Race, offence and democracy

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Introduction

I was sheriff of this county when I was twenty-five years old. Hard to believe. My grandfather was a lawman; father to […] The crime you see now, it’s hard to even take its measure. It’s not that I’m afraid of it. I always knew you had to be willing to die to even do this job. But I don’t want to push my chips forward and go out and meet something I don’t understand. A man would have to put his soul at hazard. He’d have to say, ‘Okay, I’ll be part of this world.’

In the Coen brothers’ 2007 film No country for old men a briefcase bursting with loot provides the perfect MacGuffin, bringing together the lives of three men: a sheriff, a working-class Texan and a psychopath. On the face of it, the film involves a deadly manhunt as the ruthless murderer chases down the man who stumbled upon and took the ill-gotten stash. The sheriff appears helpless to prevent the violent murders that follow, as though this new face of criminality somehow causes the failure of the law itself. On another level, I find it useful to read the film as an exploration of three different approaches to political practice. The symbolism of the final scene at the crossroads is significant for a film so centrally concerned with chance, fate and its mastery. Opening with Sheriff Tom Bell’s melancholic reflection on a lost order, the film soon introduces us to Llewelyn Moss, the man who stumbles by chance

¹ David Tyrer is a Senior Lecturer in Sociology and Political Theory at Liverpool John Moores University, UK.

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upon the loot-filled MacGuffin that sets in train the deadly game of cat and mouse with the psychopathic Chigurh. In their own ways, these characters provide us with different perspectives on politics. If Moss attempts to transform his lot by taking the money, the sheriff’s apparent impotence to prevent the deadly face-off between the Texan and Chigurh indicates a regulatory failure associated with the loss of the order he appears to mourn. In turn, Chigurh steps into the vacuum left by this failure, employing violence to prevent Moss usurping the new order that has been established through violence.

Another way of looking at this is to note that the film centrally concerns different attempts to master fate. The attempt to master fate is centrally political. In this I acknowledge a distinction between the social and the political, based on a recognition that the social is a web of sedimented relations and embedded practices that constitute a particular order. In contrast, the political can be understood as the moment at which their contingency is rendered visible through contestation, and an attempt is made to institute alternative social relations (Glynos and Howarth 2007: 113). In this, any project that has the effect of making visible, or transforming, the principles and power that structure social relations can be understood as being centrally political. Thus, another way of viewing the political is to suggest that it is centrally concerned with contests over the lots of subjects – over whether political actors should accept their lot as envisioned within a particular way of organising the social, or whether their lot can be transformed and new social relations instituted. In No country for old men, Sheriff Bell, Anton Chigurh and Llewelyn Moss each represent different approaches to managing the political. Bell reflects a traditional regulatory mechanism for protecting the established order and domesticating the antagonisms that ensue from Moss’s attempt to transform his lot by keeping the loot. In the failure of this, Chigurh employs extreme violence to prevent Moss from upsetting the established order.

This also illustrates the processes through which, when traditional attempts to tame and domesticate antagonisms by channelling the political into politics fail, space is left open for the emergence of an ultra-politics predicated on violence. There are innumerable ways in which political actors can seek to transform their lot in life: Marxists, environmentalists,
feminists, LGBT activists, indigenous rights campaigners, antiracists, fascists … all attempt to transform the social in some way, stepping into the domain of the political in ways that lay bare the contingency of sedimented power and social relations, and critiquing the relations of power that determine our lot in life. Political practice therefore poses ontological challenges, since it lays bare the contingency on which the social is constituted. Marxists, for example, reveal the ways in which relations of production result in specific modes of class composition and exploitation in capitalist societies. In other words, one of the things that political practice achieves is to place in question the idea that things are the way they are as a result of some purely natural process. The distinction between politics and the political emerges through a recognition that the former provides a regulatory framework through which the tensions and antagonisms attendant with the latter may be domesticated. State multiculturalism represents an example of such a regulatory framework, and it works by enabling recognition of particular group identities and for their bearers to make certain claims – or at least to place them up for discussion, whether or not they are met – so long as particular rules of the game are followed. Indeed, it is worth noting that multiculturalism was backed by the state during the early 1980s in part as an attempt to defuse tensions and politics felt to have been stoked by anti-racism and to have led to race riots in a number of British cities (Kundnani 2004).

