



# From Privilege to Precarity (and Back): Whiteness, Racism and the New Right<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction: Whiteness between Privilege and Anxiety

If one is to believe former *Breitbart* senior editor Milo Yiannopoulos, young white men are at risk of missing out on proper higher education. Luckily for said young white men, Yiannopoulos has lent his name to the newly launched Yiannopoulos Privilege Grant, which “is exclusively available to white men who wish to pursue their post-secondary education on equal footing with their female, queer and ethnic minority classmates.” (“The Privilege Grant”)<sup>2</sup> Even if one has only vaguely followed Yiannopoulos’ career as a poster boy for the alt-right until his recent misfortune<sup>3</sup>, one can surely imagine the glee with which Yiannopoulos has decided for the name of his grant scheme. After all, what would infuriate “woke” liberal social justice warriors (as he would denounce his enemies) more than a tongue-in-cheek flip on the concept of white privilege – a set of characteristics which whiteness scholar Paula S. Rothenberg, has called “the other side of racism” (2016)?

Risking accusations of sarcasm, one might say that both Rothenberg and Yiannopoulos seem to be concerned about equal opportunities in education, if from different angles. What is safe to say, however, is that what is at stake in the founding of the grant is the conspicuous relationship between race, ethnicity, social position and privilege. In the US, this relationship has not become easier with the election of Donald Trump, and even if the dynamics of race, ethnicity and class are not necessarily always and in every instance comparable, the same can be said about Britain in the age of UKIP and Brexit.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In proper academic fashion, these statements are backed up with a number of footnotes leading to peer-reviewed journal articles, newspaper think pieces etc., a discussion of which would exceed the limits of this article.

<sup>3</sup> After a video surfaced in early 2017 in which Yiannopoulos condones sexual relationships with underage boys, several organisations rescinded their invitations, and Simon & Schuster cancelled the publication of his autobiography (cf. Peters et al. 2017).

<sup>4</sup> The resurgence of the right and racism is of course not limited to these two countries, as the Front National in France and the AfD in Germany clearly demonstrate. I will, however, concentrate on the US and Britain



Analysing and understanding the rise of the new right entails understanding what role race, ethnicity, and, more precisely, the racial and social formation of whiteness play for it. In the following, I want to shed light on this issue by arguing that the analysis of the new right and its cultural expressions can benefit from an approach informed by Critical Whiteness Studies. I will therefore focus on the concepts of white hegemony and white privilege and propose some routes (which by no means are supposed to be proper solutions) to take in this debate. Critical Whiteness Studies, as a relatively young academic discipline, has been preoccupied with analysing and interrogating concepts of racial hegemony, white supremacy and white privilege both in historical context and in the present.<sup>5</sup> The question regarding the current rise of the new right is whether and in how far western cultures are witnessing a strengthening of whiteness as a hegemonic social and racial formation.

However, this issue does not seem to be unique to the current conjuncture. A “new racism” was already diagnosed in the emerging climate of neoconservatism and neoliberalism in the 1980s and early 1990s. Back then, several publications focussing on the political developments visible in the UK and the US asked the question whether what was back then labelled as the new right under Thatcher and Reagan, respectively, was connected to a new kind of racism. For example, Amy Elizabeth Ansell’s 1997 monograph on the subject is paradigmatically titled *New Right, New Racism. Race and Reaction in the United States and Britain*.<sup>6</sup> I contend that by drawing on insight from Critical Whiteness Studies and by comparing the situation of the 1980s and now, whiteness can be dissected as one of the driving forces of the current new right even when, and often precisely because, it is often rendered invisible.

By looking at the discourses connected to the election of Donald Trump and the Brexit referendum, I argue that whiteness plays a crucial role in the current national imaginaries of the new right as well as in the attempts at explaining the rise and appeal of the new right. What lies at the heart of the new right’s relationship with whiteness is a simultaneous hyperbolisation and obfuscation of whiteness. In the following, I argue for an intersectional analytical approach to understanding how whiteness is placed within hegemonic processes. This will also allow for uncovering the inherent paradoxes in whiteness as a social and racial formation. I will conclude my argument with a discussion of the potentials of Critical Whiteness Studies as a discipline in the current global political climate.

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in my argument since these are the two cultural contexts within which the study of whiteness has most fruitfully been employed.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Rothenberg 2016 for a collection of key texts on the concept of white privilege and Garner 2007 for an overview of the discipline’s main trajectories as well as for its potential political “pitfalls” (8-11).

<sup>6</sup> Other publications include Seidel 1987 and Gordon/Klug 1985.



