

New racisms, new racial subjects?: The neoliberal moment and the racial landscape of contemporary Britain

Abstract

The articles in this volume reflect upon a very specific moment in the social architecture of British society: a moment which brings financial meltdown together with some sizeable shifts in the racial and ethnic landscape of the UK. As a 'neoliberal revolution' (Hall 2011) heralds the end of public services and the end of the welfare state, it proclaims 'the end of race' as well. But cultural retrenchment and coded xenophobia have also been sweeping the political terrain, accompanied by 'new racisms' and 'new racial subjects' which only close contextual analysis can unpick. Against those who suggest we live in a post-racial time, the research presented offers friction. By focusing on particular locations in Britain at a particular moment, the articles explore local stories of 'race' and racism across changing socio-political ground.

Keywords – 'race', ethnicity, 'post-race', neoliberal, 'new racism', Britain

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Britain is “living through an extraordinary political crisis” reflected Stuart Hall in the Guardian at the end of last year (Guardian 15 September 2011). A crisis, he argues, which brings global financial meltdown together with the rise to power of a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition and, in doing so, creates an alibi for “the most radical, far reaching and irreversible” neoliberal revolution yet. The ‘long march’ of this revolution has been making steady progress since the 1970s, accompanied by some similarly sizeable shifts in the racial and ethnic landscape of the UK. Today, just as it heralds the end of public services, the end of the welfare state and the end of state-led ‘social engineering’, it proclaims ‘the end of race’ as well. The potent political rhetoric which argues that ‘race’ is no longer the significant disadvantage it used to be (Mirza 2010), is bolstered by the ‘long march’ Hall describes at the same time as it is problematised by it. In targeting particular constituencies, the neoliberal engine and its savage cuts have wrought havoc on advances in racial and ethnic equality. The end of ‘race’ now sits alongside a series of ruthless legislative programs through which that end, if ever in sight, is increasingly unravelled.

It is in the midst of this extraordinary political crisis that this special edition sits. It comes at the end of a decade in which the racial and ethnic landscape of Britain has greatly shifted and, we would argue, shifts the ground further still. The articles in this volume reflect, therefore, upon a very

specific moment in the social architecture of British society. A moment of 'new racisms' that only close contextual analysis can pull apart. Since the turn of the century forms of racism and impacts of racism are in many ways quite different but, as the political field has moved, the challenge for anti-racism has only moved with it.

This challenge is of course a global one. Internationally, we have seen patterns of new migration grow in scale and complexity. And with an increasingly rich and varied mix of categories of migrants (in size, location, socio-economic differentiation and legal stratification) we have seen new forms of racism directed towards them. We have seen the resurgence of ethnic nationalisms and new border conflicts, alongside the continued foregrounding of religious identities, terrorist 'cyber' networks, and Far Right techno wars. Through the decade long 'War on Terror', new antagonisms have emerged and the discursive work of securitisation has lost none of its force. In addition, the financial crisis has chipped away at the American Dream, while the BRIC countries have made inroads upon American imperial hegemony. Consequently, western triumphalism has taken a defensive stand, and 'culture' or the concept of 'modernity' has become ever more the dividing line (Mamdani 2005). Within Europe much of this rhetoric has been the same. There has been a growing harmonization of political approaches with a partial shift away from the idea(l)s of multiculturalism towards a re-embracing of older notions of assimilation and cultural sameness. In France, Austria and elsewhere the entire political mainstream has been pulled to the right. Articulated as it is within a framework for the promotion of a national

identity around a set of core national values, this emboldens the ideological terrain of 'West/East', 'good/evil', 'us/them' (Lewis and Neal 2005). As old patterns of movement and settlement have been reconfigured in Europe, and new challenges are posed to ideas of nationhood, identity and belonging, reductive racisms have been reconfigured too.

In the UK we have witnessed similar hostility towards new 'strangers' – asylum seekers and economic migrants - marked by the increasing securitisation of our borders. Following urban unrest in northern UK towns in 2001, the attacks of 9/11, and the 2005 London bombings, the country has shifted along with the rest of Europe away from celebrations of diversity towards an insistence on citizenship, community cohesion and Britishness. Older discourses of assimilation have been exhumed through an emphasis on an imperilled national identity. In this move, the British Coalition government has followed where New Labour left off, and 'state multiculturalism' has been blamed for promoting segregation and eroding national identity. The increased visibility of the Extreme Right has accompanied such shifts, together with a growing ideology of white English victimization – and accusations that the white working class has been abandoned by the political elite. This ideology is embodied in the (brief) electoral successes of UKIP and the BNP and the street activism of the English Defence League. While this has catalysed and legitimated the diminishing protection for foreign nationals living in the UK it has also targeted long-settled black and minority ethnic communities. Britain's South Asian Muslim communities have been a specific focus of these discourses