The curious thing is that thirty years on multiculturalism is routinely described in the tabloid press and public discourse as having roundly failed because, it is alleged, multiculturalism has gone too far in having excessively benefited minorities, in turn obstructing the integration of minorities into western democracies. This fundamentally misunderstands multiculturalism which, far from being a free-for-all in a sweetshop of rights, has been a system within which minorities have often had to engage in lengthy struggles for rights such as protection against hate crimes and that, in its routine institutional application, frequently tends towards stale managerialism, cynical box-ticking and tokenism rather than an arena of radical politics. It also misunderstands how politics works as a regulatory framework in two senses. First, if the ability to place demands on the table, irrespective of whether or not they are met, is part and parcel of democratic practice, multiculturalism represents a technology for incorporation and integration, not one for separatism. Second, since the regulatory frameworks of liberal
institutional politics involve establishing the rules of the game and domesticating political antagonisms, then if the public mood is that minorities are failing to integrate, the logical thing would be to call for more multiculturalism, not less. In other words, to return to my earlier metaphor, if the ageing system for dealing with competing demands (Sheriff Bell) is thought inadequate to deal with the presence of subjects who seek to transform their lot (Llewelyn Moss), then the answer is not to retreat into a violent ultra-politics (Chigurh), but rather to strengthen the original framework. In this paper I am concerned with these issues as they highlight the interplay of race and democratic practice in times often seen as being somehow post-political.

Race and democracy

In the world that has brought us 9/11, 7/7 and the Madrid atrocities, it does not require much imagination to grasp why western states have become concerned about the spectre of Islamist terrorism. But while this concern is not in itself problematic, what is problematic is the extent to which public discourse has so often shifted away from a concern with the criminals and the extremists, and instead given way to a broader stereotyping of a new ‘suspect community’ (Pantazis and Pemberton 2009). This trend runs counter to the basic precept of studies of extremist movements that they tend to be marked by small hard-core groups of ideologically committed extremists at the centre, with great fluidity at the margins as people drift in and out. This fluidity around the edges of extremist groups underlines the importance of grasping the contingency of political behaviour and raises tensions with the attempt to read wider populations as inherently or potentially extremist. Instead, Muslims tend to be read as essentially, excessively political, and this in turn obscures the contingency of their political behaviour. As a consequence, we are left with a sense of the inevitability of a Muslim political threat to democratic principles, a challenge in turn invoked in popular Islamophobic discourse as justification for attempts to close democracy around their exclusion. This is problematic, for the attempt to combat extremism is dependent upon incorporating Muslims into democracy, rather than closing it around their exclusion.
There are three compelling ways in which we can approach the question of why it is that wider Muslim populations seem to be such a challenge. First, we can assume that they present no challenge at all. This we can reject, for all populations are a political problem to which the response is biopolitics (Nadesan 2008: 211). Second, we can assume that such populations are indeed inherently extremist, and that the attention they receive collectively is in proportion to the nature of the threat they pose to democracy. This sweeping explanation can similarly be rejected for, in a world in which there exist Muslim punks, porn stars and pub landlords, as well as groups expressly promoting moderation such as the Quilliam Foundation, there is plenty of evidence to suggest otherwise. The third approach lies somewhere between the first two. We can take as given that the great diversity of political opinion within Muslim communities makes it impossible to apply a single blanket label, but recognise at the same time that there is something specific to the political problem presented by Muslim populations in the West that heightens the sense of crisis and feeds into wider representations of Muslims as a threat. In other words, we can conclude that Muslim populations present a political problem that is analytically distinct from the question of extremism, and that part of the response to this lies in its conflation with the separate question of extremism. To understand this, we therefore need to clarify what it is about Muslim identity politics that has been seen as somehow upsetting the natural order of things.

Faced with a range of different contemporary modes of Muslim political agency, the dominant mode of reading Muslims has essentialised them as somehow bound by extremism and terrorism, as Ash Amin noted:

