

(Pseudo)intellectualism and democratic (il)liberalism: on Aurelien Mondon and Aaron Winter's "Reactionary democracy"

In 'Reactionary Democracy', Aurelien Mondon and Aaron Winter frame modern liberal democracy as fundamentally exclusionary. Appeals to liberal democratic principles that both institutionalise and normalise political inequality have not only allowed but actively facilitated the rise of the 'alt-' and far-right. In the book the authors expound the 'fuzzy' demarcation between 'illiberal' and 'liberal' racism, the latter encompassing not only an adherence to principles of universalism, individualism, meritocracy and equality alongside a wilful denial of the effects of systemic racism in multicultural Western societies, but an instrumental support of group self-determination only when and where it serves to further liberal credentials. This review will discuss, given the arguments in the book, the limits of 'mainstreaming' support for racial justice in the UK and the challenges for academics, critical theorists of race and scholar activists posed by the increasing pseudo-intellectualisation of both illiberal and liberal racist narratives in academia and public discourse.

To understand the development of the normative underpinnings of liberal democracy and thus the racialized character of modern liberal democracies, it is worth looking at the development of the liberal tradition within dominant strands of political theory. Mills ([2008](#)) argues that in post-Rawlsian political theorizing, race is not only a non-issue but non-existent in ideal-type "just" societies. This has contributed to the inherent Whiteness of contemporary political philosophy, a discipline evolving not only to marginalize attention to the issue of racial (in)equality but to racially demarcate to whom liberal norms apply. When grappling with "real world" issues around racial inequality, it does so primarily by appealing to what critical scholars of race frame as inherently exclusionary and hegemonic principles of universality, neutrality and objectivity. This is, in essence, the theoretical basis of the authors' critique, that "despite its universalist pretensions, liberal hegemony has never managed to actualize its claim that its principles should indeed be applied equally to all" (3).

In Aurelien Mondon and Aaron Winter's *Reactionary Democracy* the authors first give a comprehensive and historically-informed discussion of the "illiberal racism" of the extreme political right and its relationship to "mainstream" politics over time. They then go on to expound the racial hegemony inherent within liberalism and liberal traditions of democracy in multicultural, Western societies, drawing on political and sociological scholarship and contemporary case studies from the US, UK and France. A particular area of critique surrounds the burgeoning counter-(pseudo)academic discourses to critical theories of race. The contemporary political analysis of UK-based scholars, writers and public commentators such as Eric Kaufmann, Matthew Goodwin and Matthew Goodhart, aligned with the ideological "free thought" discourse of think tanks, online fora and publications such as *Quillette*, *Spiked*, *Policy Exchange* and the *Academy of Ideas*, has gone some way to intellectualize from an (often flawed) evidential standpoint the sort of neutralizations/conservative shifts in thinking about racial justice which Mondon and Winter outline in the book. An example is taken from Kaufmann's *New Statesman* article where he attributes anti-immigration sentiment and the demonization of Muslims to a lack of outlet for the sense of "ethnic loss" felt by White communities (101). "Brexit" was largely framed in the early days post-EU referendum as a legitimate response from White working class voters to a loss of their identity (ironically by intellectual and conservative political elites who also make a point to routinely decry claims to identity recognition lobbied for by minority groups). Not only is this an incomplete rendering of the complexity behind contemporary Islamophobia and xenophobia from supposed academic scholars, but more troublesome in the pseudo-intellectualizing of far right ideas focussed on re-asserting and re-centring the primacy of Whiteness without – as the authors are keen to stress – doing so by name. Those concerned with exposing the structural bases of racial inequality in our society know the first step is speak truth to power, which necessitates public discussion of Whiteness, White privilege and White supremacy.

Kaufmann believes that a White identity, like any other ethnic identity, deserves to be acknowledged and protected and in doing so draws a false equivalence racism against non-

Whites, and “anti-White racism” (103). As Holmwood (2020) points out in his review of Kaufmann’s book on “ethnic change” in the West – “*Whiteshift*” (2018) – this serves to sideline useful and necessary discussion of the very real racial privilege attached to White identities (Holmwood 2020, 236). In *Whiteshift* Kaufmann (2018) toes the line between illiberal and liberal racism, decrying the overt fear-mongering racism of Enoch Powell’s rivers of blood speech whilst agreeing with his warnings about the potential effects of cultural fallout from rapid immigration. Proponents of liberal racism choose their adherence to liberal principles carefully which allow for such hypocrisies – claiming a pro-feminist stance in relation to the threat of the Muslim male “other”, for example, at once signalling progressiveness while also amplifying the “Muslim threat” (70). Defenders of modern liberal democracy claim that worse, politically extreme outcomes are risked by critiquing liberal democratic principles and systems than by protecting them, utilizing – indeed, perhaps, relying on – the far right to push “moderate” liberal racist policies. In doing so they perversely appeal to White nationalisms by sanctioning racialized expressions of national pride. Mondon and Winter do well to illustrate and alert us to these crucial political and discursive shifts, exposing the hypocrisies and deflections inherent in pseudo-intellectualized liberal racist arguments.

