

Circuits of aversion: the transnational mediation of multicultural crisis

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Abstract

Since '9/11', commentators, politicians and media discourse in a range of European contexts have increasingly drawn on narratives of the 'crisis of multiculturalism' to make sense of a broad range of events and political developments. For all this focus, multiculturalism has rarely amounted to more than a patchwork of initiatives, rhetoric and aspirations in any context, and has been subject to a long and well-documented history of 'backlash'. Multiculturalism, therefore, can be approached analytically as a mobilising metaphor and discursive assemblage that facilitates and orders debate on questions of race, legitimacy and belonging. This article examines the transnational mediation of 'multicultural crisis', and explores the cultural dynamics through which a congruent narrative of a 'failed experiment' has been shaped and circulated. It argues that these transnational dynamics have become politically significant in positioning and justifying a politics of integration predicated on visions of core values and 'ways of life', and invested in by a complex spectrum of political positions.

Key words: multiculturalism, transnationalism, Europe, culture, mediation, integration, liberalism

Introduction: there be zombies

Multiculturalism is a zombie category, not just in the sense defined by Ulrich Beck, as a social category 'dead but still alive', but also in a ritualistic sense, as an unhappy object revived on special occasions to haunt a world that has long ceased to be home. (Beck and Willms 2004: 19). This revival is transnationally shaped and sustained, and this article explores the profoundly mediated dimensions of multicultural crisis. To write on multiculturalism is to immediately position an analysis in a field of such political and conceptual density as to be almost disabling. In a sense, it is this multivalent density that is under discussion. Multiculturalism may be, in Stuart Hall's description, a 'maddeningly spongy

and imprecise discursive field', yet it shows no sign of reaching saturation point. This is because, in contemporary politics, it is widely deployed to soak up interpretative excess on the terrain of identity, belonging and legitimacy. It may be the case that multiculturalism, in political philosophy, has never amounted to more than an attenuation of liberalism's universalist tendencies (Pathak 2008), or that, in terms of actually existing governance frameworks, it has rarely comprised of more than a shifting patchwork of limited and frequently disjointed policy initiatives¹ in any western European state (Grillo 2007; Phillips and Sawitri 2008). Regardless, its resonant, zombie undeadness has taken on a life that can no longer be recalled to particular movements, normative frameworks, or empirically informed histories.

As Liz Fekete writes, 'in a climate of fear, hostility and suspicion, homogeneity is fast becoming western Europe's security blanket' (2009: 67–8). In the context of the crisis of neoliberal globalisation, the amplified politicisation of immigration and the living legacies of the 'war on terror', multiculturalism functions, euphemistically, as the unhappy past upon which this new politics of integration is predicated. As Vertovec and Wessendorf have recently noted, 'since the early 2000s across Europe, the rise, ubiquity, simultaneity and convergence of arguments condemning multiculturalism has been striking' (2009: 7). A series of violent and dramatic events in western Europe since September 11 2001 have been made to attest to the death of multiculturalism, which is held to have valorised difference over commonality, cultural particularity over social cohesion, and an apologetic relativism at the expense of shared values and a commitment to liberty of expression, women's rights and sexual freedom. Its fetishistic respect for cultural difference is held to have been given spatial expression in the parallel societies, *problemmråden*, dish cities, *parallelsamfund* and *territoires perdus de la République* in which repressive and often hostile ways of life are germinated.

As Vertovec and Wessendorf demonstrate, highly stylised rejections of multiculturalism across Europe draw on a coherent repertoire of 'crisis idioms'. Widely recited, they construct multiculturalism as a single doctrine that has fostered separateness, stifled debate, refused common values and denied problems, while facilitating reprehensible cultural practices and providing a fecund habitat for terrorists (Vertovec and Wessendorf 2009: 13–19). This article develops this analytical focus by concentrating on the transnational, mediated dimensions of multicultural crisis. The first section provides a limited contextualisation of multiculturalism as an object of multiple lines of aversion. While the rubric of multiculturalism has recently been subject to some interesting normative re-imaginings (Modood 2007; Philips 2007), this discussion is situated in an emerging paradigm that engages multiculturalism primarily as a discursive space within which broad debates about 'the changing nature of states, citizenship and political identity' are registered and conducted (Schuster and Solomos 2001: 4–6; see also Gunew 2004; McGhee 2008; Pitcher 2009).