> Past and new portrayals of threat and contamination [by Muslims] are being given bite by states hastily cobbled together emergency powers permitting intrusive surveillance, arrest without warrant, illegal detention, foreign rendition, supported by hysterical media commentary calling for vigilance regarding veils, rucksacks, Urdu, gatherings in mosques, Islamic organization, the behaviour of Muslim-looking people in public and private. (2010: 10)
This has emerged as a new common sense, so that the threat to our security is frequently supposed to be a general Muslim threat to liberal democracy rather than a specific threat posed by terrorists. This idea is expressed across dispersed and frequently contradictory nodal points of contemporary discourse on Muslims, with its meanings stabilised around a common appeal to the notion that ‘their’ apparently excessive politicality somehow emerges from their difference (Tyrer and Sayyid forthcoming). For example, Europe’s Islamophobic far right parties defend their anti-Muslim hatred on the grounds that they are merely anti-Islamist, seeking to defend European democratic traditions against a political alterity that is centrally extremist. Another nodal point in this discourse was the mass arrest of Muslims in the United States following the 9/11 atrocities (Meeropol 2005). Elsewhere, we have witnessed attempts across a number of liberal democracy to legislate against assumed signs of Muslim alterity: Dutch legislation against the burqa was passed in the context of debates problematising this threatening presence as much as they were concerned with the rights of women forced to wear the burqa, and in spite of the fact that it is worn by just 0.03 per cent of the population (Moors 2011: 157). This has been followed by similar legislation attempted in France and passed in Italy, and even by an attempt in Oklahoma to legislate against the menace of non-existent Shariah courts in the state (Eichler 2010). Racial profiling against Muslims has become increasingly commonplace across Europe (cf Moeckli 2008), resulting most strikingly in a massive rasterfahndung data-mining operation launched in Germany between 2001 and 2003 in which police ethnically profiled the population for potential terrorists, trawling through the personal data of eight million people. The phantasmic presence of Muslims, seemingly unknowable because of the way in which they have stepped outside the logics of race and racialisation, has been represented as terrifying, and one of the most important justifications for this has been the need to protect our democracies against those who would seek to remove our democratic rights and freedoms.

What lends these dispersed articulations a fragile unity is the common sense that the terrorist threat posed by militant Islamists is in fact a general condition of Muslim alterity. Geert Wilders’ famous rhetorical question ‘Moderate Islam? That’s a contradiction’ (Spiegel 2008) reflects this logic, reading Muslim politicality as essential to their difference. This logic pre-
dated the war on terror, and following 9/11 has developed into a broader critique of multiculturalism as having pandered to the difference of minorities, placing strain on collective bonds so that the Muslim threat to democracy is seen as having been fuelled by the failure of multiculturalism. During the war on terror, the emphasis upon the supposedly threatening nature of this suspect community has fed wider racism (Frost 2008; Pantazis and Pemberton 2009). This process can only be understood as a mode of racialisation, and in the case of Muslims it emerges as an attempt to work through the political problem that they present, namely: how one can guarantee the racialisation of human populations at a time when Muslims seem to weaken its hold by ostensibly rejecting ascribed racial and ethnic categories in favour of religious identity labels that they have selected themselves? This is an important question, because to speak of Islamophobia is not to speak about a form of religious discrimination, but rather an expression of racism. Islamophobia rarely takes the form of attempts to problematise religious practice, but rather targets Muslims and, in doing so, it draws its metaphors from an established racial vocabulary.

The liberal political imaginary has come to be concerned with the development of a wider disciplinary apparatus in which force is exceptionalised although never completely excluded for the purposes of correctional interventions (Zanotti 2011: 61). Although it is often assumed that the expansion of the liberal project will deliver rights and remove racism from the public sphere, the relationship between liberalism and race is in practice more complex. This is because liberalism does not simply play a neutral role in a fully realised social world, but it shapes and institutes the nature of the social itself. A political imaginary specifies the nature of being and as such relates closely to the political question of how social relations are instituted, and how populations are managed (Dillon and Lobo-Guerrero 2009: 2). The ontological structure of the social is more complex than is accounted for within rationalist political theory, and this complexity is reflected in the problematic involvement of race in instituting the social relations that characterise a liberal order. This is illustrated by the relationship between race, recognition and rights. Access to liberal rights typically involves recognition of one’s status as a rational actor unencumbered by excessive politicality or alterity but capable simply of discussing political ideas and holding rights as a universal subject (Staeheli 2008:
While such an approach generally gives rise to a politics of liberal ‘colour blindness’ in which difference and racism are both privatised, race still sets the terms in which categories of people can be recognised for incorporation and receipt of rights or excluded from accessing rights on the grounds of non-recognition (Schaap 2011: 30; Ranciere 1999). The question of recognition/non-recognition does not simply concern the extension of rights to illiberal subjects, but rather establishes the terms on which subjecthood itself is recognised and, as such, it draws the distinction between being as existence – what Agamben (1998) would term ‘bare life’ – and being as complete subjecthood (ie life with a political value). In liberal societies this distinction is not simply managed through some culturally neutral logic, but rather through the exercise of power. As Connolly noted:

The bearer of difference may be one open to your appreciation or worthy of your tolerance, or an other whose claim to identity you strive to invert, or one who incorporates some of its own dispositions into her positive identity while you insist upon defining them as part of her negative identity, or one who internalizes the negative identity imposed upon it by others, or an impoverished mode of existence (e.g. ‘madness’) you refuse to recognize as an identity, or an anonymous self who resists the pressure to crystallize a public identity in order to savor the freedom of anonymity, and so on. Power plays a prominent role in this endless play of definition, counter-definition, and counters to counter-definitions. (2002: 65).

