Race in neo-liberal times

George Shire

George Shire looks at the ways in which processes of racialisation have been reworked in the neoliberal era.

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In this article I want to look at some of the ways in which current ideas about politics and culture - at the local, national and global levels - are intertwined with new and old forms of racialisation. My argument is that race today, while continuing to draw on an older repertoire, is inflected in substantively different ways from what was going on fifteen or twenty years ago, so that the hierarchy of race is delivered in different forms. In particular I want to look at ways in which processes of racialisation link to a neoliberal stance in which the idea of equality has more or less disappeared from the lexicon. Broadly speaking, we can still see a white axis of power in operation, but the ways in which it works are informed by new ways of thinking about the relationships between individuals, new cultures of the self, and new ways of thinking about markets.

Within a neoliberal framework people are seen as individualised, atomised, disconnected. Thus, for example, the meaning that equality had in social democratic left discourse has been replaced by the notion of inclusion and exclusion, and it is framed as a question about individuals. Liberal individualism then provides the underpinning for a legalistic understanding of racism, as a transgression of rights to which a person is entitled. There is no consideration of the cultures, histories and structures that have produced unequal relations between people. Racism is seen as

individual pathology rather than as something that is socially produced or can be socially addressed. The equality discourse we had in the 1970s (which of course had its own problems) no longer exists. And this 'thinning out' of definitions of equality has taken place at a time when neoliberal economics is creating greater inequality both within and between countries. This has led to a paradoxical situation in which race (consciously and unconsciously) is frequently mobilised as an explanation for crises and disasters in narratives that otherwise discount structural explanation - for example crime is linked to black culture, failed states are linked to tribalism, etc.

Postcoloniality and living with difference

I tend to think about these issues in a global as well as local context. Perhaps the best way to illustrate this is to say a bit about my own formation and biography. I spent my childhood in a country which no longer exists - the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. This was a very particular formation; it was a racial dictatorship of settlers, established by the British government in 1953.[1] There was growing hostility to apartheid in South Africa at that time, but there was little realisation in the British labour movement that policies with an exactly similar tendency were being pursued in these territories, which were the direct responsibility of the British electorate, disguised under the title of the Central African Federation.

My grandfather worked as a cargo carrier for white missionaries and settlers in the system of forced labour known as *chibaro* in the early 1920s. This was still frontier country in those days, and the settlers forced people to work without pay to build their houses, roads and railways. My grandfather was from a generation that had been engaged in traditional subsistence farming. His parents had been killed in the first war of liberation in 1896. The settlers not only drove them off their land but confiscated their herd of cattle. My father worked as a garden boy, attended evening classes set up by Sir Garfield Todd and became a local school teacher. He would later emigrate to Britain in the early 1960s, but he first saw and smelled modernity as a garden boy and a cleaner, reading magazines and missionary catalogues left lying around by his employers. When he landed on a boat at Southampton from Cape Town he could not understand why everybody kept on calling him that 'coloured' from Southern Rhodesia.

Within this racial dictatorship, the choices that I could make - or that my family

could make for me - were determined by the practical every day business of getting by - for example by issues such as whether or not I would be available to look after the cattle, and the amount of time left in between those key functions of the organisation of the family to go to school. The only schools that I could go to were the schools that were provided by missionaries. To get into these schools you had to have a baptismal certificate - not a birth certificate - the first regulative document I ever had was the baptismal certificate. And you learned to dance to the tune, to know the bible - otherwise you wouldn't get into school. It wasn't a place to say that you didn't believe in Jesus Christ, because if you said that you didn't go to school. As well as a colonially adapted form of the English school curriculum, we had to follow a compulsory course in how to become a garden boy, a chef, and a good servant - the vocational route for Africans. Learning about African music, paintings and drawings was considered heathen and forbidden. So there were these local ways in which my life was regulated by the everyday. Of course there were things going on at the macro level - the land being taken away, access being denied to productive parts of the country and the city - but there were also these regulative systems in place in the minute day-to-day aspects of our lives, whether it was making a choice about going down one street rather than another, or living in one part of the country or another.

