

## ***Reductio ad Hitlerium: The ‘New Racism’ – A Challenge for the Anti-Racist Movement?***

Ruari Shaw Sutherland  
University of Strathclyde (Undergraduate)

### **Abstract:**

A recent rise in far-right activity in Britain has brought with it the associated reinvigoration of the anti-racist movement. This has not, however, been unproblematic. It has been argued that there is a growing ‘new’ racism, representative of the so called ‘Defence Leagues’ of Britain, which warns of perceived cultural dissonance rather than biological superiority or inferiority. This article argues that, in the face of this ideological shift, the anti-racist movement must reassess its tactics and avoid Nazi reductionism if it is to successfully counter racism. This can only be achieved through full and frank discussion about emergent forms of racism and their genesis as well as targeted preventative community programmes.

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There has been a recent resurgence in far-right politics in Britain, and not just in the hands of the British National Party (BNP). This revival, however modest, has worrying implications. The local face of this has been the development of the so-called ‘Defence Leagues’ of Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland. These groups claim legitimacy as anti-terrorism campaigners but all too often display overt Islamophobia and indiscriminate racisms. The far-right has not been allowed, however, to grow without opposition and a number of anti-racist organisations have (re)formed in response. Anti-racism has, it could be argued, struggled to adapt to the relatively recent evolution of populist racist discourse - from overt biological superiority/inferiority to tropes of cultural incompatibility - often reducing the complexity of the far-right to historical precedents such as Nazism. This article will explore some of the challenges posed to orthodox anti-racism by the ‘new far-right’ and, with reference to an existing anti-racist youth project, make some tentative suggestions for the future.

There has been much written in the last three decades about the shifting conceptual sands of ‘race’ and racism. It is now accepted as axiomatic, in *most* contemporary academic discourse, that ‘race’ is a social

construction; no more significant to an individual's character than the colour of their eyes or the size of their feet. Indeed, it has been empirically established that there are more genetic variations *within* so-called 'races' than *between* them (Lewontin cited in Haviland *et al*, 2011:281). And yet, as Winant argues: "the concept [of race] persists, as idea, as practice, as identity, and as social structure [... and] Racism perseveres in these same ways" (2006:987). Racism is also sustained in and through discourse/discursive practice.

Foucault argues that "a discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy" (1998:100-1). Indeed, anti-racism has grown out of a need to counter the damaging ideology and discourse of superior/inferior 'races' and their profound consequences ranging from social exclusion to genocide.

Racism, as used here, is defined as "any argument which suggests that the human species is composed of discrete groups [races] *in order to legitimate inequality between those groups of people*" (Miles, 1989:49 – emphasis added). The latter part of this definition is particularly important if we are to recognise racism as a social process rather than an abstract, and therefore neutral, set of ideas. Indeed, Miles goes on to stress the importance of foregrounding "function" over "content" in understanding racist discourse (*ibid*). The idea of concrete forms of racism is also picked up by Gilroy who argues that:

*"People do not encounter racism in the general or the abstract, they feel the effects of its particular expressions: poor housing, unemployment, repatriation, violence or aggressive indifference"* (2002[1987]:149)

The relations which racism propounds are particularly visible at the level of politics. The far-right has experienced something of a revival in Europe over the last few years and, whilst ideologies vary, nativist racist discourse - whether explicit or implicit; cultural or biological - has generally been a thread of continuity across the movements. Less visible, yet arguably of greater consequence, are the recurring injustices of day-to-day racism. Recent analysis points towards a shift in focus of racism and 'race' from biological factors to cultural criteria (Barker, 1981; Balibar, 2007; Seymour, 2010) and, as Walker argues, a 'softening' of racism through attempts to foster ideals of egalitarianism whilst remaining hostile toward the 'other' (2001: 25). The discourse of cultural racism, however, has been integral to the growth of the far-right; allowing parties and grass-roots organisations to shed the baggage of traditional racisms and begin to legitimise xenophobic and culturally-racist ideologies.

As the current financial crisis unfolds and the working class is marginalised and disproportionately disadvantaged, racist parties such as the British National Party (BNP) are seen to benefit. This is not always overt support for racist policies; votes for the radical right generally fall somewhere between “protest and conviction” (Georg-Betz, 1994:59). Such parties are in any case well-placed during crises to exploit voters’ alienation and perceived powerlessness. The correlation between the financial crisis of 2008/9 and the BNP’s European electoral success, for example, may not present an unproblematic causal link but it is hard to imagine that this was pure coincidence. Balibar argues that once mechanistic and mystical explanations of “crisis racism” are set aside, “undeniable correlations remain” between economy and racism (1991:217).

It could be argued that such institutionalisation of racism is apparent in the problematising of immigration. This can be seen in particularly sharp focus since the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. The ‘war on terror’ and associated discourses contained within ‘homeland security’ in the USA have precipitated the articulation of a form of Barker’s ‘new racism’ which has essentially demonised Islam. This discourse has become known as Islamophobia and is commonly employed by, even ostensibly liberal, politicians and media (Runnymede Trust, 1997). The hegemonic discourse of the political elite across Western Europe over the last decade has been profoundly influenced by Islamophobic currents – clearly displayed in Merkel, Sarkozy and Cameron’s separate attacks on multiculturalism in their respective states (Helm *et al*, 2011).