Aversion to ‘multiculturalism’ – as a dilution of universalism, betrayal of Europeanness or affront to liberalism – is expressed in ways that always already assume a transnational frame of reference. The following section subsequently engages the transnational mediation and circulation of the problem of multiculturalism. In a recent comparative study of multicultural governance in six countries, Augie Fleras (2009) draws attention to the impact of international discourses in ‘hardening European arteries’ towards multiculturalism, immigration and Muslim populations (2009: 194–202). While the diffusion of multicultural discourse has been critiqued through discussions of transnational academic cultures (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1999), international legal architectures and intergovernmental structures (Kymlicka 2009), and as a legitimating narrative of globalising capitalism (Žižek 1997), little has been done on the transnational dimensions of this hardening. This article examines how political tactics, and the intense circuitries of networked media, have fostered processes of linking, reciting and indexing that mediate a sense of a convergent European crisis, where events *there* are infused with performative possibilities *here*. It does this by examining the Swiss 2009 referendum on minaret construction as a heuristic device. The conclusion discusses the mediating properties of these mobile idioms and fragmented borrowings. In other words, how and why does ‘multiculturalism’ retain such negative, connotative force, and why have these processes of transnational legitimation proved so seductive?

A history of shared aversion

In Shohat and Stam’s assessment, the idea of multiculturalism, however it is interpreted, can be made to insist on a ‘constitutive heterogeneity’ (2003: 3) that refuses sublimation to foundational constructions of a national ethnos. Thus while state multiculturalisms have been consistently critiqued as reductive, top-down strategies, designed to contain the autonomy of anti-racist movements (Kundnani 2007), the idea of multiculturalism retains idealist, critical and affective senses derived from this irreducible sense of refusal, and from its historical incorporation into migrant, minority and anti-racist struggle. However, the converse to Shohat and Stam’s idea also holds. The pronounced sense of multiculturalism as an imposition, as an unwelcome amendment to a pre-existing monoculturalism, makes claims on affective senses of how social life is lived, and ‘... the very idea of multiculturalism, the ideology, disturbs out of proportion to what in fact it may be’ (Elliot and Lemert 2006: 137). For a variety of reasons, this suggestive, affective resonance perdures.

As Roger Hewitt (2005) notes, a multivalent backlash against something called multiculturalism took shape internationally in the 1980s and 1990s: in debates on equality, affirmative action and the reductively titled ‘culture wars’ in the US; in the politics of what Ghassan Hage (1998) termed ‘white anxiety’ and its mobilisation through Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party in Australia;

and in the axiomatic logics of the so-called ‘cultural racism’ (Stolcke 1995) that shaped the mainstream political success of anti-immigration and far-right parties in northern and western Europe (MacMaster 2000; Fekete 2009). For all the near irreconcilable variations of multiculturalism invoked in this brief list, it is also possible to note some key trajectories of backlash, trajectories inseparable from, if not reducible to, the insecurities of neoliberal capitalist ‘restructuring’: the populist instrumentalities of countering unfairness and ‘reverse racism’ to silent majorities, reclaiming the shrinking state from parasitic asylum seekers and immigrants, and of defending the nation from various, minority agents of moral and cultural erosion.

Ralph Grillo has argued that currents of multicultural discontent are shaped in the gap between the ‘weak multiculturalism’ that has largely characterised institutional practice and the widespread critical assumption that it is always in its ‘strongest form’, that is, for many critics, ‘multiculturalism is always already “unbridled”’ (2007: 987). It is of little consequence to these perceptions that, by the early to mid-1990s, even in contexts firmly associated with full-on multicultural experiment, multiculturalism had little institutional expression beyond the managerial aspirations of governmental rhetoric. And sometimes not even; for all the general association, for example, of the Netherlands with a multicultural backlash following the murders of Pim Fortuyn in 2002 and Theo Van Gogh in 2004, an influential discourse of multicultural rejection had already been politically mainstreamed by the early 1990s (Prins 2002). A series of immigration and integration acts, from the mid to the late 1990s, actively dismantled the limited provisions anyway dedicated to ‘immigrant integration’ (Vink 2007). As Ellie Vasta summarises, there was a demonstrable ‘ideological shift (in the early 1990s) from support for group needs to promoting individual identity. Even if there is agreement that there has been strong multiculturalism for the past ten years, officially this is not the case’ (Vasta 2007: 733).