Colonisation works in and through its regulative stance, on the ground, in people's daily lives. And it is also there in the literatures that are made available, the images that are circulating. The photography, the films, the sounds, and the narratives in my Victorian schoolbooks, all had a regulative function. This is the world in which I came into being. Growing up in such a place left me with only one choice - to get out and start the process of decolonising my mind through an involvement in the war of liberation and discovering the pleasures of educating myself. Although my experience is particular, similar coercive and regulative processes provided the context for people growing up across the colonial and neo-colonial world. For us those structures of inequality and racialisation cannot be easily separated.

This is why more nuanced ideas about race, for example those based on discourses of difference, are not sufficient if they do not also embrace questions of power. Equality is not produced simply through learning to live with difference. Living with difference is one thing, but the project of decolonisation is another.

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Some people misunderstand living with difference to mean that you can simply give up yesterday and just start happily living together. There is a vogue for living with difference that operates at that level - just moving on. I want pluralism in a much more real sense. Before I can even choose whether I like Bourdieu or not, I am still dealing with something that came to me early on in life. So I want to lock living with difference and postcolonialism together. They have to enter into conversation with one another.

When you frame multiculturalism and the question of living with difference in an international context, it becomes a question about sanitation, health, education - things that are part of people's daily lives. And if you place the idea of nation into the heart of all that, different issues come to mind. It becomes clear that decolonisation, as well involving discussion about difference, means thinking about questions of distribution and of the relationships between - and the nature of - states. For example, what would it mean to think about the question of cosmopolitanism from the perspective of the global south? What would it mean to think about migration outside of a framework whose rhetoric defaults to 'British jobs for British workers'?

Black and white bodies

Something that has disturbed me particularly in the current 'clash of civilisations' wars is the persistence of racial terror, and the continuing confluence, though expressed in changing inflections, between the whiteness of power and neoliberalism. One sees the questions of postcoloniality returning. In the age of the 'post', those older questions from colonial times reconstitute themselves in the present.

One thing we can see on the international scene is the return of the dark body. One can see a direct line from the lynchings of black men in the American South to Abu Ghraib. In the circulation of the images from Abu Ghraib you can see that preoccupation with the dark body - abused, sexualised, degraded. And it can be seen in the escalation of racist attacks against Muslims, the nightly television depictions of civil war in Iraq, the riots and civil disorders in France as alienated African and Arab youth make visible their anger, and the many bodies of dead black young men found on the beaches of Sicily, young people who have died trying to cross the Mediterranean in search of a better life. The images of abuse violently focus

attention on what is perhaps the biggest question for the twenty-first century - facing up to the difficulty of living with difference in a planet in which the majority peoples of the world live in crippling poverty.

The vocabulary of racialisation is a mobile resource - its effectiveness can extend beyond the pigment of the body in question. If you look at recent discussions about immigration, for example, although the bodies under discussion are not black, the underpinning of that discussion, the alien wedge notion, is still there - the notion of being invaded by hordes of people coming over here to rip us off and swamp us. One of the older ways of putting the alien wedge notion into play was to go for skin colour - it was a way of holding that image together. This has not completely disappeared. In the images that people think with, the past returns quietly, but without necessarily being pitched in exactly the same way. In the 'post' the 'skin colour' question has shifted. Something else sometimes comes to occupy that space. It doesn't work in exactly the same way, but you can see the thread. Its echo is still registered. The Kosovans or the Albanians or Moroccans or Muslims have come to occupy the same terrain that some of us used to occupy in an earlier period. Thus there has been a return to a kind of Powellism in the British social cultural and political landscape, but with a twist.

The notion of intersectionality is useful here. It helps us to think about the commonalities and differences between various socially constructed categories of people, and allows analysis of the ways in which categories of difference intersect in social practices, institutions and cultural discourses. Old notions work with new circumstances to give them particular kinds of meaning.