In other words, the liberal problem with difference is not simply analytical, since power is always at issue in the expression of identities and the politics with which these processes are associated. In liberal states, modernity’s racial project has established the boundaries of the polity (not everybody can be given rights) (Sayyid 2004), and in Foucauldian terms defines the membership of the population to be defended (Foucault 2003; Terranova 2007). The implications of this for racialised subjects are obvious, and the exercises of power with which their identity politics have been conflated have reflected the range of ways in which different ascribed racial labels are alternately rejected, occupied, enforced, subverted, recognised, de-recognised, rearticulated and replaced. Since raciosity is intimately bound up with membership of, or exclusion from, the polity, members of racialised and ethnicised minorities have
historically struggled for recognition in the public sphere within the terms of a liberal political imaginary that normalises whiteness by extending colour-blind logics. Struggles for recognition therefore trouble liberal theory, since ‘the individualism of liberalism raises the spectre of fundamental divisions and conflicts that cannot be overcome through deliberations on the “common good”’ (Staeheli 2008: 563). Another way of expressing this is to note that recognition of difference interrupts depoliticised notions of deliberative consensus and acts as a reminder of the centrally political nature of difference. In the case of ethnicised and racialised minorities, what has therefore happened is that recognition has tended to reflect dominant racial mores, so that groups that have a bona fide racial identity can be identified as such and access a series of rights granted to such subjects. In turn, the politicality of their collective identification can be domesticated by transforming it into a politics, through institutional multiculturalism and its cognates (e.g., community cohesion) concerned variously with assimilation, integration and the neutralising of difference.

But the large-scale emergence of a Muslim identity politics over the past two decades has proved troublesome because it interrupts the attempts to arrive at a stable social ontology based on appeals to race. By rejecting ascribed racial identifications, Muslims place into question the hegemony of a political imaginary that was predicated on the centrality of race to the expression of governmentality. This led to the insertion of a new politics that contested the terms on which the racialised were subjectified as the basis for defining and managing populations, and as such it placed the ontology of the social into crisis. This process unsettled racialised governmentality because it both complicated state relations with Muslims institutionally and contested the basis on which the social was instituted (Tyrer and Sayyid forthcoming).

Both this trend and the responses to it have implications for our understanding of the close connection between race and democratic politics. While it is nice to assume that existing democratic models offer the ideal response to the problem of race and racism, the central problem we have is that the terms on which individuals can engage with democratic institutions and practices are determined by a political imaginary predicated upon racial
difference. This has been reflected most clearly in the responses that Muslim requests for rights have met with in Britain. Since race is socially constructed and holds no biological certainty, the racialisation of Muslims through contemporary Islamophobic discourse can best be understood as a contemporary mode for the expression of race. Islamophobia has little or nothing to do with Islam; it is Muslims who are stereotyped or attacked, not their religion. But Muslim requests for protection against this form of racism have met with a fierce response that retreated into essentialist definitions of race in order to deny protection against Islamophobia on the grounds that Muslim identities are not biologically racial. The reliance upon problematic biological conceptions of race and ethnicity in legislation on racism (Meer 2007) reveals the complex racial politics at the heart of liberalism. Liberal ontology is challenged by an identity politics that rejects the logic of ascribed racialisation/ethnicisation in favour of self-defined categories for collective identification. As such, Muslims have met with a struggle to maintain social relations racialised along traditional lines mobilised in defence of the notion that race is immutable (Patel and Tyrer 2011).

**Double take**

They say that if you meet your double, you should kill him. Or – that he will kill you. I can’t remember which but the gist of it is that two of you is one too many. By the end of the script one of you must die.

