

Critical Race and Whiteness Studies



www.acrawsa.org.au/ejournal

Volume 11, Number 1, 2015

GENERAL ISSUE

Culture as 'Ways of Life' or a Mask of Racism? Culturalisation and the Decline of Universalist Views

Saladdin Ahmed

Mardin Artuklu University

I begin and conclude the article by arguing that culturalisation has contributed significantly to the decline of the Left and its universal ideals. In the current climate of public opinion, 'race' is no longer used, at least openly, as a scientific truth to justify racism. Instead, 'culture' has become the mysterious term that has made the perpetuation of racist discourse possible. 'Culture', in this new-racist worldview, is the unquestioned set of traits continually attributed to the non-White Other, essentially to de-world her Being and de-individualise her personhood. In other words, 'culture', as it is used in the old anthropological sense, is the magic incantation with which the Other is demonised, mystified, and/or ridiculously oversimplified. I focus on the phenomenon of 'culturalisation' as a common new-racist method of de-politicising the Other's affairs and surrounding socio-political phenomena. The article is an attempt to discredit the paradigm of 'culture' as a pseudo-concept used commonly in cultural racism. This cultural racism routinely assumes 'culture' to be a natural given almost exactly as the pseudo-scientific paradigm 'race' was (and is still) used in some discourses of biological racism. If mentality X attributes categorical differences to different groups of people based on A and A is assumed to be natural, ahistorical, and/or metaphysical, then X is a racist mentality. Obviously, A does not have to be skin-colour or 'blood' in order for X to be racist.

Keywords: culturalisation, new-racism, culture, Left, anthropologisation, Othering

With conservatism in its various forms (religious, political) on the rise in many parts of the world and Leftism increasingly withdrawing from political and social life over the last two decades, the prime questions for Leftists now should be concerned with the reasons that have led to the current public submissiveness, and, thus, the decline of the Left. While it is obviously by no means possible to easily list the reasons that led to the current Leftist apocalypse around the world, in my research I seek to identify some of the defused ideological paradigms and

mechanisms that sustain the contemporary climate of opinion, which is premised on the impossibility of the realisation of a non-capitalist world. The fallback we are witnessing is first and foremost represented in the lack of a popular utopia, which has its roots in indoctrinated assumptions about the world. For instance, the (politically) White Westerner's sense of self-differentiation from the Other is sustained by the belief that non-Whites, in their value systems (usually vaguely called 'culture'), prioritise things other than Enlightenment ideals. In other words, the anthropologisation of non-Whites is a major manifestation of the liquidation of the grand Leftist goal/utopia regarding the realisation of equality among human beings. I will use the term 'culturalisation' to indicate this phenomenon of anthropologising the Other.

As Slavoj Žižek frequently reminds us, the norm among Leftist intellectuals up until the 1990s was to question the economic, legal, and political roots of problems anywhere they appeared in the world. Now, however, mass mentality, fashioned largely by the culture industry (Adorno, 2006), has become obsessed with the over-simplification of the world, so mass individuals habitually avoid seeing the world in its complexity. And what better path to over-simplifying the world than claiming that it is composed entirely of different cultures and religions we cannot hope to understand, but can only 'respect' from afar, in the best cases? This new apolitical discourse wants us to believe that the reason 'they' have problems of poverty, violence, corruption, despotism, and fanaticism is that *they* have different values, culturally determined values. Hence, the common Western approach to the Other is very much dominated by the anthropological conception of 'culture' of the late 1800s to mid-1900s as a collectively applicable 'way of life', which functions in culturalisation as the ideal paradigm to substitute for any real theories of history, political thought, and sociology. It is as if 'culture' has become the magical, all-encompassing concept able to transmit understanding of the entire state of affairs in the non-European world to 'experts' and non-specialists alike.

Indeed, if 'race' had become the most poisonous pseudoscientific term before and during World War II, 'culture' is today's genealogical offspring and ideological equivalent of 'race'. Particularly since 2001, as a means of and due to the unprecedented Othering of Muslims in the aftermath of 9/11, culturalisation has saturated the discourse of policy makers, media and policing elites, academics, and, thus, ordinary people in the West. Through a series of examples, I will demonstrate the degree to which culturalisation has infected all veins of everydayness not only in openly racist discourse, but also (or perhaps especially) in the multicultural discourse of 'tolerance'. The underlying claim here is that racism has in fact blossomed post-World War II partly because of the Left's naïve optimism and their impartiality towards, if not adoption of, 'culture' as a neutral paradigm. Its instrumental use for Othering must be de-normalised through more critical research informed by what Alana Lentin refers to as "the story of how the potentially liberating, political tool of culture was harnessed in the aim of bypassing 'race'" and, thus, preserved the racist power structures of Western nation-states (2005, p. 381, 395). Likewise, projects such as multiculturalism that were essentially constructed upon the paradigm of culture must also be seen as the facade of the enduring relations of domination rooted in colonialism.¹

¹ See Lentin & Titley (2011) for more on multiculturalism as "racism in a neoliberal age".

'Culture' and Culturalisation of the Non-White as New Racism

In English, 'culture' is used in two main ways outside biology: first, to indicate sets of leisure, aesthetic canons, artistic taste, and simply methods of enjoying life, and second, to refer to a collective set of absolute norms and rules that are considered definitive and determining with regard to all social values, practices, and moral principles. From the historical work of Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) as well as Stocking (1974), we can see the evolving usage of 'culture' in anthropological studies beginning in the late nineteenth-century from the humanist or evolutionist 'culture as civilisation' (most closely aligned with the first definition above), to 'cultures' (that is, ways of life) of human groups. It is this second variation of 'culture', applied unreflectively, oversimplified, and homogeneously generalised, that is at the heart of culturalisation as new racism. All kinds of strange, irrational, oversimplified, contradictory, and mythical views are imagined about different peoples under the assumption that they are part of their 'culture', implying that culture is something the Other is born with, like skin colour. If mentality X attributes categorical differences to different groups of people based on A and A is assumed to be natural, ahistorical, and/or metaphysical, then X is a racist mentality. Obviously, A does not have to be skin-colour or 'blood' in order for X to be racist.