and policies, with the rise of Islamophobia at both the centre and extremes of political rhetoric and popular representation (Alexander and James 2011). 'Muslim communities' have become 'suspect communities' with a limited repertoire of ('good'/'bad', 'moderate'/'extremist') subject positions and minimal scope for active dissent (Gilroy 2004; McGhee 2008). Though different in nuance, the logic of suspicion and deterrence criminalizes other 'strangers' too. The 'cultural' 'common sense racism' of the contemporary moment positions asylum-seekers, new migrants, and Muslims as the enemies within and without our borders.

At the same time, the visible and aural 'super-diversity' of some of Britain's cities, the opening up of Britain's white hinterlands to new migrant populations, the growth of a mixed race population, and the record (although still not representative) number of black and minority ethnic politicians in the Houses of Parliament and Lords, are testament to the indelible transformation of multicultural Britain. BME individuals and communities are at the heart of Britain's economy, from the multi-billion pound industries of Britain's richest man, Lakshmi Mittal, to the estimated 85,000 workers employed by the four billion pound Indian/Bangladeshi food sector and the thirty-five per cent non-white staff of England's National Health Service (Alexander and James 2011). It is these successes that led the contributors of Prospect magazine, amongst others, to argue that Britain is now a 'post-racial society' (Mirza 2010), where 'race' and ethnicity are no longer barriers to success and where social class and individual character are now the key determinants of life chances. A position such as this, in which diversity is

seen to dissolve racism, is set against interminable debates about the 'failures of multiculturalism', but it is in many ways more troubling. Subsumed under a language of choice and detached from power and structural disadvantage, the denial of inequalities can be seen as part of the broader cultural retrenchment, nostalgic vitriol and coded xenophobia sweeping the political terrain. The contours of this shift, reflective of the mutability of racial discourse, could not be predicted ten years ago. Its direction highlights the timeliness of the current volume, which suggests less that the challenge to racial equality has dissipated, than that the forms, shapes and hierarchies of racism have grown subtler, and the challenge has, therefore, significantly changed.

The negotiation of this very particular conjuncture in Britain's racial and ethnic landscape forms the link between the articles in this special issue which arose from collaboration between doctoral researchers at the LSE, Goldsmiths and City Universities in London. In 2008, PhD students working in the field of racial and ethnic studies at these institutions established the highly successful 'Race', Ethnicity and Postcolonial Studies (REPS) workshops. Papers from the first workshop were developed into a publication for the Runnymede Perspectives series entitled 'New Voices, New Directions'ⁱ and this volume is a direct development of that publication. This special edition retains focus on the UK and the articles bring to the fore cutting-edge theoretical, ethnographic and policy based research to develop a critical collective voice on the challenges of the contemporary moment. To do so they move away from the identity and culturist debates that

characterised much of the previous decade's work and they re-connect with the structural inequalities and collective experiences that were missing from the theoretical uncertainties of postmodern 'difference'.

The state and the art: Cuts, crisis and 'race' in the academy

At the turn of the century, the field of racial and ethnic studies in the UK was dominated by two seemingly irreconcilable approaches. One of these concentrated efforts around ethnicity-rich, empirically-heavy, notions of 'cultural difference' which risked essentializing 'community', experience and belonging. The other focused attention on the ethereal postmodern uncertainties of a 'politics of difference' which abstracted, reified and theorized with little regard for material reality. As Alexander and Alleyne (2002) argued at the time, neither took sufficient regard of the structural inequalities, ambiguous authorizations and collective experiences involved and neither had successfully responded to the increasing estrangement between academic work and political commitment or activism. However, 'cultural racism' had already begun to cover the cracks of structural disadvantage, legislating Kundnani's (2001) 'new common sense' of our time, and five years later such discourses gained animated purpose as the holes in the global financial system emerged. By 2008, a savage austerity program, including aggressive cuts to public pay, benefits and services, were hitting the UK's BME communities particularly hard, and by 2012, as material inequalities have worsened across the board, so has resentment towards new migrants. In difficult economic times, the structural inequalities that

Alexander and Alleyne spoke of in 2002 must be revisited. The articles in this volume move away from purely discursive and textual analysis to explore how discourse and text, interact and interrelate with the materiality of structurally differentiated lives through in-depth empirical engagement. The essays are underpinned by an anti-racist methodology in which research is 'an expressly political project aimed at creating knowledge about the social relations and practices of domination, white supremacy, and exploitation for the purposes of challenging and changing these systems' (Hughes 2005 p. 205). In this way anti-racist research offers an alternative to the marginalisation/deviance paradigm apparent in much academic/policy-driven research on 'race' and represents the kind of research needed to facilitate a more plural and democratic national story which connects with local struggles and experiences.