(Multi)culturalism as a transnational grammar

Over the last decade, this projected unbridling has become a corrosive political commonplace, and one that derives and sustains much of its force through transnational dynamics. As Didier Fassin (2005) argues, the anti-immigrant populisms forged in the post-Cold War era – which depended on eliding distinctions between asylum seekers and ‘immigrants’, and on the figure of the migrant as a ‘social enemy’ embodying anxieties concerning EU expansion and labour market ‘restructuring’ – tended to focus on the defence of the welfare state and sovereign borders. Since 9/11, he argues, a further dimension of ‘menace’ has become more pronounced: ‘Although difficult to name, as it is masked by cultural or religious, sometimes ethnic description, it can be characterized more bluntly as a racial security: it has to do with the protection of a European, Christian and white civilization against Third World, Muslim or black populations’ (2005: 228). While an adequate survey of this emergence is

beyond the scope of this article, unfolding key dimensions of this culturalism provides an important basis for considering processes of transnational mediation. Fassin is undoubtedly correct to both mark 9/11 as a threshold of culturalist amplification, while also recognising established histories of 'civilisationism' (Gilroy 2004) in a significant range of western European public spheres.² After 9/11, and in the context of the 'war on terror' the culturalisation of politics has been advanced by a focus on the problem of those in but not of Europe:

The Muslim in Europe – not individual Muslims, not even Muslim communities, but *the idea* of the Muslim himself – has come to represent the threat of death ... The Muslim image in contemporary Europe is overwhelmingly one of fanaticism, fundamentalism, female (women and girls') suppression, subjugation and repression. The Muslim in this view foments conflict ... He is a traditionalist, premodern, in the tradition of racial historicism difficult if not impossible to modernize, at least without ceasing to be 'the Muslim'. (Goldberg 2009: 165–6)

Of note here is the way in which the problem of multiculturalism has come to function in mainstream discourse as a euphemism for 'the Muslim problem' (Ghannoushi 2006). The ontological ascription of an over-determining culturalism to ethnic and racial minorities is a well-established focus of analytical contention (for an overview see Phillips 2007). In several assessments, the events of the last decade are held to have 'strengthened the existing categorical thinking', whereby 'the dominant discourse in most European countries ... has become increasingly culturalist, in which a migrant's culture is considered to deviate from the European norm' (Ghorashi, Eriksen and Alghasi 2009: 4).

This pronounced culturalism provides the sticky grammar of transnationalism. As several studies have shown, an impact of 9/11 as a global event, and as a mediated moment of radical disjuncture, was to provide a structure of translation and transnational opportunity for national discourses of multicultural discontent. As Scott Poynting and Virginia Mason have argued in their work on Australia and the UK, 9/11 and subsequent events provided moments of 'ideological payout', 'I told you so moments' that enact a loop of projected causation and legitimation between domestic politics and global events (2007: 81). Similarly, Demmers and Mehendale (2010) have discussed how the murder of Theo Van Gogh was dominantly framed as a 'now nobody can deny' event, inaugurating a 'culturalist regime of truth', in which discourse in the Netherlands drew heavily on the global backdrop of the war on terror to supply civilisational explanations.

Vertovec and Wessendorf's (2009) account of a convergent European rejection of multiculturalism draws attention to the circulation of a repertoire of highly mediated events. Assembled in salutary narratives of multicultural failure, events, thus assembled, seem to attest a shared, even cumulative reckoning. Working from Paul Scheffer's article on 'The Multicultural Drama' (2000) in the Netherlands, their analysis outlines a litany of events including the 2001 riots in Bradford, Burnley and Oldham, September 11 2001, the murder of Pim

Fortuyn in 2002, David Goodhart's article 'Too Diverse?' in *Prospect* magazine (2004), the 2004 Madrid train bombings, the 2004 murder of Theo Van Gogh, the *émeutes* in Clichy-sous-Bois and other nationally dispersed banlieues in 2005, the *Jyllands Posten* cartoons and extended aftermath in 2005–06, and the October 2006 *Lancashire Evening Telegraph* article by Jack Straw, sharing his discomfort about meeting with veiled constituents (Vertovec and Wessendorf 2009: 11–12). Each event has a nodal function, and acts as an invitation to further rehearse the recurring crisis idioms as 'recited truths' (De Certeau 1986).