The shift away from the overtly biological racism of the past towards less tangible (often imagined) differences is well documented and was the subject of a good deal of research output particularly throughout the 1990s. With regard to the rise of cultural racism, Martin Barker (1981) is credited with first theorising the phenomenon, which he labelled "new racism", situated within the Thatcher administration's portrayal of immigrants and other 'undesirables'. Etienne Balibar (1991) also theorised "racism without races" in relation to decolonisation and immigration in "the absence of a new model of articulation between states, peoples and cultures on a world scale" (p. 21). Others have classified the shift away from biological racism as "symbolic racism" (see David O. Sears's work on the subject), "laissez-faire racism" (see Bobo & Smith, 1998), and "colorblind racism" (see Bonilla-Silva, 2010), among others. Often in reference to the contemporary situation of Blacks and Latinos in the United States, these contributing theories are essential to better understanding the nature of new forms of racism, and they also document the use of 'culture' (particularly the so-called 'culture of poverty') as a means of dismissing racial inequity. Nonetheless, more critical research on the pseudo-concept of culture as it functions in culturalisation is badly needed to account for the systemic and everyday Othering of non-Whites as an additional pillar of new racism. As Philomena Essed describes what she aptly calls the "culturalization of racism",

To proceed from 'race' to 'culture' as the key organizing concept of oppression, the 'other' must be culturalized. In that process the concept of 'culture' is reduced to (perceptions of) tradition as cultural constraints. Cultural hierarchies are constructed and sustained, but the dominant culture is never made explicit. (1991, p. 171)

Thus, the culture that is assumed, that is attributed to the Other, by way of culturalising the Other (as a homogeneous group composed of similar units) has little to do with the Other's actual 'way of life' or the individuals' beliefs. It is rather an anthropologising stamp imprinted on the Other in the same way that

biological racism racialises the Other. Meanwhile, the culturaliser is situated within a *culture* that is deeply racist and imperial, a *culture* that proclaims itself not only superior, but also invisible by virtue of aculturalising itself. Very much like the liberal ideology that depicts itself as above ideologies, as objective truth, and accuses Leftist criticism of the existing order of being ideological, racist culturalisers who habitually commit culturalisation of the Other depict themselves as acultural, i.e. as rational and neutral.² Indeed, in dominant discourse, White/European 'culture' is normally assumed to be the assortment of values taken to represent the pinnacle of human civilisation: reason, freedom, equality, democracy, etc. In other words, the fundamental prerequisite and parameter of culturalisation is Eurocentrism, which, as Žižek would say, is based on the belief that the ideals of the Enlightenment, rather than being applicable to all human society, are uniquely European values.³ By implicit comparison to the universal (White European) ideal, the non-White Other, who has a different culture, is depicted as irrational, weird, primitive, uncivilised, violent, fanatic, and/or both non- and anti-individualistic.

Denial of Personhood and Construction of the Other

To be clear, there are instances in which the notion of a shared or dominant culture among human beings can be helpful in referring to approximations of some collective behaviours, what Durkheim calls 'social facts', and/or attitudes that are by no means defining with regard to the individual values and/or political traits of the people in question. Culturalising uses of 'culture' can generally be distinguished by two primary factors: the social and political consequences of its use and the ideological motivation of applying the 'cultural' label. To begin with the former, whenever the 'cultural' label ultimately functions to homogenise individuals and attribute the actions or values of an entire group of people to a shared culture that is assumed to override each individual's political, economic, or social milieu, culturalisation will inevitably result. With regard to ideological motivation, culturalisation is, first and foremost, a means of Othering. Whether motivated by a desire to present Other groups as dangerous threats to White civilisation or by a less overtly racist need to comprehend seemingly incomprehensible Other groups in a politically correct fashion, culturalisation both presupposes and reinforces an atomistic view of the world. Culturalisers impose culture upon the non-White Other as an oblique means of discrimination, which necessarily re-enforces an 'us' versus 'them' social dynamic in a new, superficially less racist way.

Perhaps an overview of non-culturalising uses of 'culture' would be helpful. One might say, 'in this region, there is a culture of afternoon naps', 'in my university, there is a culture of easy-going interaction between faculty and students', or 'biking is not part of the culture around here'. In these examples, 'culture' is analogous to 'trend' or 'tendency' and is applied to specific behaviours and attitudes, as opposed to being used as a homogenising parameter to account for the aggregate of the individuals' values and beliefs. Of course, 'culture' can be invoked without making explicit reference to the term. In the case of

² Hamid Dabashi (2013) similarly writes of what he terms European "ethnographic logic", which serves to ethnicise non-White individuals and enterprises.

