became primal in the way in which difference has been conceptualized. As I've argued in much of my work, the problem with this shift is that it becomes impossible to deal with what race is particularly and actually doing. And secondly it doesn't deal with the fact that race and culture or, if you like, biological and cultural explanations of human difference have always been part and parcel of racialized logics. They cannot be analyzed separately. If race is reduced to something that is in the past, something that is teleologically leading to the particular form of genocide that the holocaust presents, other instances where race plays a role become less visible. So, to understand that to be a racist in that sense is a bad thing is actually producing a silence about colonialism. Because racism in that sense is in the past, anything that we do today cannot be racist. Because we've elevated the discussion of culture and ethnicity to the only viable explanation of human difference, which means that it's 'ok' to talk about people as being culturally incompatible, if you like. As a consequence, it seems to be no problem to argue that there is too much immigration, because different groups of people from different parts of the world don't belong with each other because they have different values – not because one is superior or inferior, but because they are simply different to each other. This allows us, if you like, to be purely post-racial. A lot of what we could conceptualize critically as racism passes easily under the guise of racelessness as David Goldberg would put it.

Yet, openly racist politics are displayed at the same time with a post-racial discourse. How do you think that the post-racial discourse or its protagonists relate to these open and violent forms of racism?

Well, I actually think it is quite interesting: if you look at the discourse of the extreme right, they will prefigure a lot of what they say with 'I'm not a racist, but. . .'. They even do this in the most violent moments, or when they have openly fascist ideologies. Maybe it's different in Germany but certainly in the UK, in Australia and other countries that I'm aware of, the extreme far right will always say 'We are not racist'. For example they will argue that they do not want to live with Muslims due to them being racist, but because Muslims are the 'real racists', because they are terrorists, they do not want to mix and they refuse to accept 'our' Western values. Here, racism is being reversed which is a huge component to post-racialism, as to say: on the one hand racism only purely existed in the past, hence we are post-racial and post-racist;

on the other hand, if there is any kind of racism it is that of the Other. Racism is therefore reconfigured as something completely divorced from any kind of knowledge of history and any kind of racial theory. And it becomes this kind of perennial, universal problem that exists within all societies, something that just has to be admitted and that we are all bound up in. So then it's perfectly natural from a post-racial perspective to argue that white people are being the victims of black or Muslim races, for example. And I don't think that these two things are mutually exclusive - I rather think that the violent forms of racism that we are witnessing are deeply connected to the post-racial condition.

Yes, I think in Germany the consequence of this situation is that the line between both conservatives and movements and parties on the far right is getting blurred again.

Indeed. The general feeling seems to be that to want to control refugees or to want to imprison them or discipline and punish them in any kind of way has nothing to do with racism, it's merely to do with pragmatic politics. And I think it is paradoxical because it doesn't seem to help to point out the parallels between some of the actions that are done today in the name of let's say refugee 'discipline' or border control and historical patterns, to point out their racist genealogy. It doesn't work, because we somehow legitimize the current situation as not racist. Within the logic of post-racism, Nazism was pure racism, because it separated and annihilated Jews and other 'threats to the German race' that were internal to the country. In contrast to that it seems to be considered just pragmatic – and as having nothing to do with racism - to deal with the so called threat of immigration. So, it becomes hard to even use historical arguments to draw attention to what is happening today, unless of course you are talking to people who already agree with that.

But historical or genealogical arguments have problems of their own anyway. Because they often put all their focus on the past. It becomes all about how it was then and look at these parallels. And then we don't pay attention to the specificities of racism today, which are different, right? It's not all the same as it was then and if you merely say that, then you are hiding a lot of what is going on.

One very interesting moment in the current situation in Germany is the way neoliberal racist logics are being called into question. While state policies have been developed towards a position where asylum is more and more restricted to Syrian refugees perceived as well educated and fitting in the German value system, other refugees and migrants are often addressed as unwanted, 'economic refugees' neither fitting German cultural values nor being qualified. But the ways 'Willkommenskultur'

('welcome culture') is unfolding in local contexts is calling this distinction into question. People are helping in informal volunteer structures, their mostly humanitarian approach towards migration and migrants seems to be the opposite of the neo-liberal logics that the government proclaims. How would you explain that?