That this narrative has become widely circulated transnationally, regardless of profound differences in socio-political context, suggests that culturalism provides an organising grammar, where a sense of cumulative crisis is patterned by a 'remarkably consistent racial politics more generally operative in the West' (Pitcher 2009: 135). Crucially, this is a performative process, involving the constant need for disparate Muslim populations to be seen to negotiate or distance themselves from the reductive 'idea of the Muslim'. Yasmín Ibrahim (2007) has argued that the post 9/11 period has (re)generated a 'referential archive' of associations and images that '... creates an intertextuality which constantly weaves events as new memories crafting a new temporality to gauge and locate Islam' (Ibrahim 2007: 49). Ibrahim frames this as a process of *dis-orientalism*:

Since 9/11 the narrative of Islam has put the focus on Muslim communities in the West. Unlike the Islamic revolution in Iran in the late 1970s and 1980s, this 'reimagining' of Islam, narrated as posing a clear and present danger to civilisation, has placed Muslim communities in the West under relentless scrutiny. The Muslim intellectual debates and responses emanating from the communities are often seen as being externalized from the conditions of modernity or its incumbent reflexivity. The constant need to respond to events associated with Islam renders immense pressure on these communities to negotiate the sustained moral and social stigmatization in narrating Islam. (2007: 48)

The Swiss minaret referendum, discussed subsequently, provides an illustration of the activation of these *dis-orientalist* dynamics. However, it is necessary also to pay attention to the variegated political positions from which these projections emanate. In other words, the culturalisation of dominant populations is of equal import.

Populism, liberalism and the politics of a European 'failed experiment'

Arjun Appadurai (2006) has noted what he terms the 'new incentives for cultural purification' produced by the speed and intensity of globalised circuitries, the neoliberal dilution of aspirations to national economic sovereignty, and the general intensification of uncertainty in social life. In the dynamics of globalisation, 'the nation-state has been steadily reduced to the fiction of its ethnos as the last cultural resource over which it may exercise full dominion' (2006: 23). Such broad diagnoses require careful particularisation, and must also reckon with, in most European contexts, variations on what Hall and Back have termed a

British 'species multicultural drift' (2009), as well as the various ways in which imaginaries of cultural diversity are inscribed in the mediation of globalised economies, urban spaces, creative industries and touristic spaces. It is precisely in this culturally literate context, however, that the idea of a 'failed experiment' of multiculturalism provides an alibi, a euphemism and a facilitative discourse for re-shaping the perennial problem of difference.

A variety of overlapping trajectories are at work here. Firstly, multicultural backlash is embedded in the 'populist zeitgeist' experienced in western Europe since the mid-1990s (Mudde 2004). Populism, according to Mudde, is moralistic and a 'thin-centred ideology', in that its empty heart can easily incorporate and refashion disparate ideological elements and issues along a crucial central distinction 'that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, the "pure people" versus the "corrupt elite", and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people' (2004: 543). The 'failed experiment' of multiculturalism is a refinement of the central antagonism of populism, and is widely represented as a form of elite social engineering, or conspiracy, against 'the heartland' (Taggart 2000). While categorical pronouncements on what are conventionally regarded as far-right, 'populist' parties in Europe are singularly unproductive (Zuquette 2008), it is possible to position multiculturalism as a mobilising metaphor within common structures of meaning: as a capacious idiom for recalling the problems of immigration and globalisation to sovereign political agency – *the elites did this, it can be undone* – and as an imposition that requires a countervailing culturalism, the 'right to difference' of national populations and heartlands. Understood in this way, it is clear why 'multiculturalism' has purchase when attacked by populist right parties in countries with no meaningful history of state multiculturalism, and in the case of Finland, for example, relatively limited flows of immigration (Keskinen, Rastas and Tuori 2009).