³ Žižek (2008, pp. 76-7) offers a similar analysis of the 2005 riots in the French suburbs.

culturalisation, examples would be 'Greeks are lazy' or 'Muslim women are not liberated', while non-culturalising uses would be 'Iranians unlike Iraqis like light tea' or 'political jokes are popular among Egyptians'. As an approximation of social behaviour that could hint at certain faith related practices, it could be said, 'for many people in Central Asia, drinking and dancing do not interfere with the practice of Islam'. Putting aside the problem of generalisation, the last statement could still be free of culturalisation if it is not contextualised in a discursive attempt to Other because the statement itself does not entail any claim about people's values nor does it seem to seek a justification for a 'them' (or bad Other) versus 'us' (or good Other) categorisation. As for questions regarding a group of people's moral values or their perception of certain social and political phenomena, ideology critique would prove more effective than trying to mystify such questions in the name of 'culture'. Needless to say, the complexities and nuances in Western societies that necessitate the rigorous production and interdisciplinary application of knowledge in all fields of the sciences and the humanities are present to the same degree in the rest of the world.

Yet, the common attribution of 'culture' as a sort of unifying umbrella to non-White societies and communities dismisses the necessity of studying and understanding the historical, sociological, economic, and political dimensions thereof. The existing order in which the Other is marginalised and oppressed on the basis of oversimplified and racist generalisations is thus sustained as well. On the individual level, attributing 'culture' to a non-White person amounts to defining her in terms of a set of imagined values and ahistorical traditions. Accordingly, the person is denied the minimal recognition of personhood or even the potentiality of personhood. The non-White Other is systematically denied individual agency (i.e. the will to think, choose, and act autonomously) on the ideological basis that her personality is determined by the 'whole'. Hence, the Other is never seen as a subject; she is rather a repetitive unit, an 'it', the abstract animal Derrida (2002) refutes as a category.

Just as a species of animals is usually defined by the animals' 'nature', the culturalised individual is defined by her 'culture'. Even when committed out of sheer ignorance, culturalisation is rooted in a larger ideological worldview sustaining White domination and pigeonholing Other peoples into biological classes with identifiable collective traits and predictable behaviour. This explains the tendency of culturalisers to equate familiarity with one non-White person to an insider's understanding of that person's entire 'culture'. For instance, if a culturaliser happens to know a Chinese person, she can speak in the comfort of having firsthand knowledge about Chinese people because she automatically considers one Chinese person representative of all Chinese. The same goes for virtually all acquaintances of non-European descent. The Other is seen as a flat being without history or complexities. Thus, she is often regarded as either purely evil or purely good, but nothing in-between. Again, has this not been the human conception of animals since mythological times? While some animals are simply evil and they have been so for thousands of years in the human imagination, other animals are inherently good, peaceful, cute, useful, and so on. Likewise, and as will be further discussed in relation to liberal culturalisation in the following section, culturalisation is not always intended to demonise the Other; again, the culturaliser's primary motivation is Othering.

Since 9/11, nowhere has this Othering tendency on the basis of culture been more visible than in the White Western depiction of what has been dubbed 'the Muslim world'. The magnitude of this form of culturalisation is unprecedented, amounting to the imposition of Islam as the definitive identity upon nearly 2 billion people, including the estimated 23 percent of the world's population the Pew Research Center (2012) reports practice Islam as well as those who are considered Muslims due to their skin colour, accent, name, or ethnic origin and are not. I will call this phenomenon Muslimisation—not to be confused with the term used to convey the belief grown out of Islamophobia that the West is becoming increasingly Islamic—and it is by no means new. Writing in the late 1980s, Balibar notes the "differentialist" traces of anti-Semitic discourse in what he termed "Arabophobia" "since it carries with it an image of Islam as a 'conception of the world' which is incompatible with Europeaness and an enterprise of universal ideological domination, and therefore a systematic confusion of 'Arabness' and 'Islamicism'" (1991, p. 24). Today's Islamophobia carries with it the same underlying presumptions that Islam is much more than merely a system of belief and that it is just as natural and irrefutable as one's 'race'.

Amidst the fear and paranoia that pervades White discourse about the Middle East and North Africa region, the homogenising, flattening effects of Muslimisation have become increasingly absolute both at the theoretical level and in everyday social interaction. On a number of occasions in Canada, complete strangers have asked me what religion I practice, not because there is anything about me that could remotely suggest I follow any religion, but I assume merely because of my Middle Eastern appearance. In one of these cases in Montreal in 2007, a White Canadian woman had already deduced I was 'Muslim', perhaps both because of my appearance and my two Iranian companions, who had already identified themselves as Muslims. When I replied, "I have no religion", she enthusiastically responded, "Don't be ashamed of your religion!" before proudly divulging her own (non-Muslim) religious affiliation. Her response speaks to the very heart of the matter: the Other cannot be an individual with an individual character. Therefore, if a 'Muslim man' says he is not Muslim that must only be because he is ashamed to admit his beliefs to a 'non Muslim'. A 'Muslim' cannot be, for instance, a non-believer because the freedom to choose to become an atheist or agnostic belongs solely to the White, who alone is an individual. It should not have to be said that just as Europeans cannot definitively be identified as Christians, Middle Eastern and North African peoples cannot automatically be identified as Muslims.