## Evading Race in the 1980s and Today

Tackling the issue of race, whiteness and the current new right must involve the tracing of continuities between the 1980s emergence and link of the new right and a new racism on the one hand, and the current situation on the other. A common element between the 1980s and now can be detected in the often paradoxical and multi-layered discourse on race. Indeed, it is the very obfuscation of race as a relevant identity category that can be identified as one of the common denominators: as analyses in the 1980s have shown, the rhetorical and political strategies of the new right demonstrate a tendency to relativize race while simultaneously evoking it in new guises. A paradigmatic example, analysed by Paul Gilroy in his seminal study *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, is the 1983 election campaign poster of the Conservative Party (cf. 2002: 63-65). The poster shows a black man in suit and tie, accompanied by the headline "Labour says he's black; Tories say he's British." (qtd. in Gilroy 2002: 64) As the accompanying text argues, the Labour Party allegedly fixes and reduces people of colour to their racial identity position rather than acknowledging them as "equal" British citizens. The text goes on to argue that said equality is expressed in each individual's willingness to work hard and be measured according to their achievements, irrespective of race.

This discursive strategy bears many similarities to the current discourse of colour-blindness – a discourse which has been criticised by race scholars and activists as problematic since this seemingly well-meaning gesture is in fact indicative of a refusal to see how racial thinking as well as its symbolic and material expressions ultimately still have an effect on the lived realities of people of colour. Being colour-blind thus also means blindness to ways of challenging structural disadvantage based on race, for even if some might be colour-blind, others certainly aren't. Colour-blindness, it has been argued, is thus a form of complicity with latent racism, i.e. a "racism without racists" (Hart 2016: 36).<sup>7</sup> In the Tory poster, Britishness is offered as an inclusive identity which is primarily defined by individual merit. However, taking into account the criticism of colour-blindness, the poster ignores that black British people might not have the same structural and economic advantages to adhere to this meritocratic ideal.<sup>8</sup> That is, even when, as the poster states, "[t]he Conservatives believe that everyone wants to work hard and be rewarded for it [...]"

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<sup>7</sup> Writing about the situation in the US after the killing of Trayvon Martin in 2012, William David Hart describes colour-blindness as "the dominant expression of racism in post-civil rights America. [...] Colorblind racism obscures the legacy of social death, the ongoing crisis of civil death, and the virtual probation that shadows the lives of black Americans." (2016: 36f) Amanda Lewis goes further in identifying colour-blindness as complicit with, if not constitutive of current dominant racial and social formations: "Color-blindness is a variant on the tradition of liberal individualism that denies the reality of groups and group-based privileges/penalties, thereby obscuring relations of domination." (2004: 636)

<sup>8</sup> In his analysis of the poster, Gilroy adds an intersectional perspective by interpreting the black man shown on the poster as the representation of a "solitary maleness" which he reads as an expression of "the logics of racist discourse" which "militate against the possibility of making British blackness visible in a family or an inter-generational group" (2002: 65).



regardless of their race, creed or colour”, this party mission statement does not account for the problem that certain sections might not even have the same access to job opportunities simply because they have been at a structural disadvantage from the outset. To put it differently: a proclamation of colour-blindness does not single-handedly change persistent racist attitudes that lead to structural disadvantage, in the worst case, it might even prevent solutions towards a non-racist society. However, this is a logic which is still present in discourses on race and ethnicity in Britain and the US today.

In their *Searchlight* special issue on *New Right, New Racism*, Paul Gordon and Francesca Klug analyse how this logic has been carried further throughout the 1980s. Gordon and Klug identify the emergence of new right pressure groups and commentators (sometimes associated with the right wing of the Conservative Party, sometimes not affiliated with the party) which carry these arguments further in the light of Thatcherism’s loss of popular appeal (cf. 1985: 7), and inspired by the thinking of Enoch Powell (cf. 1985: 16). At the heart of this new right discourse is the ‘way of life’ of the ‘ordinary people’. Paraphrasing an argument made by Powell in 1983, Gordon and Klug identify the new racism as drawing on the idea of nation and culture: “Such a way of life includes not just language and customs but also beliefs and feelings, in short, a ‘culture’ and while there are many ways of grouping, the most important way in which people who share a way of life come together is in a ‘nation.’” (1985: 16) The “newness” of this new racism in the 1980s rests in its firm denial of biological differences between people. Instead, it emphasises culture, tradition, habits, the nation and identity – and it is this identity which sets populations apart. This new sense of national identity rests on a firm Powellian territorialism and a resulting scepticism towards immigration (cf. Gordon/Klug 1985: 19). These, as Powell and his ideological successors might argue, rest not on biological race but a sense of (British) culture and tradition. Yet, as Paul Gilroy has argued, despite the logic that Britishness is supposed to supersede race as the defining marker of identity, neoconservative discourse does not restrict the definition of national identity to the “legal definitions” of citizenship – “[t]here is more to Britishness than a passport”, and it is still defined “in the sphere of culture.” (2002: 65).<sup>9</sup>