However, as Benjam in Arditi (2008) reminds us, it is necessary to regard 'populism' as a mode of political representation, rather than as a political property of given actors. Thus the second major trajectory of multicultural backlash is the articulation of what has been termed 'Schmittian liberalism' (Triadafilopoulos 2011) and 'identity liberalism' (Tebble 2006). The civilisational discourses of the 'war on terror', and subsequent terrorist actions in western Europe, have given rise to a 'sharply antagonistic discourse designating putatively clear and inviolable boundaries of liberal-democratic conduct' among politicians, journalists, academics and 'aspirant public intellectuals' (Triadafilopoulos 2011). In this formulation, domestic struggles over the putative dimensions of multiculturalism are constructed as localised expressions of a wider struggle, with the transnational 'idea of the Muslim' providing the legitimating continuum.

In Tebble's account, 'identity liberalism' has emerged in explicit opposition to multiculturalism, advocating a national culture of shared values, compulsory forms of immigrant assimilation and the duty of the state to protect liberal

national culture, up to and including the exclusion of non-liberal forms of life in the interests of democracy. Identity liberalism's claim to distinctiveness is not based on a singular national ethnos threatened by incompatible cultures, but instead on a vision of the defence of liberal principles and ways of life – the national identity of liberal polities – against illiberal forces, and against the threat of regressive cultures to both the liberal polity and the individual rights of minorities. Thus for identity liberals, 'multiculturalism as a response to diversity does not represent the equalization of cultural expression but rather the death of the very culture that permitted multiculturalism in the first place' (Tebble 2006: 481).

Identity liberalism is predicated on familiar, over-determining constructions, for as Anne Phillips notes, 'in the debates around multiculturalism, to allow for the *relevance* of culture without making culture a *determinant* of action' is to relapse into a hapless relativism (2007: 130–1, italics in original). This is not surprising if we recognise that identity liberalism is not an ontological rejection of multiculturalism, but a re-composition of its foundational assumptions – the problem is not culture, but cultural excess of the wrong kind. Tebble's formulation is persuasive as it captures the rise of a liberal *identity politics*, but one based on a narrative of past failures: identity politics is something *they* do, and that was indulged to dangerous excess. Nation-building in pluralistic and individualised societies, as Christian Joppke has argued, is increasingly characterised by near generic 'repetitions of the self-same creed of liberal democracy' (2009: 120–1). This useful observation may nevertheless underplay the ways in which it is less repetition than particularisation, less an elective expression of individualisation than a corrective to it. Identity liberalism provides a (trans) nationalist modality that inscribes cultural claims to gender politics, homonationalism³ (Puar 2007) and already achieved freedoms in the core values of the enlightened nation, and Europe.

The equation of multiculturalism with a degenerative relativism allows for a political triangulation: in the face of fundamentalism, or, at the very least, the certainties of ethno-religious culture, liberalism must be defended against both essentialist threats and the elitist multiculturalists – what the Danish liberal identitarians Karen Jespersen and Ralph Pittelkow (2006) term the 'naivists' (*Naivister*) – that facilitate them. The 'idea of the Muslim' is the *Other* of resurgent liberal certainty, but a concomitant 'idea of multiculturalism' is also required. This is a necessarily limited overview of a multivalent culturalism, however the emphasis on the ways in which culturalist frameworks shape a prevalent, sticky grammar provides the basis for examining particular dynamics in the transnational mediation of multicultural crisis. Key dimensions are now explored in relation to a case study of the 2009 Swiss referendum on minaret construction.

Mediated minarets: the transnational construction of crisis

The Swiss referendum, held on 29 November 2009, was explicitly designed to audition for entry into the repertoire of European crisis events. The Swiss electorate voted by 57.5 per cent for a constitutional amendment to ban the construction of minarets, and the Yes vote was regarded as a shock. It was widely criticised as an attack on freedom of religion; as damaging to the nation's image; and as bringing the tradition of direct democracy into conflict with obligations under international law (Solioz 2009). Organised by the Swiss People's Party (SPP) and the Federal Democratic Union, it was presented as a necessary measure to prevent losing ground on a slippery slope evident elsewhere in Europe. According to Ulrich Schlüer, an SPP MP: 'The fear is great that the minarets will be followed by the calls to prayer of the muezzin [...] sharia is gaining in importance in Switzerland and in Europe. That means honour killings, forced marriages, circumcision, wearing the burka, ignoring school rules, and even stoning' (Traynor 2009). The idea of an audition event is intended in a precise sense, suggesting the deliberate channelling of transnationally legitimated aversion as a political tactic.