To make matters worse, because of the over-simplifying, flattening effects of culturalisation, Islam has come to be viewed as a unified worldview without regional, let alone individual, variations, in spite of the vast geographies encompassed by the so-called Muslim world. Thus, whatever stereotypes come to be associated with Islam as such are automatically applied to 'Muslims' at large. Edward Said, in a lecture entitled "The Myth of the 'Clash of Civilisations'", said:

In today's Europe and the United States what is described as Islam ... belongs to the discourse of Orientalism, a construction fabricated to whip up feelings of hostility and antipathy ... Yet this is a very different thing, than what to Muslims who live within its domain, Islam really is. There's a world of difference between

Islam in Indonesia and Islam in Egypt. By the same token, the volatility of today's struggle over the meaning and definition of Islam is evident, in Egypt, where the secular powers of society are in conflict with various Islamic protest movements and reformers over the nature of Islam and in such circumstances the easiest and least accurate thing is to say, 'That is the world of Islam, and see how it is all terrorists and fundamentalists and see also how different, how irrational they are, compared to us'. (1998)

In itself, and in a less culturalised world, this association of Islam with violence is not necessarily a racist problem, but the ensuing association of 'Muslims' with violence is. Therefore, counterclaims that Islam is a religion of peace fail to address the most dangerous aspect of Muslimisation, which is its denial of personhood to individuals perceived to be 'Muslim'. It is this same culturalising setup that explains why the wrongdoing of a Muslim individual is treated as the wrongdoing of the entire 'Muslim world', which is more or less the case for all non-White individuals and minority groups. Indeed, terrorism has become so exclusively linked to the Muslim world that 'Please don't let it [the perpetrator] be a Muslim' has become a recurring refrain among Muslimised individuals in the immediate aftermath of public shootings and other acts of violence in the West (Ali, 2013). The wrongdoing of any number of individuals from the majority, however, remains an exceptional wrongdoing of individuals. If the perpetrator of a public shooting happens to be from a non-White background (regardless of nationality), the immediate presumption is that we are facing a cultural conflict (for example, in the form of a religious fanatic/terrorist), whereas if the shooter happens to be White, the presumption is that she (as an individual) was somehow failed by society. That is to say, if the criminal is White, psychology is where people turn for an explanation of her criminal act. A non-White criminal, however, only further validates mainstream White fears of the alien Other who can never be assimilated into Western society.

Liberal Culturalisation and Multiculturalism

This uncritical process of culturalising the Other is undertaken by conservatives as well as many liberals. In both cases, what we end up with is an erroneous depiction of the world backed by knowledge authorities in academia (and thus various specialists who help shape public opinion) and manufacturers of mass belief in the media. The only noticeable difference between conservative as opposed to liberal culturalisation is that conservatives frequently seek to demonise the Other, while the liberal spectrum of culturalisation extends from tolerance to superficial romanticisation. In terms of policy approaches, conservative culturalisation is typically anti-immigration oriented due to a belief that the non-White Other cannot be assimilated, whereas liberal culturalisers often ascribe to the multiculturalist view that 'different' cultures ultimately enrich the host (White) society.⁴ In either case, the unspoken motivation and result is Othering. Yet, because the racist motives of conservative culturalisation are

⁴ Not surprisingly, conservative and liberal versions of culturalisation often co-exist in practice, with 'multicultural' reforms—such as the superficial acknowledgement of Aboriginal populations in Canada's citizenship guide (Jafri, 2012) or Australia's National Curriculum (McAllan, 2011)—serving to offset the continuation or introduction of overtly racist policies.

typically more visible, I will focus on the liberal variety, which has been enshrined as the politically correct means of relating to the non-White Other.

What liberal proponents of multiculturalism fail or refuse to see is that in response to their desire not to speak about 'race' amidst the breakdown of geographical and linguistic boundaries that previously served to isolate Whites from non-Whites, they have merely erected new racist boundaries on cultural bases. Thus, the White community is able to continue to discursively segregate itself from the non-White Other while purporting to be living in a new age of harmony alongside each other. As Farid Farid writes, "orientalist multiculturalism", while appearing to give minorities voice and visibility, is in fact "built on orientalist stereotypes where the other's role easily becomes exhibitionist in performing exotic spectacles or being excluded on the basis of their otherness" (2006, p. 12). Conveniently, the belief that all people belong to unique cultures from which they draw their identity is the perfect preventive antidote to the cross-societal political alliances that could be fostered in this age of heightened connectivity. Regardless of the knowledge, beliefs and values, or citizenship of the non-White Other, her skin colour, name or ethnic ancestry will continue to be taken as an indication of her Otherness in the form of her (imagined) culture. The non-White Other can essentially never regain the personhood that culturalisation denies her. Moreover, because culturalisers simply fail to ascribe personhood to any non-White Other, even their 'love' for the Other is demeaning, and their 'respect' is intrinsically disrespectful.

This brings me to an example of this mentality that I witnessed during, of all things, the closing day of an academic conference on multiculturalism in Montreal in 2007. At that point, mostly the non-White presenters remained and in the context of praising the multicultural landscape of the conference, a White Francophone woman turned to the rest of us in the auditorium and exclaimed, "I love you all! I wish I had enough space to take you all home". Her proclamation of unconditional love for the different Others, no doubt born of strict adherence to multiculturalist doctrine, confers no more personhood upon the non-White Other than conservative (demonising) culturalisation. In either case, the culturalised Others are reduced to subject-less objects of the subject's simple emotion, as opposed to being recognised as equal subjects with agencies and complexities of their own. That is to say, the emphasis is not on the object of love ("you all" in this case), rather, it is on the loving subject. This is a merciful and kind subject who looks down upon the non-White and loves them all. I suspect the expression on the woman's face, the tone of her voice, and, more importantly, the omnibenevolent content of her self-assuring statement would have been the same had she been fussing over a bunch of vulnerable stray kittens.

