

Racism and Islamophobia

S Sayyid¹

Of the many strange permutations that the so-called ‘war on terror’ has thrown up perhaps none is stranger than the process by which the distinctions between left and right that orientated western metropolitan politics since the time of the French Revolution have seemingly collapsed in relation to the ‘Muslim question’.

The demise of the left–right split was perhaps almost inevitable with the end of the Cold War, and the installation of neo-liberalism (and its multiple variants) as the only way of organising societies. There was, however, always the hope or expectation that some of the advances made by anti-colonial and anti-racist struggles would survive this neo-liberal dispensation. It was even argued that neo-liberalism would underwrite anti-racism and anti-colonialism. Free markets would lead to societies that were free, unencumbered by exclusions based on ‘irrational’ factors such as gender, sexual orientation, disability and race. Deng Xiaoping’s famous quote ‘It does not matter whether a cat is black or white as long as it catches mice’ would seem to capture this possibility. A colour-blind meritocracy beckoned. Certainly, in the Anglophonic plutocracies, etiquette changed so as to mitigate the most blatant expressions of racist opprobrium. Racism became uncouth as well as uncool. It was no longer the common sense, no longer part of the uncritical chitter chatter of the genteel and well-heeled. Its only

¹ Prof S Sayyid is Director of the International Centre for Muslim and Non-Muslim Understanding at the University of South Australia. This commentary was originally published in *Dark Matter* on 26 March 2008, <http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2008/03/26/racism-and-islamophobia/>

outings were a matter of scandal: the drunken outburst, the off-the-cuff, off-mic remark, the private joke that leaked into the public domain ... With the marginalisation of the language of racism from public discourse, one would have assumed that circumlocutions like ‘some of my best friends are black ...’ and ‘I am not racist but ...’ would also have been cast into the dustbin of bad manners.

It is therefore curious, to say the least, to see the return of these racist circumlocutions. In the train of these turns of phrase follow the themes that characterised racism: individual behaviour as the product of racial belonging, different races incorporate distinct values, the white race is superior to other races ... Of course, it could be argued that ‘horrorism’ of the Holocaust put paid to the idea of a science of race, and with the collapse of ‘race’ as a meaningful grouping of human beings racism became impossible. The science of race, however, was concerned with the production of race, rather than simply with its discovery. The measurements, the experiments, the classifications were all attempts to allay the anxiety that underlay western racism – so-called human races were not sufficiently analogous to animal species to obviate the policing of miscegenation. This fundamental inability to sustain race as a stable category did not prevent the deployment of the panoply of practices developed to sustain the racial order. The echoes of these measures have recently been played out, perhaps, in the momentary ‘urge’ (don’t you feel it sometimes?) of one of the most famous Blitcon writers: strip searches, collective punishments, deportations and internments ...²

One can detect the rehabilitation of racism, its stealthy re-occupation of the citadels of the kommentariat, in the recycling of colonial verities as contemporary core values, the nostalgia for empire that animates much middle-brow cultural output. This time, of course, racism is different. It is a racism that is savvy enough not to be caught wearing jackboots or leaving burning crosses as calling cards. It is a racism that rejects racism, that is happy to find racism among those it despises. It is the racism that takes up the white man’s burden for the new American century. It is a humanitarian intervention, not a *mission civilisatrice*; it only wants to

² See Ginny Dougary, ‘The voice of experience’, *Times Online*, 9 September 2006, <http://www.ginnydougary.co.uk/2006/09/>

spread democracy not to expropriate resources; it does not want to exterminate ignoble savages, only to domesticate unruly Muslims.

The figure of the Muslim is vital for this racism without racists. Because Muslims are not a race, any and all forms of discrimination and violence disproportionately directed at them is thinkable and doable. Because Muslims are not a race the systemic violations directed against them cannot be racially motivated. Because Muslims are not a race their subjugation is not racism. Thus most themes associated with previous expressions of racism can be (and increasingly are) brought back into style. Muslim extremists can join the black mugger, the Gypsy thief, the Jewish anarchist as the stars of racism's narratives. Expertly opined, scientifically classified and institutionally enshrined, Muslims are inserted into a public discourse as almost isomorphic replacements for previous arch-villains of racist anxieties and fantasies. The Muslim as super-villain (and it is always, of course, a 'he' since there are no Muslim women, except those waiting to be rescued by strong white arms) can help mend the holes in the tattered fabric of old-style racism, which struggles of various anti-colonial and civil rights movements in various parts of the world had done so much to rip to shreds. In this stitch-up the usual suspects of what used to be the right are joined by many in what used to be the left. The normalisation of the western enterprise, which is the eventual consequence of the struggle for racial justice, can be deferred, perhaps forever. By relying on Orientalism, in which Islam historically functioned as a counter-factual paean to What Went Right With the West, the demonisation of Islam and Muslims becomes the implicit valorisation of everything that is considered to be western. Islamophobia has been denied as a problem and defended as a practice. Islamophobia has been presented as nothing as sordid as racism, but rather a rational response to real threats to western, nay universal, values. As even the BNP knows Muslims are not a race. Racism's ventriloquists can get away with it not just because it is the dummy that does most of the talking but also because they are only bad-mouthing Muslims and they are not a race.

Racism, however, did not and does not depend on the actual existence of races. In the last fifty years the two communities in Europe that have been subjugated to some of the most intense

forms of racist genocidal violence were the German Jews and the Bosnian Muslims. Clearly, in both cases being Jewish or being a Muslim was not about endorsing a set of beliefs or engaging in set of practices. When the Nazis and Serbian ultra-nationalists called, it was not just the practice but the population that they targeted. Refusing to observe the Sabbath or refusing to pray towards Mecca would not have been sufficient to save you. Races were never exclusively biologically determined but rather socially and politically produced. Bodies were marked at the same time as religion and culture, history and territories; these markings were used to group socially fabricated distinctions between Europeaness and non-Europeaness. A woman who dons the hijab becomes subject to all the effects of mundane racism: from the dirty looks, to random threats of violence, regardless of her phenotype. If it is possible for some people to detect anti-Semitism lurking beneath anti-Zionism, why is it so difficult to imagine that that attacks on movements for Muslim autonomy could also be manifestations of racism, especially since so many of these attacks rely upon metaphors and assertions long associated with it?

Martin Amis's³ various public pronouncements about Islam and Islamism, with their curious mix of ignorance (will someone tell Amis that Baghdad is not generally considered to be the third holiest city in Islam, and Islamism includes Shias, Sufis as well as Sunnis ...) and priggish certainty indicate how public racist talk has mutated into Islamophobia and, as such, it can flourish like it is the 1970s all over again. This is why, when listening to Martin Amis, one can't help but think: this is what Alf Garnet would sound like if he had swallowed a thesaurus.

³ See Martin Amis, 'The age of horrorism (part one)', *The Observer*, 20 September 2006, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2006/sep/10/september11.politicsphilosophyandsociety> (accessed 12 October 2011).