The challenge then, for anti-racists, is not just to change the opinions of explicitly racist individuals and groups but to problematise and challenge the hegemonic discourse of tacit xenophobic populism. It is this discourse which has given a modicum of legitimacy to the groups and organisations which make up what Jackson terms the “new far-right” (2011:1).

The combination of factors including: the discourse of ‘new’ racism, growing systemic inequality, the increasingly mainstream rhetoric of Islamophobia and the advent of social networking sites, has led to the proliferation of a new form of populist grass-roots and political movements. Populist movements and parties such as the English Defence League, the Dutch Freedom Party, Block Identitaire, CasaPound Italia and the Swedish Democrats have begun to grow, espousing a complex philosophy of left and rightwing ideas (Bartlett *et al*, 2011:25).

These groups are ‘new’ in the sense that they renounce traditional fascist ideological trappings of biological racism and white supremacy, at least in public discourse, focusing instead, for the time-being, on the perceived

cultural ‘threat’ of Islam. As discussed above, the convergence with official political rhetoric allows the new far-right to exist on the fringes of the mainstream instead of being banished to the underground as their predecessors often have been. The growth in social networking and social media sites, such as Facebook and Youtube, has allowed the new far-right to expand their support internationally, disseminating and sharing ideas and building virtual solidarity networks. This digital development has also been mirrored by the anti-racist movements. However, the reach of the internet is arguably of more benefit to right-wing populist groups who can not only build support for their public projects, but also construct more reactionary private discourses outside of ‘the public’ gaze.

Racism does not, however, exist and operate unopposed. Anti-racism as discourse and praxis, a relatively new concept - first discussed in the 1960s (Bonnett, 2000:10) - exists, ostensibly, as a counterpoint to racism. However, as Bonnet argues: “anti-racism cannot be adequately understood as the inverse of racism” (*ibid*:2). Whilst it is important to appreciate the intricacies of anti-racism, it can be argued, that taken in its broadest sense, anti-racism at least aims to negate racist discourse and activity. Two key divergent political positions fundamentally shape the ideologies and practice of anti-racism: reform and revolution. Anti-racism organised along the lines of the former philosophy fight for racial equality through societal reforms, whilst those aligned with the latter see racism as systemic and unassailable within the status quo, arguing that its eradication is part of a larger revolutionary project (Bonnett, 2000).

The ideological contortion of the ‘new far-right’ has hitherto proven a challenge for anti-racist movements from both camps whose overarching strategy has been a form of Nazi reductionism. Anti EDL demonstrators, for example, can often be heard chanting “follow your leader; shoot yourself like Adolf Hitler” and “Nazi Scum off our streets”. This process is one of moralism, argues Taguieff, who talks of “*reductio ad Hitlerium*” (in Bonnett, 2000:167) - the belief in the incontrovertible teleological link between racism and Nazism. Whilst it is difficult to construct such pithy chants out of the complex reality of the ‘new far-right’ it is surely necessary to better appreciate understand their genesis; all the better to oppose and defeat them.

This may appear to be a controversial proposition and Les Back, in his brilliant chapter on the ethics of interviewing the far-right, expresses discomfort at the “politics of assimilating those who [espouse] racism into the realm of understanding” (2002:35). Back goes on however to cite Ezekiel who argues that: “to present white racists as humans is not to approve their ideas or their actions. But to picture them only in stereotype

is to foolishly deny ourselves knowledge. Effective action to combat racism requires honest inquiry” (2002:57). Caricatured representations of groups such as the EDL and the SDL serves minimal purpose and at times may be counter-productive.

Gilroy argues that “the absurdities of anti-racist orthodoxy” are a result of those “moralistic excesses practiced in the name of antiracism” (1992:49), adding that we must address anti-racism’s “inability to respond to [...] distinct aspects of [...] new forms of racism” (p53). Unless this reflective analysis transpires, the anti-racist movement will continue to waste energy on falsely-defined battles, damaging their legitimacy and allowing ‘new’ racist attitudes to grow with relative impunity.

The ideas of the BNP and the EDL are deeply problematic and, of course, should be opposed by all means. Direct action and confrontation, I would argue, are completely justifiable in the face of an organisation composed largely of football casuals whose street fighting pedigree and often indiscriminate racism make them a dangerous force at demonstrations. There is need also, however, for a more considered and preventative approach and here I am reminded of a programme run by the Swansea based Ethnic Youth Support Team (EYST) called the Think Project. The project targets young people who are at risk of far-right radicalisation and, using staff from ethnic minority backgrounds, explore issues of ‘race’, religion and migration. Amongst other things the project aims to imbue in the enrolled young people resilience to racist and far-right ideology. (LINK: <http://eyst.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/iworks-Think-Project-Evaluation-FINAL.pdf>). It is precisely this sort of work which can challenge the hegemonic myth of failed multiculturalism and over-migration whilst avoiding the trap of reductionism.

This article is not meant to present a scathing critique of the anti-racist movement. Whilst I am sceptical about some of the tactics of the anti-racist movement in Britain, I am glad that there is such a large counter-force to the EDL *et al* and can only see this as a positive thing. The difficulties of opposing such a heterogeneous and complex phenomenon as the EDL are clear and, as argued above, the cornerstone of success will be critical engagement with such groups and targeted prevention work within communities. There is, I believe, the urgent need for a full and frank discussion within the anti-racist movement about issues of Nazi reductionism. The changing nature of racist and far-right ideology requires an equally flexible anti-racism, both in theory and practice.

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