The coming examples will illustrate the degree to which such patterns of liberal culturalisation and its essential generalising aspect have also become part of everyday discourse about the non-White world. Of course, this discourse has a long history as evidenced by Orientalism, but it was previously reserved mainly for elites such as colonial army officials, diplomats, missionaries, and writers and scholars (for example, historians and anthropologists). Now, however, in addition to being armed with the proper culturalising rhetoric to make sense of the non-White Other, ordinary people in the West have nearly unlimited access to the wonderlands of those strange, distant cultures not only via mass media, but also

through humanitarian and touristic travelling. The discourse of culturalisation thus no longer needs to be disseminated from above, it is perpetuated by humanitarianists and tourists just as the Orientalist research of scholars during colonialism greatly fed into racism. To begin with humanitarianism, it is becoming more and more common to hear White Westerners, ranging in background from devoted Christians to humanitarianists, or simply any college or even high-school student, speaking of their plan, or at least their desire, to go to Africa 'to help those in need!' This discourse is tragically rich for analysis. First of all, Africa (the world's second largest continent with nearly a billion inhabitants) is, as usual, reduced to one simple entity. To the culturaliser, this singular African identity is built upon images of villages of malnourished children who run after and adore the Whites that come to save them. Thanks to global injustices that privilege Whites, Africa offers the White humanist/tourist/student a chance to gain a sense of self-importance independent of their personal merit or lack thereof. Any utterly unskilled and untalented White person can go to the land of the sufferers and automatically perceive herself as a saint setting out to save the world. In addition to the inexpensive or even complimentary luxuries the colonialist heir will enjoy there, she will have a heroic story to regale herself and others with for the rest of her life. A round-trip ticket to Africa has become the vehicle for redemption, affordable heroism, and first hand knowledge of another culture.

The White culturalising humanitarianists, who usually fail even to recognise the historical and contemporary role of Western imperialism in creating and sustaining a lower standard of living in the third world, behave as though poverty, violence, and corruption are endemic to non-White cultures. In effect, humanitarianism and tourism have become major apparatuses of the Christian West's depoliticisation of the non-White world. The mentality behind the pseudo-compassionate culturalisation present in some forms of humanitarian and tourist discourses is that the Other, who is irrational, violent, primitive, helpless, or some combination thereof, deserves the compassion of the civilised Christian, just as the fallen human being deserves the compassion of Jesus Christ. This compassion, this Godly love, can easily extend itself to huge parts of the world as in the not-uncommon statement, 'I love India', made by some Western tourists India had been fortunate enough to have the chance to host. It is as if to the White tourist India is as simple to take in and comment on as an exquisite dessert or exotic species of cat. Do they really fail to grasp the fact that India is a world full of all kinds of issues including terrible things such as poverty, injustice, and so on, just like any other complex world? Do they love this India in all of its complexities, or do they just love the self-image they enjoy in India? Obviously, one must presume, they love that as they take in the exotic Indian culture, they are also the perpetual beneficiaries of the international division of labour and, of course, a long history of colonialism. Here too, the emphasis in the statement is on the loving subject. It is a self-proclamation of divinity in which India becomes the object of the semi-divine being's love. The White touristic context of the statement is what distinguishes it as subject-centred. Ironically, when the immigrant to the West is asked how she likes her new country of dwelling, she too is expected to say, 'I love it here', but the political context of such a statement, 'I love America', for example, orients it completely opposite of the White touristic one. In this case, the emphasis is placed entirely on benevolent America, the mighty nation that gave shelter to this helpless Other. An immigrant is expected to implicitly express gratitude to every White

citizen who asks her, 'How do you like it here?' by expressing her absolute and unconditional love for the country, thus sustaining the culturaliser's sense of generosity and superiority.

Whiteness is an unspoken and neutralised social rank with inherent 'cultural' privileges the rights to which are no longer questioned. Thus, even when 'loved', it is very important that the Other always sustains the relational order that preserves the racist White's myth of superiority and the image of the Other as a biological category. In other words, as long as the Other plays the predetermined role of a cultural bearer lacking personhood, and thereby feeds into the culturaliser's sense of self (and thus the privilege of the racist White), the culturaliser thinks of them fondly as a sort of obedient pet. On the other hand, if the Other were to show any sign of personhood, autonomy, or free individual will, this would be disturbing, and possibly threatening, to the culturaliser. Imagine the case of an immigrant who answers the question, 'How do you like Australia?' by stating something along the lines of, 'I don't like it very much. I am here because of the same reasons that drove you, your parents, or your grand or great grandparents here'.

Culturalisation and Politics

Žižek calls the phenomenon of culturalisation "the Huntington's disease of our time" (2008, p. 140), in reference to Huntington's thesis of "the clash of civilizations": "The Velvet Curtain of culture has replaced the Iron Curtain of ideology" (Huntington, 2010, p. 10).⁵ Describing the phenomenon of the "culturalisation of politics" in what he calls the "liberal multiculturalist's basic ideological operation", Žižek states, "Political differences—differences conditioned by political inequality or economic exploitation—are naturalised and neutralised into 'cultural' differences, that is, into different 'ways of life' which are something given, something that cannot be overcome" (2008, p. 140). This culturalisation of politics took currency among former Leftist Marxists when attacks against the orthodox, economist interpretation of Marxism became extremely popular after the fall of the communist states in Eastern Europe. The popular form of this critical attack, however, has now lapsed into the other dogmatic pole: dismissing the material conditions of life entirely in the 'new' worldview. Now, 'culture' is expected to be behind all social and political phenomena, especially when people from the third world are involved. Thus, in Žižek's words, the "liberal multiculturalist's basic ideological operation" has become dominant. Žižek continues,

The basic opposition on which the entire liberal vision relies is that between those who are ruled by culture, totally determined by the lifeworld into which they are born, and those who merely 'enjoy' their culture, who are elevated above it, free to choose it. (2008, p. 141)

⁵ See Bonnett (2005) for a helpful discussion of the evolution of 'the West' as a "ubiquitous [supremacist] category in the articulation of the modern world" (2005, p. 15) with specific reference to the contributions of Huntington's unacknowledged ideological predecessor, Benjamin Kidd.