Look, I think, that is exactly the point. I mean, racism was always resisted and in order to understand how race operates, we have to look at exactly these moments of resistance because that is when you see the functioning of race unfolding – in the resistance of people of color and other people who are racialized. So I don't think it is surprising that you have that polarisation of population and involving race and other issues like austerity and class, as you say, the kind of onslaught of neo-liberal policy in general, which causes people to think twice about what is actually being done in their names. So, I don't see that as surprising, but I do find the discourse of 'welcome culture' at least something that is worth pointing at to be potentially problematic, because of the ways in which it centers the national or the citizen as the legitimate author of welcome and kind of delimits people's possibilities for autonomy. Of course it is a fine line, because people do practically need help and they can't just arrive in a country and just fend for themselves, but there is a kind of a distinct feeling that things are done in the terms of people who are insiders for outsiders and there is not necessarily a sense that this cannot be the permanent logics. The idea of welcome always has a kind of a temporariness to it and can function as a blockade towards the permanent transformation of society which has to involve a renegotiation around what kind of future, what kind of sociality all of these people, now living in the space should inhabit. Which doesn't mean to say that there aren't differences within groups who are involved in movements and 'cultures' on behalf of refugees today. Clearly there are political divisions between various approaches to this. It seems particularly interesting when you think of people who are of migrant origin themselves operating within these spaces, because of course the other thing that's happening is that their position within the society is becoming more and more tenuous. So their position as citizens is no longer, if it ever was, assured, because more and more suspicion is put over people who are seen as outsiders within, if you like. You know, the race within the race, as Foucault would have put it.

That means that migrants who are involved in these volunteer structures may be trying to reassure their own citizenship therein?

Well, look, I don't think that that's what they're doing. I mean, I think that there are people who do that. I can't talk about Germany, but I can definitely talk about the sit-

uation in Australia, about which I have learned a lot from long-term scholar-activists, notably Angela Mitropoulos, and others involved in the campaigning blog *XBorder Operational Matters*, as well as migrant, refugee, detainee and former detainee activists in Australia. There are various organizations that constitute themselves with the tagline 'Welcome'. One of the slogans that has become very popular is 'Real Australians say Welcome'. And when you critique that, the answer will immediately be 'But there are people of migrant origin and people of colour obviously who are saying this or who are members of the organization that promotes this point of view', as if that then delegitimizes any critique of the notion of 'welcome'. Of course in Australia we have the additional problem that the country is a settler colony. So Aboriginal people never agreed to be colonized and there is still a question overhanging the whole setup of Australian citizenship, or the whole idea of Australia, if you like, around whom the land really belongs to. So then for migrants who are themselves participating in this colonization of the land who say 'Well, real Australians say Welcome' becomes quiet problematic, right? And then again, to use that as a legitimation of any kind of the critique of the discourse of 'welcome' is equally problematic, because of course one of the ways in which you acquire your safety within a society as a migrant is by assuming a position that is as close as possible to that of the dominant group. And that doesn't necessarily mean you have to become a right-wing fascist, obviously, but maybe exactly a left-wing humanitarian. And I'm not trying to say that any of this is particularly sought out in people's minds as a strategy, you know, that they are kind of planning this in some kind of Machiavellian way. But you cannot ignore such dynamics going on. What it leads to is a kind of a demarcation of who is legitimate in their actions and who is not, because of course - at least in Australia - many of the asylum seekers are definitely not 'welcomed' by any means, especially those who are in detention, but also people who are living in society under this kind of temporary visa regime for instance. This would be the same for people who have just recently arrived in Germany and find themselves in this kind of 'limbo-situation', if you like. They are not allowed to speak for themselves. I mean, they can speak but they don't have any avenues to which to speak officially in any sense and then they become represented.