Truth events as a political tactic

The referendum was precisely calibrated; targeting traditional methods of animal slaughter had been initially proposed, until the potential implications for Swiss Jews was taken into consideration (Ramadan 2009). The Swiss system of direct democracy, Damir Skenderovic (2007) argues, provides an 'institutional opportunity structure' for the radical right, allowing them to keep issues of *Überfremdung* (over-foreignisation) simmering, and to pursue a strategy whereby 'referendums on issues related to immigration are often less about specific policy changes than the expression of a general disapproval of immigration and a resentment towards immigrants, asylum-seekers and foreign residents' (2007: 174). The minaret referendum stands in this tradition, but the careful choice of a mobilising symbol was designed to insert the referendum into the broad repertoire of crisis. The predominantly Euro-Balkan Muslim population was deliberately collapsed and inflated into the salutary transnational imaginary; the mere presence of Muslims, as a transnationally legitimated object of attention, allows for the activation of *dis-orientalist* associations. This, in turn, contributes to occluding these histories of transnational political production, to their becoming social and historical (Ahmed 2004). Instances of this tactic abound. In the immediate aftermath of the London bombings in 2005, for example, the government of John Howard in Australia explicitly⁴ identified Australian Muslims as a potential security threat, and following Howard's declaration that Islamic leaders in Australia were not 'as strong in denouncing these acts as they should have been', the government launched a drive, modelled on British governmental responses, to inculcate 'Australian values' in its suspicious subjects (Kuhn

2009: 63–7). Events elsewhere are also opportunity structures, easily mediated as possible futures for the national here, and as conductors for the re-animation of localised controversies and debates. Similarly, the 2005 *émeutes* in Paris and urban centres in France have provided a particularly powerful imaginary of this kind, featuring in public discourse across Europe as a splintered premonition of both multicultural parallelism *and* the failures of (French) Republicanism, and as an image of the necessity of integration, however that is ultimately defined (see Koff and Duprez 2009: 717–19; Stehle 2006).

Assemblage and indexicality

Reflecting on the referendum campaign, Nilüfer Göle notes how ‘the debate on the minarets in particular, and the visibility of Islam in general, generates transnational dynamics and assemblages of disparate elements’ (2010). In other words, the ‘truth event’ of multicultural crisis works because of the accretion of meaning – the minaret is a lightning conductor. The process of assemblage, then, is both political tactic, and also a product of media work, across and within interpretative contexts. Régis Debray (1996) has suggested the idea of a ‘civilization of the index’ to capture how the intensification of instantaneous processes of mediation collapses both the relations between sign and referent, and the critical distance required for reflection. As mediation is produced constantly within the time of the event, and produces the time of the event, coverage, commentary and linking have an indexical relation to the occurrence that becomes the event (see also Lash 2002).

Vertovec and Wessendorf’s (2009) list of convergent multicultural crisis idioms, and Goldberg’s ‘idea of the Muslim’, are produced through such indexical procedures, procedures that draw on a dis-orientalist ‘referential archive’ of images and associations that is constantly updated (Ibrahim 2007). Hänggeli and Kriesi (2010), in a study of issue framing in a 2002 Swiss referendum on asylum law, argue that referendum campaigns are intrinsically contests of substantive framing, involving the need to clarify a mode of understanding and to oppose it to competing modes, while limiting ‘trespass’. However, the minaret referendum involved a tactic of encouraging trespass. As a report in *Der Spiegel* noted (Von Rohr 2009), the strategy of the campaign paid relatively little attention to the substantive issue of minarets, but instead to cultivating an indexical logic, linking the minaret to events and the Muslim problem *elsewhere*, and to the controversies that recur in the politics of both right populism and identity liberalism on Muslim incompatibility with – and multicultural betrayal of – feminism, secularism and freedom of speech. During the campaign the ‘referential archive’ was continuously updated; the prohibition of particular campaign posters by judicial ruling in Lausanne saw the referendum indexed to the *Jyllands Posten* cartoon controversy as ‘evidence’ of multiculturalist self-censorship; Nicholas Sarkozy indexed his then ongoing *Grand débat sur l’identité nationale* to the minaret referendum; and here, writing in the *Financial*

Times days after the attempted murder of the *Jyllands Posten* cartoonist Kurt Westergaard, Christopher Caldwell (2010) completes the syntagmatic chain:

The rise of Geert Wilders's party in the Netherlands, the referendum to ban minarets in Switzerland, the proposed ban on burkas in France – these are all desperate measures to declare that Islam is not the first religion of Europe. 'This is a war,' the mainstream French weekly *L'Express* editorialised in the wake of the attempt on Mr Westergaard's life. 'To flee this conflict would be to buy tranquillity [sic] today at an exorbitant price in blood tomorrow.' It concluded: 'Banning every kind of full-body cover [the burka] in our public spaces is a necessity.' This is not the non-sequitur it appears to be.