The edition as a whole reflects the complexity of the contemporary terrain, mapping both the continuities and the changes in our understanding of 'race' and ethnicity, and the challenges to race equality in twenty-first century Britain. The volume also reflects the splintering of the field in the last ten years, around new migrations, religion, asylum, mixed race, whiteness, postcolonial and diaspora theory, post-race and public space, as well as a re-engagement with the intersection of 'race' and ethnicity with gender, sexuality and particularly with class. It explores a range of key contemporary issues, providing insights from new empirical research that focus on the changing political climate (from 'Community Cohesion' to the 'Preventing Violent Extremism' agenda), key areas of policy intervention (such as

education, youth policy and counter-terrorism), emergent identities (including new migrant communities, Muslim identities, diasporic youth identities and white identities), and the tensions between anti-racist and post-racial political mobilization. In attempting to unpick the messiness of the contemporary moment, all of the essays share some common lines. They challenge a neo-liberal, post-racial, post-feminist fantasy in which a market driven notion of personhood offers freedom rather than repression. They reveal reorganised (and reorganising) hierarchies of value that attempt to bleach 'race' from the story but sustain its imposition and entrench its most pernicious effects. And they remind us, above all, of the twisted lines of causality which invokes inclusion as it reproduces its denial.

Against those who suggest we have reached a settled position on issues of racial inequality in Britain, the research presented offers friction. By focusing on a particular location and time, the articles in this issue aim to explore the intersection between the socio-political landscape and collective experiences of 'race' and ethnicity, producing a local story, with insight into the shifting global ground.

New racisms, new racial subjects: Themes and issues

The aim of the first REPS workshop in 2008, and of this current volume, was not to define a single unified theme in the landscape of racial and ethnic studies, or to present a theoretical vision for future work. Rather, the aim was to address understandings of 'race' and the impacts of racism in 'real-life

situations' (Bulmer and Solomos, 2004) and, in doing so, to dig a little deeper below the surface. Individually, each article is an empirical engagement with one aspect of the racial and ethnic landscape of the UK, as policy or theory translates into practice and experience. Collectively, they represent a challenge to much of the narrative that policy and theory have produced.

Policies of otherness, multiculturalism and difference

The collection opens with two essays which set up the political context by considering policy responses from the New Labour government to the events of the early 2000s. Both of these articles focus specifically on the workings of policy *in practice*, and in doing so go beyond documentary analyses on which much work has relied. Naaz Rashid's article begins the volume by exploring initiatives to empower Muslim women as part of New Labour's Preventing Violent Extremism (Prevent) agenda. Rashid observes a particular inconsistency in the broader 'community cohesion' programme, which although allegedly directed at all 'communities', has been overtly focused on just one. In an examination of attempts to give Muslim women a 'stronger voice in their communities', she looks at part of a wider policy trajectory in which an imagined, essentialised Muslim community has gained particular attention. Here, Muslim women's religious affiliation alone has been considered responsible for their marginalisation; they are 'victims of their culture' not their status in wider society. The 'empowerment' of Muslim women, therefore, merely acts as a proxy for attempting to integrate an inassimilable community. And, efforts purportedly aimed at giving 'voice' to

Muslim women only permit certain voices, speaking about certain things, in certain ways, to be heard.

The silences inherent in the practice of policy are an issue returned to by Hannah Jones in an article which examines how local government practitioners have negotiated 'community cohesion' policy in towns across the UK. At the interface between national and local levels of UK government, places are made to fit particular tropes of 'success' or 'failure' at multiculturalism, and Jones considers the construction and re-interpretation of narratives of place, as well as the racialization of space, this requires. She argues that the complicated narratives of place-identity produced by policy practitioners represent reputational tools through which local governments negotiate the space between national and local priorities in the quasi-market of local government performance. In doing so, practitioners often knowingly simplify such narratives, re-inscribing or subverting local reputations, and creating silences which obscure difficult pasts and presents.