However, what is possibly most crucial about this new racism is its very denial of racism: “The proponents of the new racism emphatically deny that they are racist. One of the ways in which they do this is to offer a definition of racism and then declare that they do not subscribe to such ideas. Once again, this strategy dates back to Powell’s statements in

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<sup>9</sup> Gilroy goes on to argue that the “politics of ‘race’ in this country is fired by conceptions of national belonging and homogeneity which not only blur the distinction between ‘race’ and nation, but rely on that very ambiguity for their effect.” (2002: 44) This argument ties in with a similar observation made by Vron Ware on notions of Anglo-British identity, or Englishness, as often being implicitly synonymous with whiteness. Due to this ambiguity, Ware argues, whiteness is of a “volatile nature” (2001: 192). There is thus a constant ambiguity of the racial connotations of national identity and vice versa.



the late 1960s" (Gordon/Klug 1985: 20). This strategy is reminiscent of the current rhetoric of the alt-right, parts of the Brexit campaign and similar political actors. As Steve Garner (2012; 2016: 34-49) has shown in his studies of whiteness in contemporary Britain, cultural racisms are very often being played out with the awareness that racism is officially taboo and a punishable offence. That is, anti-racism, or at least the condemnation of racism by the political 'establishment' is perceived by (cultural) racists as the dominant discourse that their own 'subversive' views are opposed to.

As Amy Ansell (1997) has argued in her study of new racisms of the 1980s and 1990s in the US and Britain, those new racisms are played out in terms of hegemonic strategies – the expression of racist views is adapted to the dominant discourse of the times, anticipates the potential discursive sanctioning of explicitly racist views and statements, and consequently develops alternative discursive strategies to package racist views in an "acceptable" form. This "Gramscianism of the Right" aims at a "conservative revolution in the arena of culture and ideas" that complements the "conservative policy revolution." (Ansell 1997: 25)<sup>10</sup> Twenty years later, this definition ties in with the widely-made observation that parties like UKIP have from the outset been "anti-establishment" parties which challenged the dominant status quo by appealing to a disenfranchised and precarious collective which has been failed by the major parties (cf. Ford/Goodwin 2014: 270). In a similar vein, Trumpism in the US can be considered as an anti-establishment politics which appeals to an electorate that no longer trusts the major parties and for whom the 'outsider' Donald Trump becomes a trustworthy carrier of 'fresh' ideas. Following Ernesto Laclau's analysis of populism, the racially charged thinking and rhetoric of UKIP and Trump follows the strict "division of the social scene into two camps", with figures like Nigel Farage and Donald Trump representing the "oppressed underdog" (2007: 87). The signifiers of cultural belonging that can be found in both the British and the American variants of the current new right discourse can thus be conceived of as "empty signifiers" which are employed in an effort to come to terms with the "experience of a lack" of the "fullness of the community" (Laclau 2007: 85). In order to achieve this "fullness", the community needs to be constructed and articulated in an "equivalential chain" (Laclau 2007: 84) of empty signifiers. When, for example, Nigel Farage says that "we want our country back" ("UKIP" 2015), then one might ask: what are "we" and "country" actually signifying? Who precisely is 'we' and whom exactly do they want to have their country back from?

In this context of anti-establishment politics, cultural racism – a racism which acknowledges that race is not a biological fact, but nevertheless uses racializing strategies

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<sup>10</sup> Ansell defines the New Right as representing "that section of the right wing distinct from both traditional conservatism and from more extreme Far Right groupings. Its distinctiveness is most commonly attributed to its emphasis on social issues – although its stress on free market economics has been crucial for its overall appeal. It is important to study the New Right since it, more than any other section of the contemporary right wing, has served as a catalyst in connecting popular backlash sentiments with the electoral strategies and policy goals of the Republican and Conservative Parties." (1997: 30)



– is thus a form of racism that can find its way into dominant political discourse: “New Rightists are keenly aware of the charges of racism commonly attributed to previous right-wing movements and consistently and proactively respond by insisting that their views do not represent racism but realism.” (Ansell 1997: 62) The rhetorical strategy of evading race, yet insisting on “cultural” differences between populations becomes in this respect something which could be called ‘outsider truth’ – a truth which only the anti-establishment ‘realists’ speak and which is allegedly willingly ignored by establishment politicians. Trump’s “Muslim Ban” can in that respect be considered an exemplary strategy: it pits different and allegedly incompatible ways of life against each other under the pretence of cultural protectionism when what is at stake is in fact a racially connoted islamophobia. In a similar vein, UKIP’s “Breaking Point” poster, issued only a few weeks before the 2016 “Brexit” referendum, with its imagery of refugees plays with fears of cultural collapse. It employs suggestive racist tropes, all the while evading the explicit discourse of race.