Mediation and indexicality

Recent research on the global interpretation of the *Jyllands Posten* 'cartoon crisis' in 'new, fast, intense and potentially less controllable media realities' makes clear that, given the polysemy of the cartoons and their fluid movement, incorporation, framing and interpretations in context, no dominant framework can be applied to their reading (Eide, Kunelius and Phillips 2008). However, the accelerated, instantaneous and networked dynamics of these same media produce syntagmatic assemblages that invite these comparative and causal linkages. Research on 'integration debates' in Europe by the Institute of Race Relations, for example, argues that international events are profoundly influential in framing domestic discussions, particularly: 'terrorist events abroad and fears that "imported" Islamic fundamentalist and "illiberal, intolerant" movements will take root in "modern western" Europe, increasingly frame the domestic news in reporting of issues related to the Muslim community' (Fekete 2008: 23–4). The prevalent loop that what happens *there* has significance for *here* suggests the interplay of the dynamics of mediation with the politics of culturalism. Indexicality of this kind works to obscure context and contextual political struggles, but this is patterned in the ways in which culturalism has already attenuated such forms of knowledge. The full-blooded culturalism of anti-immigrant populism and identity liberalism is complemented by a more general 'tendency to call on culture when faced with anything we cannot otherwise understand' (Phillips 2007: 46).

Concomitantly, as Jodi Dean has perceptively argued, while the 'meaning' of an event may be impossible to over-determine, the form of the event provides an organising principle within ever more complex arteries and capillaries of informational flow:

Media circulate and extend information about an issue or event, amplifying its affect and seemingly its significance. The amplification draws in more media, more commentary and opinion, more parody and comic relief, more attachment to communicative capitalism's information and entertainment networks such that the knot of feedback and enjoyment itself operates as (and in place of) the political issue or event. (Dean 2009: 32)

Thus, writing in *The Jerusalem Post* ten days after the referendum, Daniel Pipes was able to point to an extensive series of online polls to argue for the minaret affair as a decisive turning point in 'European resistance to Islamicisation'; 49,000 readers of *Le Figaro*, 24,000 readers of *L'Express* and 29,000 readers of *Der Spiegel*, among others, had rejected minarets by jubilant percentages. The questions posed by these generic modes of interactivity shifted from a faithful transposition of the Swiss question to variations on mosque construction, and the necessity for harsher terms of immigrant integration. In processes of fast and ongoing mediation, culturalisation produces forms of functionally adequate knowledge, ways of representing, linking and comparing to elsewhere deemed of current import and future significance. Mathew Hyland captures this generic indexicality, and it is instructive to compare it to Caldwell's summary of European anxiety:

First a fact is invoked that lays claim to the utmost moral gravity (the diaspora of Oriental bombs in Western metropolis being the obvious but by no means the only example), followed by some observations on the dis-integration of cultural behaviour (preferably a fusion of anecdote and dislocated statistics as in: 'only x per cent of Muslims born here think of themselves as British, and in parts of town nobody speaks English'). The necessary causal relation between one set of phenomena and the other is presumed to be too obvious for statement, and the Expert moves straight on to consider what, in particular, should be done in order to induce self-identification with 'society' among culturally dis-integrated subjects. (Hyland 2006: 4, italics in original)

Conclusion: the crisis of multiculturalism, or, the triumph of culturalism?

In the introduction, it was noted that the density of contest, connotation and controversy associated with 'multiculturalism' is analytically disabling. It is also politically problematic; for all its well-known limitations, 'multiculturalism' is still invested by many groups and networks with resistant significance through political practice. Multiculturalism involves political claim-making from 'above' and 'below', and normative debates on what can be achieved and for whom, through multicultural frameworks, remain relevant. The intent of this analysis is not to obviate these debates but to suggest that they take place in a communicative and political space where 'multiculturalism' is simultaneously under and over-determined; as a lightning conductor for multiple anxieties in an era of neoliberal globalisation, and as an unhappy history of failure, where veracity is far less important than the production of ideological certainties.