At the same time, it is important to reiterate here that although this culturalising view may have become more popular in the last two-three decades, its roots go back centuries, as Said's *Orientalism* (2003) illustrates.

The important point to be made is that 'culture' carries with it no substantial designation that could aid us in understanding the fundamental features of any human being anyway. In the best cases, this pseudo-concept, culture, would indicate a set of very general attitudes and superficial appearances, by way of loose approximations, that could give us a hint about a society's social manners and customs, which would be admired or despised to various degrees, or indifferently ignored, by the individuals. On any more serious level, culture is inevitably and deeply political. It is beyond thoughtless naivety not to see the politicality of, for example, the religious roots of casteism in India, or of Islamic laws under Islamist regimes. To pause on the latter example, the official charge against some political opponents of the Islamic Republic of Iran is *Moharebeh*, by which is meant "enmity towards God", but is of course merely a way of justifying the persecution of those individuals who oppose the state. Oddly, however, casteism and Islamism are often treated as pure cultural phenomena, meaning that culturalisers also ignore the tremendous degree of opposition to casteism and Islamism within the same societies, respectively, because these forms of opposition have no place in the homogeneous images culturalisers hold about those societies.

In addition to being too insensitive to account for popular acts of dissent and progressive politics of resistance in its view of the Other, the culturalising mentality also mistakes even what is openly political (such as the discourse of political Islam) as culture. Hence, it is even more improbable that this mentality could be sensitive to the more diffused levels of ideological arenas whereby political agendas are put forward most effectively precisely by masking them with non-political claims, such as moral, metaphysical, or spiritual justifications.⁶ Even if we take 'culture' to mean a set of common beliefs, values, rituals, practices, and customs, even the most supposedly metaphysical or natural cultural component among them is still deeply political. This metaphysical or natural (ahistorical) facade is exactly where ideology lies because ideology functions qua ideology by disguising itself and, thus, presenting itself as neutral. In short, 'cultural interpretations' amount to the dehistoricisation and apoliticisation of socio-political phenomena.

Similarly, Said's work on Orientalism is particularly helpful in terms of better understanding the politicisation of culture. Although it has almost become a matter of political correctness to avoid the word 'Orient' in English due in large part to the impact Said's work has had, this style of thought based upon a clearly divided 'Orient' and 'Occident' is still extremely common, even among Eastern academics. Essentially, what Said claims about the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is that the forms of knowledge produced about the Oriental Other by European thinkers, writers, and scientists, who had conscious and distinct beliefs about 'race', was crucially imperial and served imperialism. Therefore, Orientalism was in fact a process of racialising knowledge that

⁶ For a critique of the failure of cultural anthropology to account for ideology see Talal Asad (1979).

functioned within a broader political project, the aims and methods of which have changed very little in the decades since *Orientalism* was first published in 1978. A contemporary example that clearly illustrates the phenomenon of the 'politicisation of culture' is the 'issue' of Muslim women's clothing in the West. Strangely, for the last decade or so in Europe especially, liberals and conservatives alike have become interested in liberating Muslim women from their ultimate 'symbol of oppression': their headscarf or burqa. Thus, women's bodies have become the territory for yet another battle originating in classic racism. Absurd though it may be, publicly taking a side with regard to headscarves and burqas has become almost fashionable. In fact, the question of Muslim women's attire has become a subject of political party platforms (for example, the Party for Freedom in Holland and Northern League in Italy) and state and provincial legislations (for example, in France and Germany respectively), as well as municipality by-laws (for example, Belgium). Of course, the politicisation of such an issue is inherently stupid and utterly sexist. You would not normally be asked, for instance, whether you are in support of or in opposition to Catholic or Orthodox nuns' habits, let alone White women's clothing at large, because, needless to say, these kinds of issues are considered to fall under individual freedom.⁷ My question, then, is why has the headscarf and burqa so suddenly become one of *the* 'political' and legislative questions for Westerners and especially men? 'Who am I to tell women what to wear or what not to wear?' Is this not the only proper response to this kind of debate?

What exactly is it that prevents conservatives and liberals across the board from seeing Muslim women as individuals with personal freedoms? The obvious assumption here is that a Muslim woman cannot be seen as an autonomous and free subject, and that as such, she needs (White) men's aid to be liberated from the male-imposed oppression so dominant in her 'culture'. But this is not the actual motive behind these self-professed liberators. In reality, there are a number of political reasons why Muslim women, among all other non-White, and hence (to the Orientalist mind), un-free women, have been so consistently targeted to be 'freed'. Quite obviously, the battle has nothing to do with women's rights after all. Rather, it is a war against the culturalised Other by means of politics and legislations. And conveniently, the doctrine of human rights today not only allows racists to practice their discrimination under the celebrated discourse of liberalism, but it also gives them the privilege of moral superiority as the civilised ones who are on a sacred mission to liberate the primitive, irrational, and enslaved Other.

Ultimately, the matter here is not whether or not forms of Islamic clothing are oppressive. They can very well be oppressive in many contexts of Islamic societies, but wherever it is so, women have fought back with all available means of struggle, including militant methods. However, this long history of resistance is aggressively excluded from what the White liberal man educates himself about on the subject of women's rights because it does not fit his ideological image of the Oriental woman. This seems to particularly be the case in the third world, where the most radical feminist organisations exist. Indeed, I doubt these White 'liberators' could even imagine how women in certain militant movements are actively engaged in liberating men from traditional sexist and chauvinistic value

⁷ Of course, this does not include White Muslim women, who fall outside the acceptable range of Whiteness in the view of those who are politically White.

systems. For example, in the Kurdistan Workers' Party (commonly known as PKK), female guerrilla leaders teach feminist courses to re-educate their male comrades (Journeyman Pictures, 2005).