The question of skin colour is an interesting one. The constant fascination with the figure of Princess Diana is a case in point. In the media commentary on Tony Blair's resignation as prime minister in May 2007, there was constant reference back to his Diana as people's princess speech. How does sense get made of this, and how does it relate to his presentation, in his farewell speech, of Britain as a great country - something that he knows we all feel, deep down inside?[2]

Diana's allure has to do with a particular figuring of whiteness, which is very different, for example, from the way Sarah Ferguson - the redhead - was represented and read. The circulation and representation of that body - with its whiteness, paleness, beauty, femininity, purity - is completely distinct from, say, images of post-soviet Eastern European whiteness. There is a yearning for particular white bodies in

the visual, the scopic; it somehow makes connections to all those 'older' countries. And it goes beyond questions of Englishness: Englishness functions here as a kind of supra-language. There's a twinning of Englishness and whiteness - and whiteness in particular forms of representation - which is about more than skin colour. And the post-soviet world is outside that bodyscape. This new inflection has allowed old forms of whiteness to continue to haunt us. It allows us to not recognise Polish bodies - or Irish bodies - as white bodies. They are outside, they can be seen as a kind of white trash. Thinking about whiteness as a category of this kind helps us to understand some of the racialisation processes that take place in our perceptions of the post-soviet world. It enables us to see how migrants from Eastern Europe, by the time they reach Sangatte, are already black.

What is it that works people into these kinds of narrative? There is something about white bodies, and the yearning for them, that is connected to the axis of power. This is much more than a question of discrimination. Liberalism is technically anti-discriminatory, but it is also embedded in the whiteness of the privilege of power. Whiteness - particular forms of whiteness - can still be read as a signal of proximity to power.

More than two and a half millennia of the domination of the world by Europeans (and latterly the United States) could hardly fail to produce racism. And it is important to understand the crucial role of whiteness in that domination: it goes some way to explain the alliances that are produced around Iraq, for example. Its power is institutionalised, and racism is institutionalised, on the global stage. The unipolar world, dominated by today's heirs to the succession - Europe and the United States - continues to circulate and bring together particular configurations of identity and power, and to produce racism. Part of the process of understanding this is to identify the different ways in which it works locally and in different geographies.

The look of the skin, as a cultural construct, continues to have purchase as a code that allows people to keep their privilege. Some people can buy into this and some can't. For example, in South Africa people can be anti-apartheid and yet at the same time continue to enjoy the benefits of their whiteness. Making whiteness visible as part of an axis of power helps us to understand how this continued enjoyment of the benefits of whiteness is made possible.

Whiteness historically embodies, and continues to confer, entitlement. Thus

someone like George Bush, in spite of his many personal idiosyncrasies, doesn't arrive in power as a result of struggle. He's secure. His identity is not an issue; it's not in crisis. In his person different forms of power are embodied and articulated (whereas for Barack Obama, for example, his identity is always part of the conversation).

Looking at the connections between whiteness and the contemporary unipolar world makes us see that coming to terms with living with difference cannot be separated from the way the post-colonial economy is organised. Issues of difference are connected to issues of distribution. In other words, living with difference cannot be separated from a socialist politics. Socialism therefore has to rework itself so that learning to live with difference is as important within it as its distributive instincts.

One of the only ways to do that is to constitute oneself as an incomplete subject. For me the discovery that I was incomplete happened when I arrived in the United Kingdom in the early 1970s, drifting from one sort of colonial subjectivity to another: I discovered that I was irreversibly contaminated by this place. I had to find a way to live with it. That has been my understanding of what is meant by the struggle to live with difference. To constitute our selves in that way would bring us closer to a community of love, in which we would stay the course of the conversation, without guarantees, drawing on resources of hope to enable us to imagine differently. There is a question there about learning and listening to each other, which is a question that lies at the heart of any contemporary politics.

Decontextualising power

Another issue from the past that has come back to haunt us in new ways is the recent panic about young black men and crime. Here we can see clearly that curious process of simultaneous avowal and disavowal of structural causes.