### **Playing with the Signifiers of Race**

The current new right is also acutely aware of such discursive pitfalls, as Milo Yiannopoulos and his co-author Allum Bokhari show in their “Establishment Conservative’s Guide to the Alt-Right” on *breitbart.com* (one of the main agents in the current new right’s “revolution in the arena of culture and ideas”). They describe the type of the “natural conservative” as one of the most common representatives of the current alt-right. Their description of the “natural conservative” is in many ways indicative of this new cultural racism, with western European culture and tribalism substituting for race:

For natural conservatives, culture, not economic efficiency, is the paramount value. More specifically, they value the greatest cultural expressions of their tribe. Their perfect society does not necessarily produce a soaring GDP, but it does produce symphonies, basilicas and Old Masters. The natural conservative tendency within the alt-right points to these apotheoses of western European culture and declares them valuable and worth preserving and protecting. (Bokhari/Yiannopoulos 2016: n.pag.)

Bokhari and Yiannopoulos argue that this focus on cultural value and heritage distinguishes natural conservatives from what they call establishment conservatives (Republicans in the US, for example) who would be primarily driven by neoliberal free market economic interests. In addition, they claim that “the alt-right would argue that they’re [the “establishment conservatives”] too afraid of being called ‘racist’ to seriously fight against it. Which is why they haven’t” (Bokhari/Yiannopoulos 2016: n.pag.). According to the two authors, Donald Trump has presented himself as the “first truly cultural candidate for President since Buchanan” (Bokhari/Yiannopoulos 2016: n.pag.). Whether Trump can be



considered a “cultural conservative” (no matter whether this is being judged from the left or from the right) or would declare himself to be one is debatable, but what can be gathered from this line of argument is that the right’s obsession with “culture” is conspicuous and must be assessed.

“Culture”, whenever it is being used to emphasise the speaker’s sense of value and belief-system, and especially when it is used to distinguish oneself from common racist positions, is never really free from racial and ethnic connotations. As Ali Rattansi has argued, emphasis on cultural difference, even if it meticulously avoids reference to any biological markers, still takes place in the semantic realm of race and ethnicity. This becomes clear when culturalist arguments are examined for their essentialist traits:

In practice, [...] *cultural* demarcations are often drawn and used in a form that *naturalizes* them by implying that they are more or less *immutable*. Thus the supposed avariciousness of Jews, the alleged aggressiveness of Africans and African Americans, the criminality of Afro-Caribbeans or the slyness of ‘Orientals’, become traits that are invariably attached to these groups over extremely long periods of time. The descriptions may then be drawn upon as part of a common-sense vocabulary of stereotypes that blur any strict distinction between culture and biology. (Rattansi 2007: 104f; emphasis in orig.)

Such tendencies become visible in a number of recent examples in the UK and US, but also in other countries.

In the UK, historian David Starkey’s response to the English Riots in 2011 on *BBC Newsnight* was heavy with the discourse of cultural difference when he blamed “nihilistic black gangster culture” for the growing violence in communities like Tottenham (BBC 2011: n.pag.). While he emphasised that he was not concerned with racial features – “it’s not about skin colour, it’s culture” – he nevertheless claimed that this gangster culture proved to be infectious across cultural differences by stating that “the whites have become black” (BBC 2011: n.pag.). In this use, “culture” can be argued to operate in terms of Laclau’s equivalential chains.

While Starkey is certainly neither the prototypical alt-right neo-racist nor a UKIP-friendly figure, his argument still evidences a considerable tendency in British society and public discourse to consider differences among people along the lines of racist arguments.<sup>11</sup> Following Rattansi’s argument, the distinction “between culture and biology” is clearly being blurred in such statements. Such tendencies become especially visible in the discourse on migration which is so central to the Brexit question and the driving fuel for

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<sup>11</sup> Ann Phoenix has analysed Starkey’s statement as a “new racist” argument (cf. 2012: 63). Cf. also Tyler 2013: 88f.



many UKIP politicians. Rattansi demonstrates that the immigrant is the key figure of cultural racism which also evokes a new sense of whiteness. This becomes evident in

arguments common in the 1980s (and now revived in a different form) that the real racists are not indigenous whites, but the black and Asian immigrants who insist on keeping alive a wide range of their own ways of life while still wanting to claim full rights as British citizens and turning whites into 'second-class citizens.' (Rattansi 2007: 101)

Structurally, even David Starkey's comments appear to follow a similar pattern. In both arguments, whether they are concerned with the "invasive" cultures of immigrants or the corrupting influence of black gangster culture on white youths, white culture appears to be in a precarious position.