For all its contemporary associations with cultural relativism, parallel lives and states of dis-integratedness, it is rarely recalled that multiculturalism has always centrally involved, if not always a nationalist project, then a will to national management (Hage 2003; Pitcher 2009). Writing across contexts of various and overlapping 'settler', postcolonial and migration multiculturalisms,

Sneja Gunew has figured it as a concept developed ‘by nations and other aspirants to geopolitical cohesiveness who are trying to represent themselves as transcendentally homogenous in spite of their heterogeneity’ (2004: 16). The ‘crisis’ of multiculturalism can be read as an extension of this will in a period when transcendental homogeneity is further unpicked by the layered intensities of transnational connexity, and in which something called multiculturalism has become a repository for anxieties concerning migration, globalisation, and the socio-political transformations wrought by neoliberal governance (Elliot and Lemert 2006; Pitcher 2009). The continued recourse to a zombie notion, and the temporalisation of a failed, experimental era, arguably provides a myth of comforting sovereignty: *we* created this situation, and we can remedy it. It structures a neo-assimilationist agenda by lessening the burden of reflexivity for nationalist articulation, as the failed experiment requires a process of rehabilitation without apology, without further opportunity for them ‘to abuse our multicultural love’ (Ahmed 2008). It is this mediating sense that in part accounts for the prolonged afterlife of what was, in most European contexts, always a limited and limiting set of ideas and practices.

In exploring the ways in which a broadly congruent narrative and recurring idioms of crisis feature in national contexts with significantly different migration histories and contextual political settlements, this article argues that these themes and processes of transnational mediation are politically significant. In contexts where migration has become an increasingly fraught yet politically productive ‘issue’, and where such debates are heavily inflected with culturalist vocabularies and assumptions, ‘multiculturalism’ provides a mobile and mobilising metaphor, sanctioned as a focus of aversion and legitimated as a space of coded contentions, and given shape by linking and indexing a transnational repertoire of associations to Muslim populations as the agents who – as the British columnist Rod Liddle (2004) put it – ‘killed multiculturalism’. For all the contextual and political variation at work, the zombie ritual of multicultural rejection is congruent enough to speculate as to the constitutive importance of its transnational mediation. In large part, this discursive space is created by the transnational articulation of ‘identity liberalism’, and the ways in which ‘multiculturalism’ provides a useful form of shorthand and political animation. Arguably, in contexts where the politics of migration is suspended between instrumentalist discourses of demographic and labour market need, on the one side, and a dense amalgam of anxieties over social futures, on the other, this transnational circuitry of recited truths provides a form of stabilising knowledge, a way of speaking about difference, race and the gradually shifting composition of western European societies, in the absence of other compelling vocabularies and political imaginaries.

Notes

- 1 As Phillips and Sawitri summarise: 'It was never adopted as official policy in any part of Europe ... in France, however, multiculturalism was rejected pretty much out of hand as at odds with republican principles; in Germany, as at odds with a predominantly ethnicized conception of citizenship; while in Italy or Spain, multiculturalism barely figured in either popular or political discourse until the last few years. In those countries most commonly cited as exemplars of multicultural policy – the UK, the Netherlands, Sweden – practices varied and were rarely codified in any explicit way' (Phillips and Sawitri 2008: 291–2).
- 2 On contextual histories of the interplay between articulations of 'cultural racism' and a discourse of civilization, see, indicatively, Wren (2001) on Denmark, Prins (2002) on The Netherlands, Pred (2000) on Sweden, and, in entirely different yet comparable terms, Jallon and Mounier (1999) on France.
- 3 Puar's theorisation of 'homonationalism' identifies 'Islamophobia in the global North' as a key political modality whereby 'homonormative and queer gay men can enact forms of national, racial or other belongings by contributing to a collective vilification of Muslims' (2008: 21).
- 4 Kuhn's argument pertains to a specific state focus on the 'problem of Islam' as requiring governmental intervention, and does not ignore the prevalence of anti-Muslim racism prior to 2005.

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