The irony, in fact, is that even if the leading White liberators learned of such progressive feminist movements, it is virtually certain that they would mercilessly debilitate them. One must bear in mind that the traditional liberal typically and historically supports power relations and ideologies that are by all means oppressive in many parts of the third world. In fact, it was this same liberal force that preferred and supported Islamist fundamentalism over popular communist and Marxist movements in the Middle East and other parts of Asia (including Afghanistan). Although Islamism and liberalism continue to present themselves as a dichotomy, it is certainly a false dichotomy. Whether a White man is targeting women's bodies as a setting for men's power relations in Europe, or Islamist leaders are politicising women's bodies in the Middle East, the enmity towards female autonomy is virtually indistinguishable.

From the example of the European politicisation of Muslim women's clothing in Europe in the name of women's liberation, we can see that the racist is wrong even when s/he may sound right. The most perfect forms of deception are often conducted not despite truth but via the use of truth. Truth is a currency that can be manipulated in all kinds of ways, and usually it is used most effectively by those who control the means of knowledge production, and that is precisely what makes "power and knowledge directly imply each other", as we have learned from Foucault (1984). Likewise, discourse is the locus of the ideological agenda, and as such, it emphasises a truth only to deliver an untruth obliquely. While the ideological purpose is concealed in the oblique part, the argument is structured around the obvious part, the truth. That is to say, the racist's aim is never to communicate facts, and the moment we begin to engage in a debate on the factuality of what the racist claims to report in her/his discourse, we immediately fall into the trap. New-racist arguments do not rely on what have now been proven to be false premises, such as the biological notion of race. Nonetheless, the arguments put forward by new-racism are unsound as a whole, and their persuasive power lies solely in diverting our attention to proving or disproving their premises. As Žižek concludes, the aim should instead be focused on falsifying the racist's motive (2008, p. 100). Hence, whether what the liberals and conservatives claim about the headscarf and burqa as symbols of oppression is true or not is irrelevant. The point to emphasise is that there is a racist aim concealed within this well-structured discourse that strategically relies on the politicisation of the cultural and culturalisation of the political.

Concluding Remarks

In sum, this common mystification, naturalisation, and racialisation of culture has contributed significantly to the global decline of a universalist vision of humanity. As universalist ideologies and philosophies began to lose ground in the social and political world in the late 1980s, religious and nationalist waves began to accumulate more populist force. Today, no world heroes exist, because the world lost its worldness qua one world. Nations have their own heroes whose visions are dreams for some and nightmares for others. Capital alone is fully

globalised, which embodies the objectification of human relations and the humanisation of relations among objects, as Marx predicted (1990, p. 166).

Of course this is not to say the world should be conceived in terms of atomic individualism without any plausible collective political will. The point here is to overcome the politics of Othering on the bases of differences that should not have any political significance, such as differences in skin colour, ethnicity, gender, and imagined social values. Instead, the Left should realise and capitalise on collective wills that would emerge as soon as pseudo-identities collapse into a more critical view of the question of human liberation. Though race and gender relations are political now, the subsequent response should not be internalisation of those constructed differences as natural and metaphysical. Rather, it should be a struggle against the conditions that sustain such inequalities. As for class relations, the old Marxist goal of abolishing class society is still as legitimate as it was in the 1950s and 1960s regardless of how unrealistic it may sound.

One of the most central conclusions of Marxist philosophy is that humans create their own history whether they are aware of it or not, and whether by activity or passivity. Enlightenment from the Marxist point of view, one could argue, is the awareness of the human potentiality to determine history, and to be enlightened would thus mean to work consciously towards the liberation of humanity by leaving behind the pre-human history in which humanity is the object, not the subject, of history. That is to say, universal equality and freedom will never be realistic as long as we fail to see history as the product of our own actions. By the same token, the more human societies and communities are perceived and treated as naturally and fundamentally different from each other, the more impossible the realisation of a freer humanity will become by virtue of people's own actions. The dominant belief in equivalents of 'human nature' (such as 'race' or racialised 'culture') amounts to the self-fulfilling prophecies of the Hobbesian war of all against all in the form of exploitive multi-sided (class, race, gender) domination. What differs is the amount and the forms of oppressions different groups of people have been subjected to throughout their histories, not their natural entitlement to or (cultural) appreciation of equality and freedom. A key point in undoing the history of oppression is to cease taking today's 'cultures' as natural and absolute determinates of individuals' identities. Even nature itself and all that is natural have histories, and humans alone are capable of living, thinking, and acting in accordance with that historical awareness. It is the belief that reality is above and beyond our will that sustains and prolongs the existing state of affairs.

If we continue to limit ourselves to what we are made to think are realistic options, the history we are creating will only grow bleaker. The alternative to the existing world and its relations of power is not even conceivable for a mindset that habitually perceives humanity in terms of intrinsic cultural identities. A mindset that is incapable of imagining an international Left sharing foundational concepts of human equality and freedom while grounding its struggles on local circumstances and histories cannot expand the limits of the possible. In a world where the most dominant, and thus the most neutralised, ideology is a masculine, White, and capitalist ideology, a true alternative cannot even theoretically be constructed if first the dominant ideology is not de-normalised. Accordingly, deconstructing the current paradigms of the dominant ideology is

the prerequisite for progressive movements both theoretically and on the level of day-to-day political struggle against exploitive multi-sided dominations. Moreover, the Left should not be afraid to, at the least, reject the de-politicisation of relations of domination that are defused and legitimised under the name of multiculturalism. Individuals and groups of people should be empowered to be able to cultivate forms of revolutionary communication capable of expressing the universal extensions of their identities. As long as oppressed groups are fitted with cultural lenses to view the collective self and the collective Other, the Left will continue to decline.