This, I would argue, is an affective structure which lies at the heart of the current rise of the new right and its racist tendencies. The new right appeals to many white people because it articulates the anxieties rooted in a perceived loss of cultural identity and power. Whiteness, as Steve Garner has shown in a series of qualitative interviews with white working-class and middle-class Britons, is now often considered to be "a position of injury and beleagueredness" (2012: 460). Garner shows how the social world of contemporary white Britons is based on a "racialized understanding" in which "to be an ethnic minority grants privilege that the white working class used to enjoy through a national framework of belonging" (2012: 460). Consequently, for those white Britons who perceive their ethnic and cultural identity to be under threat, "the nation-state is thus a presence framing the current racialisation discourse" (Garner 2012: 460). In the same vein, the emphasis on cultural traits, national belonging etc. does not diminish or relativise the importance of biological racial or ethnic traits. In fact, as Garner argues, the desire to reduce the complexity of social narratives and relationships of power eventually leads to a return to old-fashioned markers of distinction: "despite claims that we are living in times of 'cultural racism', 'new racism', 'colour-blind racism', etc., in which culture is the key theme of discourse, people still simultaneously make sense of difference through the old-school visual distinction of skin tone, hair type, facial features, etc." (Garner 2012: 459)

Here, the current alt-right inhabits a special position. While, like the new right of the 1980s and 1990s, they are acutely aware of the current taboos of explicit biological racism, they distinguish themselves from earlier new right protagonists in that they consciously and wilfully play with the signifiers of race and thus engage in the power play of racialisation. Returning to Bokhari and Yiannopoulos' "typology" of the alt-right, this becomes evident in the following observation regarding the alt-right's concern with cultural purity:

The alt-right's intellectuals would also argue that culture is inseparable from race. The alt-right believe that some degree of separation between peoples is necessary



for a culture to be preserved. A Mosque next to an English street full of houses bearing the flag of St. George, according to alt-righters, is neither an English street nor a Muslim street [sic] — separation is necessary for distinctiveness. Some alt-righters make a more subtle argument. They say that when different groups are brought together, the common culture starts to appeal to the lowest common denominator. Instead of mosques or English houses, you get atheism and stucco. (Bokhari/Yiannopoulos 2016: n.pag.)

The two authors themselves engage in this play of signifiers and ideologies when, in the same article, they accuse the “Establishment conservatives” of not taking seriously the fears of “white voters that they’re going to go extinct” by “openly [welcoming] that extinction” (Bokhari/Yiannopoulos 2016: n.pag.). Milo Yiannopoulos himself has taken the ambiguity about matters of race and racism to perfection, it seems. In a piece for the online magazine *The Stranger*, Rich Smith dissects some of Yiannopoulos’ arguments and alleged attitudes on the issue and states that, while he claimed in a speech at the University of Colorado on 26 January 2017, that white supremacy “isn’t the way to go” and that “you shouldn’t give a shit about skin colour [...], and you should be deeply suspicious about the people who do” (qtd. in Smith 2017: n.pag.), Yiannopoulos himself seemed to be “strangely unsuspecting” of both his endorsement of the self-declared white supremacist Richard Spencer as well as of his own attitudes, reflected in his launching the “Privilege Grant.” In a similarly ambiguous way, Smith argues, Yiannopoulos has at times both endorsed and rejected the label “alt-right” (2017: n. pag.).<sup>12</sup>

While Yiannopoulos might be considered as merely an exceptional figure, a grotesque clown cynically playing the ideologically ambiguous transgressive, his performance nevertheless representatively hints at the problems that one encounters when trying to study the “alt-right” or the current new right in general. His popularity with a predominantly white male audience at least testifies to the increasing acceptability of “non-pc” attitudes. In many ways, this ties in with the current shifts in performing white identity, for Yiannopoulos’ crusade against political correctness, very much like the appeal of Donald Trump, seems to resonate with sections of the white population who feel themselves to be “beleaguered.” As Amanda E. Lewis has argued, “[t]here are multiple ways of expressing or doing whiteness. However, there is at any particular time a dominant form that shapes the lives of all those living within that particular racial formation” (2004: 626). In that respect, the new right’s (and its alt-right segments) way of “doing” whiteness consists in challenging the perceived hegemony of politically correct forms of ‘victimised’ whiteness. They are part of the “competing racial logics” which challenge “hegemonic common sense” (Lewis 2004: 632n15). In the current discourse, whiteness and nation are used as

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<sup>12</sup> In another piece for *breitbart.com*, Yiannopoulos elaborates on his relationship with the alt-right: “Trust me, alt-right hardliners don’t like me any more than they like the Republican establishment or Hillary: I’m a degenerate, race-mixing gay Jew, and they don’t let me forget it! That is to say, I’m a chronicler of, and occasional fellow traveller with, the alt-right. But I’m certainly no ringleader” (2016: n.pag.).



vessels of belonging – racial configurations thus ultimately fill a vacuum left by neoliberal and neoconservative governmentality, with the aim to establish new forms of white governmentality.