Another interesting point to that is that many people who had nothing to do with migration before are now making new experiences with both refugees and migrants involved in the volunteer structures. With all these people in small towns, in villages organized in the support for refugees –there must be something changing within society. It is also remarkable that the support and the meaning it has to the volunteers doesn't appear in public opinion making. Newspapers mostly report about right-wing

conservative positions and neglect not only addressing the work of the volunteers but also the particular political momentum. And even though I agree with all the problematic aspects of the notion of 'welcome' you mentioned before, I consider it still interesting that the contradictory political moments to the 'normal rule' in Germany are absent from a public discussion.

Yes, I find that really interesting and it might be a particularity to the German situation. If it is true that more and more mainstream white people get involved in these kind of activities that, as you said, are practices of a different sensibility than the mainstream understanding of Germaness. I would find that surprising, because what can be observed in other countries is a centering of white benevolence in accounts of these types of processes. And the way in which the German situation is being reported in other countries, is very much centering on that white benevolence, just as you say for the public discussion in Germany. This may be related to the whole kind of emphasis that is placed or not placed on diversity, for the desire of a better world, in Germany in general. So that anything that is falling out of the frame of 'Leitkultur' is not given prominence in the public discussions. So it's happening in the society but it doesn't have any kind of echo in the public sphere. So it is like a situation in which something big happens, like a Tsunami, and people start rushing and giving a lot of money, which makes them feel like they have done something. This behavior is really difficult to criticize. If these people did not take an active part as volunteers, it would be absolutely awful. On the other hand this commitment is deeply de-politicising, because it leaves the state completely neutral or rather, the state is released from its responsibilities. As far as I understood from the conversations I had in Berlin, people were saying that since the state does not provide with German classes, food, or any other practical things that are needed for the refugees, they would take on the job instead. From an autonomous perspective this attitude is good, while if we are to criticize the neo-liberal state, then we might need to criticize that. What is needed is a discussion about the ramifications of this political momentum that comes along as an urgent one and with a feeling of crisis, which is needed to keep the momentum going.

In my last question I would like you to comment on the changing structures of and debates on racism. You already mentioned an ongoing polarization within society, which we discuss with the term 'post-migrant society'. We see a lot of change in Germany in terms of growing consciousness and success of migrants to articulate citizenship-claims in reference to both race and racism. As this is also articulating in new forms of German self-conceptions as a diverse society, we see interactions with

neoliberal forms of 'diversity' politics as well as opposition to these developments in form of new conjunctures of ethnic nationalism and violent racism. What would you say about the actual or rather to the necessary transformations of anti-racist struggles in this situation?

As I was implying before, what I find problematic are forms of anti-racism that are completely depoliticized, framed in the language of pragmatism that is necessary in the 'crisis'. I mean, if you really want to look at it, there is always a crisis of 'migration' in our world. And if the only way in which you can respond to crisis is in terms of pragmatic solutions then you are missing the bigger picture. So one of the ways in which we see this happening is people saying 'ok well, we can only do so much'. In a situation such as in Germany at the moment, the risk for such pragmatism is even higher. In the light of the rising support for extreme conservative or even far-rightwing politics, people begin to wonder if we risk pushing more people towards movements and organizations like Pegida if we are too radical in our demands. We see the same thing happening in Australia with the situation around mandatory detention for asylum-seekers. You have a lot of people saying, well, we should focus on children in detention. So, if we focus on children, everybody can agree that small children should not be locked up. But by doing that you are saying that these other people, namely their parents, are guilty of having brought their children here, so therefore they do deserve to be locked up. As soon as you get 'pragmatic' you are already dividing. And if race is about anything, it's about arbitrary divisions of the population, right? It is about the ability to be able to manage human populations by dividing them and ordering them in some kind of way. So, you need to always be very, very attentive to what the unwitting consequences of pragmatic, quick, depoliticized solutions are and what effects they might have. For me then, this is what a more theoretical standpoint can do: remind us again and again that we have to ask what race actually does. We need to understand how race continues to morph itself and adapts itself to ever new situations. If we neglect these mechanisms and do not connect them to the macro-historical processes, then we won't get why racism persists.

Thank you very much!

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