In Johan Grimonprez’s film *Double take* (2009), the prospect of Alfred Hitchcock meeting his future self poses an existential crisis around which a wider tale of contemporary catastrophe is woven. In some ways this is a useful metaphor for the curious parallel between militant Islamists on the one hand and Islamophobes on the other that occurred during the Danish cartoon affair as increasing attempts were made on both sides to close democracy around the exclusion of Muslims. The crisis for democracy that this created took the form of a transformation of liberal politics through which the conflicts surrounding the wider (non-militant) Muslim identity politics could be domesticated into what has been conceptualised by Zizek as ‘ultra-politics’. Predicated around a zero-sum engagement between ‘us’ and ‘them’ in
the absence of common symbolic territory (Zizek 2000: 190), ultra-politics has manifested in a hardened logic concerned with erasing problematic political antagonists (Edkins 2003: 14) that has been as emblematic of the war on terror as it has of terrorist discourse (Diken and Laustsen 2005: 134–135). In the case of the Danish cartoon affair, we therefore witnessed militant Islamists on the one hand seeking to close democracy around the exclusion of Muslims through an escalating and horrific violence against their antagonists which left 139 dead globally, and Islamophobes on the other hand, who sought to close democracy around the exclusion of Muslims by narrowing the interval between ordinary Muslims and militants. Ordinary, innocent community members were effectively represented as possessing the same dangerous difference that was assumed to have given birth to this dreadful violence. Both militant Islamists and Islamophobes were therefore engaged in a zero-sum game, and the striking feature of the cartoon affair is the extent to which mainstream Muslim opinion and expression lay caught between the two, and yet still emerged through mass protests.

It is therefore worth pausing for a question: if there is an analytical distinction to be made between extremist Muslims and ‘mainstream’ Muslim opinion, then what on earth would possess members of the mainstream majority to protest, despite knowing that members of the extremist minority had been guilty of staggering levels of violence? The extent of the violence was unimaginably horrifying, and included a plot to murder the cartoonist Kurt Westergaard and an attempted terrorist atrocity in Germany (Müller, Özcana and Seizova 2009), while in Britain four British Muslims were arrested and sentenced for serious crimes including soliciting to murder during a demonstration in London in February 2006. The editor Flemming Rose who had published the cartoons reported having done so as a reaction to what he felt was a self-censorship born of fear of Muslim reactions when dealing with Islam, and which had meant that it was even difficult to find artists willing to illustrate children’s books (Cliteur 2010).

In light of the shocking extent of the violence that followed the publication of the cartoons, it is necessary to unpick what the protests concerned in order to distinguish between the violence of the extremist minority and the responses of the mainstream majority. This is not
straightforward, for the tendency has been to look at the affair as a straightforward conflict between democracy and an anti-democratic community driven by religious belief and a desire to impose their own strictures onto others. Even when treated with greater complexity, the affair tended to be viewed as part of a conflict over alleged blasphemy and other religious questions, as Rosen (2008: 105) noted. Such readings fall back upon the idea that political events have straightforward meanings, and that the fundamental cause of the protests was theological. This fundamentally misunderstands the nature of political practice and the ways in which political meanings are fixed through articulation as particular discursive elements are inserted into a chain of equivalences in order to establish these meanings (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). There is no doubt that attempts were made by some – including extremists – to fix the meanings of the cartoons as primarily theological. However, these meanings were contested and struggled over. If theological readings dominated in the Middle East, Muslims in Europe tended to read the affair rather differently as involving social, rather than theological, concerns (Müller, Özcana and Seizova 2009: 33), and in fact the apparent offence of protesters in Europe needs to be viewed in the context of the persistence of social problems such as exclusion and racism (Modood 2006). In this light, the democratic challenge posed by the cartoon affair was not simply how to defend democracy against extremists who were committing acts of shocking violence justified through the use of theological metaphors in order to silence free speech, but rather how to distinguish between these and the majority of protesters in Europe in order that the demands of the latter group could be expressed through democratic structures and towards democratic ends. This question also cuts to the heart of the wider attempt to combat violent extremism.

If mainstream Muslim politicisation in Europe cannot straightforwardly be read as theologically motivated, it cannot also be straightforwardly read as being fundamentally anti-democratic. At its most banal, it had the effect of placing political claims about racism in the public sphere, through the concerns that were expressed about the range of stereotypes of deviance and extremism used in the cartoons, which depicted terrorists and identity parades. It was therefore significant that the protesters drew upon a protest repertoire well established in western democratic traditions, employing traditional methods such as marches, banners,
letters to newspapers and petitions, as well as using new media technologies to express their views. After the London protest was hijacked by extremists, four of whom received lengthy sentences for their incitement, attempts were made to organise a follow-up protest that could reclaim the cause from the extremists. One iconic photograph showed a protester brandishing a placard that proclaimed Muhammad to be the father of civil rights. Far from placing Muhammad in opposition to the liberal democratic rights tradition, this retrospectively located him within it. As Cram argued,

far from alienating Muslims from the state, or silencing them in public discourse, it could be argued that these participants in public debate demonstrated a healthy commitment to the idea that they could shape the contours of public policy. In so doing, those protesting against the right to engage in free speech offensive to particular religious communities ironically revealed the fortitude that can be demanded of all of us in a pluralistic liberal democracy. (2009: 330)