We have seen Tony Blair and others talking about street crime as if it is directly produced by certain kinds of black culture and black families. Here Blair took the question of race as both subject and object. Race is mobilised as an explanation for what has happened, but it is black people as individuals who have to find the solutions. There is no sense of the complexities or histories within which people's lives are constructed. The invisibility of the whiteness of power prevents people from noticing the way it operates. It's as if it doesn't exist, doesn't take place. It is possible to understand what is staging these events, but people don't look in the right places

for explanations. What made me feel particularly disturbed about Tony Blair's 'lurch into frankness' in April 2007, when he argued that violent street crime came out of a specific aspect of black culture, was that the young people in question were being completely decontextualised. This is connected to the ideas I referred to earlier about inclusion and exclusion: the unspoken assumption is that the individual is responsible for what has happened, and for the solution. People are seen as outside sociality, outside history, at the very moment in which their culture is mobilised as an explanation for their actions. This is not to deny that people are actors in their own histories - of course they are - but, equally, this does not mean that the circumstances in which they find themselves are primarily their own responsibility.

The cultural formations through which these dramas are enacted are also something that goes largely unnoticed. It is not acknowledged that the situatedness of the young men in question has been informed by the global US-based youth culture that opens up the way they live their lives. A group of young black people with few options become conscripted into the idea that that these particular forms of youth culture are the only way there is to be. They are seduced by ideas about glamour, toughness, and status. When a young person goes out of their house, they walk in a particular way, they hang out in a particular way, and they generate certain soundscapes. The identities they occupy, their becoming, has been informed by particular cultures. And the people who respond to them are also part of that global circuit of youth culture. They already have an associative link with it. We read these young people through the same global youth culture that has produced them, through the paradigms that we internalise; it is through particular representations of US global youth culture that we understand them and become fearful of them. The observer and the observed are inside the same loop.

I am arguing here that the cultural sphere - the culture of neoliberalism - plays a key role in processes of racialisation. Here race is mobilised as a paradigm through which people's fears are lived. The way that we think about race is articulated in many different conversations.

The multicultural question

Changing attitudes to the 'multiculturalism question', closely connected to the question of living with difference, have been a feature of recent public debate. There

are a number of reasons for this, including cultural shifts in the way community and identity are perceived, people's increasing sense of insecurity (see Zygmunt Bauman and Jonathan Rutherford's articles in this issue for more on this), and contemporary discourses of anti-terrorism. The importance here is to try to see what it is you need to do to nest this question within the slightly different one of how we can feel comfortable with how we have got to here - which is not at all the same thing as talking about chapattis and rice and peas. The way we think about multiculturalism largely depends on which theme has triggered its invocation. Frequently this has to do with people's struggles for a description of who they are, or were, or could be, which always comes up at the moment at which people are in doubt of themselves, or about something. So sometimes those fears are seen through the multicultural question. It's not so much that people have a sense that they would rather live in a monoculture. It's more a question of feeling insecure in their sense of being. And many of the forms of identifying themselves as British that people once had have been shaken up by a number of other histories. That means that there's a kind of longing for something that can put them back together again. They don't want to think of themselves as being in a site of danger.

So the multicultural question - and mapping the ways in which it has been ravelling and unravelling - is an interesting route into thinking about how we live together with a more comfortable sense of who we are. It is not a question of trying to stitch up one form or another of multiculturalism, being for or against it. That is not something that I would see as very useful: multiculturalism is not a condition that you can prescribe for people. It's not an injection - take a dose of multiculturalism on Monday and you will be fine on Tuesday. What is going on, rather, is the return of culture as part and parcel of the way in which we think ourselves today. And the problem with the government is that it has moved away from the question of how to enable us to be comfortable with what we have become. Instead it is still trying to describe itself in terms of a past way of being. Sometimes it will go back to the second world war, sometimes it's the world cup, and sometimes it's that noxious acclaim of British values, as if nobody else had them. These are all descriptions of the self that are defensive, that refuse the encounter with difference

Alongside this inability to think in new ways about how we can live together, there is of course a section within the British establishment that is not interested in thinking about these questions: they don't feel the need to think about ways of

negotiating difference. This has a lot to do with the cultural production of ignorance, and the relation of ignorance to power. The complex history and experience of migrants and settlers in the United Kingdom is still frequently represented in pathological terms. Dominant discourses in the social sciences are entirely comfortable with reproducing a number of pathological assumptions about the way black culture and social life are constructed. In relation to multiculturalism, and to other areas of discussion about race, this has been a big problem. In addition, those in power frequently have an instrumental approach to knowledge, searching for a confirmation of what they already 'know'. Someone decides what the problem is, and without resort to previous analytical work, papers get circulated, think tanks or peers issue reports, and new policies are dreamed up.