Race and whiteness are never straightforward affairs and must be considered in their different semiotic and representational guises as well as in their intersections with other vectors of identity and belonging such as class, gender, sexuality, religion – race, as Amanda E. Lewis argues, is “a set of identities, discursive practices, cultural forms, and ideological manifestations” (2004: 625). This set of identities is at the centre of a struggle over ideological hegemony between the right and left of the political spectrum. Just as the (new) right mobilises racially connoted sets of identities, such sets are being used on the other side of the spectrum to make sense of the rise and appeal of the new right. While the right evokes a feeling of “beleagueredness” of white, western-European identities, attempts at explaining the appeal of the new right take their cue from certain sets of white identities and their intersections. Crucially, the flipside of the current struggle over hegemonic forms of raciality, is the tendency in liberal and left-wing discourse to identify the poor, uneducated white working-class as the core of the problem posed by the rise of the new right.

### **Struggles over the White Working Class**

Diagnosing a “crisis of white identity”, Amanda Taub tries to make sense of the Brexit vote and Trump’s success in a piece for the *New York Times*: “If you are a working-class white person and you fear that the new, cosmopolitan world will destroy or diminish an identity you cherish, you have no culturally acceptable way to articulate what you perceive as a crisis” (2016: n.pag.). Yet, while Taub acknowledges “a certain fluidity” to conceptions of whiteness, her own focus on the anxious and disadvantaged white working class may prove problematic as well (2016: n.pag.). When she states that “[f]or generations, working-class whites were doubly blessed: They enjoyed privileged status based on race, as well as the fruits of broad economic growth” (Taub 2016: n.pag.), it does not quite become clear when and where exactly the white working class was fully (and homogeneously) implied in formations of white privilege. After all, as the case of white trash in the US demonstrates, certain sections of the white lower classes have been excluded from such privileges (cf. Hartigan Jr. 2005; Wray 2006). And in Britain, the whiteness (or the granting of its privileges) of the working class has historically been far from self-evident as well (cf. Bonnett 2000: 32-38; Garner 2007: 72-75; Ware 2001: 191; Jones 2011).

Thus, the essentialisation of the white working class in a way that sketches their development from a racially privileged homogeneous group into becoming a hotbed for racist and right-wing radicalism borne out of desperation over losing that privilege entails



the risk of losing sight of the inherent paradoxes of whiteness and racial identities in general. It also entails the risk of installing the white working class as a scapegoat for recent political developments which, however, are equally multi-factorial. Race and class, however decisive and crucial, are but two of the many factors of the recent political situation in the US, Britain and other European states.

In that respect, white working-classness must be understood as an intersection of identities that, just as any other identity formation, can be performed in a number of ways, and the preconditions for these performances are always historically distinctive. Thus, while the British white working class of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for instance, was rendered “sub-human” (Ware 2001: 191) and excluded from the privileged domain of Anglo-Saxon whiteness, the conditions in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century have changed. For instance, white members of the working class might benefit from white privilege in one situation, while being demonised for supposedly representing an ‘abject’ form of hyper-whiteness when seen as a homogeneous group of Trump- or Brexit-voting nationalists and white supremacists, to point out just two possible extremes. Racial hegemony is therefore never a smooth process, and the current feelings of “beleagueredness” felt by sections of the white working class (and it is important to stress that there are also other possible forms of performing white working-classness beyond racial hysteria) is but one aspect of what Imogen Tyler calls the “endless reconfiguration of abject others” (2013: 9).

These abjectifying strategies are also part of the formation of hegemony. However, just like the content and meaning of whiteness “appears to be of a volatile nature, easily evaporating when put under pressure” (Ware 2001: 192), hegemony “is never total or final” (Lewis 2004: 632n15). Thus,

[i]n any particular historical moment, [...] certain forms of whiteness become dominant. [...] Hegemonic whiteness thus is a shifting configuration of practices and meanings that occupy the dominant position in a particular racial formation and that successfully manage to occupy the empty space of ‘normality’ in our culture. (Lewis 2004: 634)

In order to make sense of the intricate struggles over racialized hegemony, what is needed is what Stuart Hall has called “the non-reductive approach to questions concerning the interrelationship between class and race” (1996: 435). This means to critically dissect where race (or whiteness) and class have come to mutually express each other (cf. Hall 1980: 341).