As Chantal Mouffe noted, the task of democracy is not to neutralise political antagonisms, but rather ‘to construct them in a way that energizes the democratic confrontation’ (2005: 6). What is interesting about the case of Muslims is that the hegemonic way to challenge militancy is to find a way of channelling Muslim mobilisations that would enable them to express their concerns, particularly about Islamophobia, within a democratic politics. This would have had increased the distance between mainstream Muslim rights campaigners and militants, rather than displacing them to the streets where they were articulated through more affective registers. Religious extremists are never going to overthrow democracy by winning elections and strengthening democratic practice; in fact, their central aim is to weaken and denounce it. The increased calls that we see for a closure of multicultural space to minorities in general (and Muslims in particular) instead reflect a problematisation of minorities’ access to democratic institutions, and an attempt to close democracy around the exclusion of Muslims. Returning to the striking question of why, in spite of such violence, so many ‘mainstream’ Muslims joined protests against the cartoons, some key factors cannot be ignored. As Dornhoff (2011) has noted, a politics of offence has come into play in Muslim politics in public space over the past two decades. This politics of offence has provided a
ready-made political vocabulary that Muslims can draw from when making their demands, and it arises because of the failure to hegemonise a stable progressive political discourse that is capable of articulating mainstream Muslim demands. This problem is exacerbated by the appropriation of progressive language by the far right, which seeks to mask its racism through the claim that it is merely defending rights and democracy. It is also exacerbated by the continued refusal to accept that those who bear Muslim names are not necessarily motivated solely by religion, and the continued fetishisation of ascribed racial and ethnic group identities in recognition. The failure to construct a hegemonic progressive political discourse that can articulate the demands of Muslim minorities also means that when these minorities feel grievances they will be displaced and rearticulated in other ways through other established metaphors. It is also notable that one common response to campaigns for recognition of, and protection against, anti-Muslim racism has been the trite line that this is just an attempt by Muslims to prevent the democratic majority from saying things that may cause religious offence when, in fact, religious offence is actually a very minor consideration in the context of the growth of organised far right extremism targeting this minority. Thus, a complex range of social grievances, many of which had nothing at all to do with theology, were overdetermined into a politics of offence played out during the cartoon affair.

Conclusion

The cartoon affair has frequently been represented as indicative of the confrontation that occurs when excessively different, fundamentally illiberal political actors attempt to erode democratic rights such as free speech. But the most curious feature of the affair is that this attempt to construct a hard opposition between excessively different, incompletely racialised/reised non-subjects on the one hand and rights-bearing liberal democratic citizen-subjects on the other, implies that the presence of this minority somehow demonstrates the limits of democracy and a need to weaken rather than strengthen democratic practice. When ultra-politics comes into play, this zero-sum game entails a range of actual and symbolic violences that problematise the surfeit of difference associated with the other, and seeks to close democracy around increased restrictions placed on the other’s entry into democratic space. The crisis of democracy reflected in the Danish cartoon affair was not that western
liberal democracy suddenly found itself confronted by an illiberal, anti-democratic presence intent on inserting its excessive alterity/politicality into the public sphere, but rather that this could occur because of the failure to hegemonise a progressive discourse capable of soaking up these demands, the narrowing of the representational gap between ordinary Muslims and extremists, and the continued rehearsal of the idea that the minority itself is essentially anti-democratic. This rendered invisible the contests of ordinary Muslims over the meanings of the cartoons and access to democratic space. This ultra-politics comes into play whenever an other is represented through recourse to an ossified we–they antagonism as having inadequate shared symbolic ground, and it interrupts our ability to analyse the processes that come into play when racialised subjects contest the terms on which they can be recognised and can speak as democratic subjects. As such, extremism should be combated by renewed attempts to energise democracy around the articulation of a progressive discourse that can integrate minorities’ demands without the violence of othering, and around a recognition that multiculturalism does not simply represent a rights-based free-for-all from which we should retreat, but rather that it is a means to integrate minorities’ demands within democratic structures that should be attended to as a priority for democracy.

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