People also have an investment in this cultural production of ignorance because it is easier not to think. Thinking things through is labour. Not thinking is less trouble. The neoliberal world is a dangerous place, but disrupting it requires energy. Sometimes the impetus to think differently comes from disruptive events. Twenty-five years ago there were riots in Britain. Those disorders opened the doors of the academy and other public institutions for people like me professionally. Without those disorders I most certainly would not have got a job in the academy. And that started some of us thinking about these questions, to begin the difficult work of understanding some of these processes. I'm not saying we need another riot, but it was that transruptive that created the space in which it became possible to think differently. The absence of obvious resources for the disruption of the current settlement is what makes it sometimes difficult to see how we could map a different political trajectory - one that is radical, liberatory and agonistic.

Conviviality and difference

The question of multiculture plays itself out in different ways in different places, and for different groups within each place. For example, mega cities like London are sometimes celebrated for their conviviality, the ways in which people there are comfortable with difference. But they are both comfortable and uncomfortable at the same time. They are not always comfortable for certain forms of identities and identifications. Take the example of a superpredator in the City, spending £10,000 on cocaine, and compare that to someone who is busted for having grass or crack

in Brixton (though I'm not arguing here for affirmative action for drugs). People are not treated in the same ways. Somehow we have to attend to those distinctions, and, for example, to the ways that those communities are policed differently. We have to return to the question of difference in order to think about the aspects of people's lives where difference is masked, or where certain kinds of identity are privileged.

Conviviality occupies a different narrative space from multiculturalism: it carries a vision of the future lived in the present. It is about living together in real time. It offers an alternative to what the government presents as the two possible trajectories for immigrants - that they must either learn English in six months, appreciate daffodils and integrate; or else they will stay separate, blow us all up and go back to where they came from. Imagining this different way of postcolonial living is something that was attempted by the GLC in the last days of its life. It is there in the photographs, in the images on the billboards across the city. But it is constituted from multiple references, each jostling to find a way to live in a particular place, in a particular time. This kind of conviviality is not the same as, though it is to do with, living with difference. What tends to arise from within a neoliberal framework is a hierarchy of differences - people seek to reorder a hierarchy which is already there. So though on the one hand you could say that one of the gains of the last ten years is that people have become more comfortable with some aspects of living with difference - that there have been convivial moments - on the other you can see that there has been no real challenge to hierarchies of difference - so that living with difference in that sense hasn't really made any difference at all.

The notion of conviviality is a pointer towards the idea that there are other forms of sociality, in which people can get by, in ways that are not always antagonistic towards one another. It is useful to know that, and just because something exists within a particular context doesn't mean that it doesn't produce its own forms of pleasure. But if you want the convivial to be connected to a left discourse you have to articulate it to something else, something that challenges hierarchy, that makes a radical break from the ways in which specific local and national histories are formed and racial power is forged. For conviviality to mean something, it has to be based on an interest in others that is combined with respect for those others. It's not just a question of William Hague going to the Carnival for the day - that is a convivial moment, but it is not disruptive of hierarchies of power. We need to develop the capacity for deeper forms of relationships, which are transformative and can be

maintained over time.

It could be that changes of this kind might come about through a transruptive moment emerging from the global south. But I want to think about how one could create that transruption from within the North, so that it would literally give up on the idea that it is the place from where the universal emerges and is thought. What would it be like to decolonise the North from within? One way this might occur is through learning lessons from the South, learning to listen. So I come back to this question about teaching and learning, which is a form of politics by other means.

This is an edited version of the essay which introduces the Soundings *collection* Race, Identity and Belonging, *published in January 2008.*

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1. The Federation, set up as a 'federated realm of the crown', consisted of Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) and Nyasaland (now Malawi).

2. 'The British are special. The world knows it. In our innermost thoughts we know it. This is the greatest nation on earth', Tony Blair, Sedgefield, 10 May 2007.