With respect to the way whiteness, and more precisely, a specific white working-class identity, has been contested in connection with the rise of the new right, it is important to identify how this particular mode of identity has been used in the struggle over hegemony. In his 2011 book on the “demonization” of the British white working class, Owen Jones offered a prognosis which in many ways anticipated the political events of 2016. Jones



critically reflects on the assumption that the British working class has, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, increasingly harboured anti-immigration sentiments and that these sentiments result from exclusively racial problems. For Jones, anti-immigration sentiments cannot be explained by a recourse to white identity and a longing for white hegemony:

Anti-immigration rhetoric has gained traction for far more complex reasons than mere culture or race. Indeed, many ethnic minority working-class people share the popular hostility to immigration. But at a time of growing insecurity about jobs and wages, immigration has provided a convenient scapegoat as well as an excuse to dodge questions that are far more relevant. (2011: 245)

These anti-immigration sentiments are thus a consequence of the evasion of class throughout the Blair and Brown governments. As a consequence, “[r]ight-wing populism is on the rise – and it is shamelessly courting working-class people” (Jones 2011: 245).<sup>13</sup> The “savvy new populist right” in the form of UKIP and the English Defence League, Jones argues, “is comfortable talking about class and [...] offers reactionary solutions to working-class problems” (2011: 245.) by blaming Labour for abandoning their core electorate and multiculturalism for “undermining ‘white’ working-class identity” (2011: 246).

For the US, Joel Olson has made a similar argument by tracing the transformation of post-Civil Rights America from a society in which “whiteness has been transformed from a form of social standing to a *norm*” which, ultimately, “created *ressentiment*” (2008: 705) that could not be compensated by the major political parties. Since “[o]ne of the key functions of official policies and unofficial practices of racial oppression is to reduce class conflict among the dominant group” (Olson 2008: 707), the “normalization” of whiteness caused intra-group conflicts among many whites which “presented a political opportunity for the minority party, if they could mobilize it” (Olson 2008: 704). Like Amanda Lewis and Amy Ansell, Olson offers a Gramscian analysis of this situation and concludes that “[t]he great irony of the destruction of white standing is that it did not lead to [Martin Luther] King’s beloved community but rather to Gramsci’s war of position” (2008: 715). This ties in with Steve Garner’s recent conception of the “neoliberal postracial state” in which a “technocratic” official anti-racism that has been decoupled from the “struggles that brought it about [...] in the late 1960s and 1970s” goes hand in hand with the “channelling [of] ‘race’ and racism from the public into the private domains” (2016: 46). Garner describes how in the current climate of neoliberalism, race and racism have gradually become something that is publicly individualised, among others, in the form of isolated, yet newsworthy stories (e.g. individual politicians, footballers or other public persons ‘overstepping the mark’) while the idea of systemic racism remains unaddressed. In a similar

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<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Robert Ford and Matthew Goodwin conclude their study on the rise of the far right in Britain by stating that “UKIP’s revolt is a working-class phenomenon. [...]. In a sense, UKIP’s rise represents the re-emergence of class conflicts that Tony Blair’s New Labour and David Cameron’s compassionate Conservatism submerged but never resolved” (2014: 270).



way, incidences like the frequent shootings of black men in the US (such as in the cases of Trayvon Martin or Michael Brown) are being framed “as if they are random individual events about anything except ‘race’” (Garner 2016: 47). However, in the private realm – that is, in the everyday interactions of the people –, race and a racialized perception of social relations remains dominant. Resulting from this, the “war of position” can be found in the way political narratives are created by the competing major parties and their candidates. The resulting ideological vacuum, it could be said, has been taken advantage of by Trumpian populist strategies which, through their various guises, appeal to a predominantly white electorate.

Following this argument, it becomes possible to regard whiteness as a vessel through which hegemonic identity politics are being negotiated. Considering whiteness and its (hegemonic) effects in this way, it also becomes possible to account for the often paradoxical and twisted way in which whiteness and racial identities are put to work in the current discourses surrounding the new right. This is not to diminish the often hurtful effects of white hegemony in the US and in Britain to the mere play of ultimately empty signifiers. After all, symbolic boundaries and hierarchies do have material effects. Yet, even while there might be “true” white supremacists who adhere to a systematic ideology of supreme cultural and ethnic whiteness, more often than not, what is at the heart of the current conflicts is a more ambivalent notion of whiteness. Studying whiteness in relation to the new right thus means to shed light on the “plural trajectories of whiteness” which show the “internal and external boundaries of the white ‘we’ [...] to be contingent” (Garner 2007: 76).