Sub-cultural spaces of 'community'

It is to narratives of space and place, as they relate to the boundaries of 'community', that the first article in the second section shifts. The section as a whole explores two very different sites of sub-cultural diasporic space and the 'performance of community' (Gopinath 1995) these spaces depict. It expands previous discussion of gendered racialization, and develops some of the themes such discourses engender in relation to policies of regulation,

social control and exclusion. The first article by Ajmal Hussain, expands Rashid's reflection on the popular fascination with Muslim masculinity, and presents a critique of the idea of 'the Muslim community' as it has emerged in the past twenty years. Hussain examines how ethnographic research of an alternative arts centre in Sparkbrook, Birmingham, works to complicate simplistic ideas of Muslim identity. In dialogue with Hannah Jones' discussion of the racialisation of space, he argues that conventional notions of Muslim community are disrupted by Muslims themselves through alternative engagements with space and ethnicity. The paper argues that these offer a ground for making Muslim community in ways that actively engage with histories of ethnic settlement in the city rather than being determined by them.

While Hussain examines how a voluntary, un-commercialised arts centre can challenge essentialisations of 'community', the article by Helen Kim shows how the performance of an *idealized* 'community' takes place within a highly commodified club scene. Kim's analysis of London's Asian club space considers similar processes of gendered racialisation as they relate to the South Asian but predominantly non-Muslim 'community'. By examining how external stereotypes around 'race', gender and class are put into practice at the borders of the club, her argument opens up a conversation with Hussain's to show that it is not just Muslim masculinity but working class Asian masculinity that remains a 'potent symbol of disorder' in urban Britain (Alexander 2000). Reflecting back upon Rashid's essay, she

also explores longstanding stereotypes of South Asian women as submissive and in need of rescue. The club is presented as carving out a sexual space of greater freedom for women, but as Kim argues, these neoliberal postfeminist subject positions are, in fact, constituted within the limits of heterosexual male power. Belonging in these instances is in fact performed through a 'proper' and 'typical' Asian femininity, demonstrated in terms of idealized notions of feminine sexual behaviour. Kim shows how, in the space of the club, differences are made distinct and apparent through markers of authenticity which are spatial. The clubs function as sites where men and women enact, perform and *regulate* shared Asianness, concerns which are intricately bound up with class and gender.

Nostalgia, belonging and territory

The third section takes up much of the discussion of diaspora space explored in the previous two essays to consider the making of home in London. The first examines the nostalgia and memory-making of a mythic white home in East London, while the second considers the production, evocation and reconstruction of Chilean transnational homes in the south of the capital. Kim's earlier account of ethnic betrayal, and the measures of diasporic authenticity, is reflected, albeit in a very different arena, through Malcolm James' investigation of diaspora space in Newham, East London. Drawn from two years ethnographic research at one East London youth club, James shows how East London has been remembered as the home of 'authentic' whiteness and traditional forms of 'community' in a way which

forgets 150 years of migration to the area. Like Hussain, James illustrates a specific racialisation of space, one in which the reification of an irredeemable image of white, working class morality ignores the dialogic creativity of whiteness as a contested and historically constituted category of being and knowledge. He develops Jones' assessment of places as markers of memories and social status' and points to the silences constituted through the construction and re-interpretation of narratives which entail powerful forms of forgetting. While the young people and youth workers he encountered, embodied and narrated particular versions of whiteness and indigeneity, his article shows the ambivalence and porosity of these accounts. In doing so, it demonstrates how whiteness and class loss are appropriated across ethnic boundaries and how they are mobilised to produce new forms of racial hierarchy in a super-diverse place.

The imagining of super-diversity in the UK and the shifting racial hierarchies produced are picked up in the second essay in this section which considers changing understandings of community, space and belonging among the Chilean community in London. As Carolina Ramírez argues, Latin Americans are today one of the fastest growing migrant groups in the capital but their participation in the multicultural landscape of the city has been severely neglected. Ramírez notes that the research which has begun to fill this gap focuses its attention on the biggest Latin American groups, rendering invisible the experiences of settled minorities such as Chileans. Her article explores that gap, by looking at the Latin American football scene in South London, specifically in a space called 'la cancha' (the pitch). In an

interesting parallel with the article by James, Ramírez discusses the way in which nostalgic accounts of the Chilean ‘community’ that arrived in London in the 1970s and 80s, are made sense of through the evocation of a lost ‘golden age’ of ‘la cancha’, and through the figure of the economic migrant (from Colombia or Ecuador) that began to arrive. In doing so, she sheds light on the changing borders of inclusion and exclusion around nationality, regional solidarity, class and gender and, like Hussain and Kim, explores evolving questions of diasporic claim-staking.