Author Note

Saladdin Ahmed is an assistant professor in the Department of Philosophy at Mardin Artuklu University. He has published work on the Frankfurt School, minorities, fascism, and continental philosophy. His research interests also include philosophy of space, and he received his PhD in Philosophy from the University of Ottawa. Email: saladdin.ahmed@gmail.com

Acknowledgements

This article would never have seen the light of day without my comrade and wife Melissa Seelye, who had the patience to discuss every idea with me, edit and reedit several versions, and assist me with sources. My gratitude also goes to the journal's editor and staff, as well as the anonymous reviewers, for their helpful suggestions.

References

- Adorno, T. W. (2006). *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*. J. M. Bernstein (Ed.), reprint ed. London: Routledge.
- Ali, W. (2013, April 17). Please don't let it be a Muslim. *Salon.com*. Retrieved from http://www.salon.com/2013/04/17/please_dont_let_it_be_a_muslim/
- Asad, T. (1979). *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*. London: Ithaca Press.
- Balibar, E. (1991). Is there a "Neo-Racism"? In E. Balibar & I. Wallerstein (Eds.), *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (pp. 17-28). London: Verso.
- Barker, M. (1981). *The New Racism: Conservatives and the Ideology of the Tribe*. London: Junction Books.
- Bobo, L. D., & Smith, R. A. (1998). From Jim Crow Racism to Laissez-Faire Racism: The Transformation of Racial Attitudes. In W. F. Katkin, N. Landsman & A. Tyree (Eds.), *Beyond Pluralism: The Conception of Groups and Group Identities in America* (pp. 182-220). Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Bonilla-Silva, E. (2010). *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America* (3rd ed.). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

- Bonnett, A. (2005). From the Crises of Whiteness to Western Supremacism. *Critical Race and Whiteness Studies*, 1, 8-20. Retrieved from www.acrawsa.org.au/files/ejournalfiles/96AlastairBonnett.pdf
- Dabashi, H. (2013, January 15). Can non-Europeans think? What happens with thinkers who operate outside the European philosophical "pedigree"? *Aljazeera English*. Retrieved from <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/01/201311414268797542.html>
- Derrida, J. (2002). The Animal that Therefore I am (More to Follow), D. Wills (Trans.). *Critical Inquiry*, 28(2), 369-418.
- Essed, P. (1991). *Understanding Everyday Racism: An Interdisciplinary Theory*. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Farid, F. (2006). Let the Egyptian Speak for Himself: An Agitation of the Cultural Integrity of Whiteness in Australian Multicultural Policies and Practices. *Critical Race and Whiteness Studies*, 2(1), 1-16. Retrieved from www.acrawsa.org.au/files/ejournalfiles/91FaridFarid.pdf
- Foucault, M. (1984). The Body of the Condemned. In P. Rabinow (Ed.), *Foucault Reader* (pp. 170-8). New York: Pantheon Books.
- Huntington, S. (2010). *The Clash of Civilizations? The Debate* (2nd ed). New York: Foreign Affairs.
- Jafri, B. (2012). National Identity, Transnational Whiteness and the Canadian Citizenship Guide. *Critical Race and Whiteness Studies*, 8(1), 1-15. Retrieved from www.acrawsa.org.au/files/ejournalfiles/179CRWS201281Jafri.pdf
- Journeyman Pictures. (2005). Guerrilla Girls of the PKK—Turkey. YouTube video, posted by journeymanpictures (2007, October 24). Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pRsw5s28jxY>
- Kroeber, A. L., & Kluckhohn, C. (1952). *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*. Cambridge, MA: Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology.
- Lentin, A. (2005). Replacing "Race", Historicizing "Culture" in Multiculturalism. *Patterns of Prejudice*, 39(4), 379-96.
- Lentin, A, & Titley, G. (2011). *The Crises of Multiculturalism: Racism in a Neoliberal Age*. London: Zed Books.
- Marx, K. (1990). *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, reprint ed., B. Fowkes (Trans.). London: Penguin Books.
- McAllan, F. (2011). Getting "Post-Racial" in the "Australian" State: What Remains Overlooked in the Premise "Getting Beyond Racism"? *Critical Race and Whiteness Studies*, 7(1), 1-21. Retrieved from www.acrawsa.org.au/files/ejournalfiles/159CRAWSMcAllan713.pdf
- Pew Research Center. (2012, December 18). The Global Religious Landscape. *PewResearch Religion & Public Life Project*. Retrieved from <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec/>
- Said, E. (1998). The Myth of the "Clash of Civilizations". Lecture at University of Massachusetts, DVD.
- . (2003). *Orientalism* (25th anniversary ed.). New York: Vintage Books.
- Sears, David O. (1988). Symbolic Racism. In P. Katz & D. Taylor (Eds.), *Eliminating Racism: Profiles in Controversy* (pp. 53-84). New York: Plenum Press.

- Sears, David O. and P. J. Henry. (2003). The Origins of Symbolic Racism. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85(2), 259-75.
- Stocking, G. (1974). *The Shaping of American Anthropology, 1883-1911: A Franz Boas Reader*. New York: Basic Books.
- Žižek, S. (2008). *Violence*. New York: Picador.