Here, Garner’s criticism of academic ‘trends’ in the study of whiteness is worth heeding. He argues that writing “on white racialized identities has focused disproportionately [...] on working-class men” which, ultimately, might say more about “the academy’s middle-class composition” and tradition (2007: 72) and creates a “selective picture” (2007: 78) of the distribution of racist attitudes in society. What is more, it is middle- and upper-class citizens who, in case of doubt, have been the gatekeepers of white belonging throughout the last centuries. In the current political climate, blaming the outcome of elections or referenda exclusively on the white working classes would thus be a conceptual mistake. In the most extreme cases, the white working class would thus become the abject Other of the respectable and therefore dominant (white) middle class. Thus, as Amanda Lewis argues, whiteness as a hegemonic formation can only be productively analysed if it is considered in context with other identity factors since

it is practically impossible to divorce the social category whiteness from its role as a force of domination and subjugation. [...]. Studying whiteness or white people absent of social context obscures the precise reason why it is important to focus on whiteness in the first place – in order to remove the cloak of normality and universality that helps to secure continuing racial privilege for whites. (2004: 642)



## Conclusion: Thinking About the Future of Whiteness

In her recent book on *The Future of Whiteness*, Linda Alcoff argues that the current demographic shifts in the US will eventually lead to whites becoming the minority ethnicity, and this will lead to transformations in the understanding and status of whiteness as an identity: “Whiteness will no longer be invisible when the majority of Americans find it so very visible in its foregrounded status as the newest minority. It will no longer be a default identity for leadership, nor will it be able to justify its cultural hegemony” (2015: 25). As my discussion of various aspects of the current rise of the political right in the US and Britain, whiteness and whites’ anxieties about their identity has shown, the appeal of these politics might well be a reaction to these impending changes. Yet, while many on the new right might in fact strive to preserve a perceived “traditional” way of being European-white, the discussion has also shown that the current debates and struggles over cultural hegemony are not always necessarily about whiteness per se, and that what is being evoked as whiteness in these discourses is very often not exclusively concerned with racial identity, but rather (consciously as well as unconsciously) uses whiteness and race as vessels or co-factors for other ideas.

Yet, whiteness cannot always be said to be a substitute signifier for something else. In fact, as I contend with Linda Alcoff, “[w]hite supremacy is built into our material culture” (2015: 26) and is “far from ontologically empty” (2015: 8). Thus, whiteness may be fleeting, but it is never not there – it is, as Vron Ware has said, “of a volatile nature” (2001: 192). The task of Critical Whiteness Studies in the current political conjuncture must therefore be to identify it in its ever-evolving intersections and particularities. Whiteness is as far from being a monolithic identity as it is from being an ontologically empty signifier. As my discussion has shown, it is often precisely in the intra-group conflicts that whiteness becomes politically crucial, and a good deal of the current rise in racism stems from these conflicts and is being projected onto the non-white population. Coming to terms with the current rise of racism associated with the new right in Britain and the US thus necessitates thinking critically about the future of whiteness as a lived experience, as Alcoff demands. If race and whiteness are haunting the political “war of position” over hegemony as a war over culture and ideas, then this conflict cannot be won by ignoring these categories even if they are fleeting signifiers without scientific validity. The critical reflection on symbolic and material boundaries erected through the recourse to whiteness must therefore be a main concern in the analysis of the dominant formations of the political right.

Finally, in a time when the right seems to be able to form at least symbolic transnational coalitions, the emergence of (new) racisms needs to be grasped in its contingencies across time and cultures. The recent months have seen a significant exchange between protagonists of the new right, from Nigel Farage’s meetings and public appearances with



Donald Trump to the 2017 Koblenz congress of European far-right leaders in high spirits about the Brexit referendum and the Trump victory (among them France's Marine Le Pen, the Netherlands' Geert Wilders and members of Germany's AfD). The latter is particularly significant, for it once more raises the question about the adaptability of Critical Whiteness Studies in cultural contexts beyond the Anglophone world.<sup>14</sup> After all, Critical Whiteness Studies emerged from a distinctly US-American context and primarily re-traced the development of formations of whiteness from an Anglo-American perspective.

However, the present conjuncture shows the pressing need to consider whiteness as an "interconnected global system" (Ware 2001: 184). Even where it is not an explicit issue, the patterns underlying the construction(s) of whiteness and its correlates can be considered. In Koblenz, for example, talk about "the people of Europe" and the wave of "hundreds of thousands of refugees" which were let into the country "against the will of the German people" (Le Pen qtd. in Connolly 2017: n.pag.) evoked the language of race and the people (in the sense of the racially connoted German "Volk"). Dissecting the semantic repertoire of race in the transnational new right must be a major task for a Critical Whiteness Studies committed to analysing the hegemonic struggle of the right. The study of whiteness as a study of racism and its political conditions therefore needs an explicit regard for transnational trajectories, historical context and the intersections of identities.

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Griffin/Braidotti 2002 for an overview of positions on situating whiteness in the European context.



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