Post-racial subjects and post-racial thought

The final section in the volume picks up themes that run through all of the preceding papers, considering the effectiveness of ‘race’ in the current ‘conjuncture’. In particular, the articles examine the denial of ‘race’ in the service of both reactionary and progressive political intervention. Christy Kulz discusses attempts to disregard ‘race’ through colour-blind (and class bound) attempts to encourage social mobility in one London academy. In doing so, she addresses the naive and blinkered logic of ‘ignore and overcome’, and the cultural implications underlying this approach which remain concealed. Set in ‘happy multicultural Hackney’ the paper returns to some of the issues explored in the second paper by Jones, in which diversity is not only a capitalist asset but a governed and managed activity. Kulz highlights how the capitalist ethos of Mossbourne Academy, with grand claims to social mobility and greater racial and ethnic equality, does not eradicate inequality. Rather, the intensification of competition simultaneously works to re-entrench and

reorganise hierarchies of value between students. The school's attempts to construct the 'ideal student' by grafting the 'right' capital onto bodies bring raced and classed positions to the fore. The imposition of whiteness this requires reflects back to the cultivation of the 'ideal (white) subject' through creative memory practices in Malcolm James' East London story. Through the distribution of 'cultural capital' it also speaks to the 'gift of civilisation' explored by Rashid, and returns to the body as the site of faux-freedom, as discussed by Kim. In this way, the article draws attention to the social distinctions of value implicated in hierarchies of power which are negotiated by young people in the playground, the youth club, or the night club.

From regressive and troubling claims to 'racial transcendence', the concluding paper by Joshua Paul considers the ability of post-racial thought to contribute to a more progressive political agenda that cannot ignore 'race'. In analysing the problems and possibilities of translating the abstract, theoretical insights of postracialism into practical antiracist activism, Paul reflects back to the conservative strands of postracial policy and popular thinking with which this introduction began. These, he suggests, can be juxtaposed against assertions of a postracialism that is in ambition (St Louis forthcoming); less an insidious denial of continued racism than a utopian project of abolition (Gilroy, 2000). As this latter postracialism argues, and as we saw in the papers by Kim and James, discourses of 'community' may indeed encourage coercive techniques of regulation and discipline (of bodies or memories) that insist on conformity to 'authentic' or 'traditional' group behaviour; naturalising thinking in terms of bounded groups. In such

circumstances, there is surely potential in thinking and talking about racialised inequalities without discussing them opaquely through the obfuscating lens of 'race'. Drawing on complex sites of postracial critique, together with interviews with race equality organisations in London, the article considers the problems and potential of applying the theoretical insights of this postracialism to a progressive antiracist praxis. In doing so, it examines whether the elimination of 'race' can represent a move against 'racial transcendence' and towards 'racisms overcoming'.

The tension between post-racial thought and equality is brought into focus in a specific moment in the UK in which the Coalition Government have shown a complete lack of leadership on race equality issues (ENAR, 2010-11). Through rich empirical analysis, all of the articles in the volume consider to some degree a neoliberal fantasy which sanitises the formative and continued role of racism in shaping unequal access to social and material goods. They all uncover attempts to airbrush 'race' from existence while reinscribing its borders and legislating its pathologising effects. And they all show that the racial and ethnic landscape of the UK is not only no more settled now than it was ten years ago, but that the ways in which it is not settled are in many ways more coded, more nuanced and more oblique. In thinking about racism rather than 'race' the contributors to this volume are themselves working simultaneously both with and against 'race', and are therefore a part of the 'post-racial' moment they seek to describe. This isn't just a discursive problem but a material one and, as they unpick the empty rhetoric of a post-racial present, the articles provide a snapshot which

reminds us that racial and ethnic discrimination may be presented in the guise of equality but it remains an unrelenting feature of our twenty-first century times.

Acknowledgements

The Guest-Editors would like to thank the contributors to this volume for their hard work and patience in putting this Special Issue together. In addition we would like to thank all those who contributed to the 'Race', Ethnicity and Postcolonial Studies (REPS) research group, then and now, for making it such a productive and stimulating forum. We would also like to thank Claire Alexander, Martin Bulmer, John Solomos, Amanda Eastell-Bleakley and Celia Boggust for all their help and support.

Notes

ⁱ The Runnymede Trust is a leading independent thinktank on race equality and race relations in the UK, and the Runnymede Perspectives series is a collection of publications which aim to foment free and exploratory thinking on race, ethnicity and equality.

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