In academic scholarship but increasingly in mainstream discourse, ethnic/ethno-cultural change or “identity loss” is appealed to instead of race, serving to obviate discussion of racism which rapidly becomes – as we have seen with the recent spotlight on the teaching of critical race theory in schools and Universities – framed as a hegemonic, ideological discourse rather than a legitimate theoretical lens through which academics and researchers seek to understand real, societal inequalities. By devaluing / deflecting the salience of race, stripping it of its contemporary structural significance, it can be “exposed” as a mere political tool of the left and a guilt-laden anachronism from a long-gone era (to be consigned, in other words, to the illiberal racisms of the past). The wielding of these terms as hegemonic discursive tools are discussed at length in the book in regard to “euphemisation” i.e. the supplanting of “racism” with phrases such as “public anxieties” or “racial self-interest” (102).

The wielding of free speech claims by “self-appointed free speech crusaders” in response to a supposed stifling of open, political discussion on academic campuses and school classrooms reflects the same sort of policing practices these public arbiters of academic freedom claim far less well-known and far less politically powerful students and left-wing academics are guilty of (78). By imbuing anti-racist theories as politically powerful as opposed to still largely marginal socio-political and theoretical stances informed by long-standing, transnational critical traditions of academic thought, anti-racist thought and action becomes a perfect target for both reactionary and conservative fervour (82). The authors go beyond discussion of the media amplification that comes hand in hand with this type of “free speech” campaigning, however, to the network of power relations that amplify and propagate these narratives across both illiberal and liberal platforms and scripts (81), beyond the academic campuses they routinely take issue with.

Legitimizers of liberal racist narratives operating within academic and pseudo-intellectual contexts often fall back on concepts of falsifiability and measurability to deny the reality of contemporary structural racism (Chotiner [2019](#)) and underscore the justifiable bases of their political assertions. In actuality, these claims to reason are highly politically strategic, a case in point being the reframing by political elites, over years, of both who “the people” are and what “they” believe. Mondon and Winter advance a critical definition of, amongst other related concepts, both the “people” and the “mainstream”, the latter a highly dynamic concept given that what is considered “moderate” or “middling” changes over time. The political centre can – and has – changed as more covertly extreme ideas become mainstreamed through the sort of mechanisms outlined earlier, and indeed the perception of the mainstream can be determined by those who map, measure and report public opinion. Discussion of “who are the people” features prominently towards the end of the book which marks a clear departure from broader discussion of discursive and political shifts to interrogation of the quantitative “evidence” base of the formation of public opinion and the so-called views of the “the people”. Their critique of psephology – the construction and interpretation of public opinion through polls, barometers and surveys into mediated political

knowledge informing policy, uncritical academic outputs and the political agenda – further destabilizes our understanding of the nature of core “democratic” functions. They discuss how polls continue to frame political events such as the EU referendum as the linear and unequivocal consequence of a groundswell of public support for decisive action on the UK’s role in the European Union and the question of EU to UK labour migration. Surveys designed to measure political and policy opinions are routinely constructed and analysed, however, to portray a sense of collective “urgency” (based, ironically, on aggregated individual data) around matters framed as subjectively important to the micro and macro lives of the “the people” (161). These are, unsurprisingly, most often reduced to immigration. The partiality inherent in these often spurious data gathering exercises reflect, amplify and legitimize the narratives around migrants and refugees peddled by so many media outlets and conservative politicians. They also form the basis of the aforementioned gloomy portents of the dystopian populist political landscape that could be made real if the political “establishment” continue fail to act on people’s supposedly well-evidenced feelings about “ethnic change”, identity loss and unchecked immigration (100). They also taint, in a sense, the definition of the “people” as an irrational and reactionary mass as opposed to a democratic political entity (194) who have been both homogenized and instrumentalized by those with agenda-setting powers.

The arguments in the book about the racial character of liberal democracies and the role of liberal elites and intellectuals within this are also highly relevant to the boundary making engaged in by predominantly White liberal feminists, a discussion given less attention in the book but of significant and timely importance. Political communities of solidarity and action constructed by and for multiply marginalized groups fill the space of citizenship, belonging and recognition for those who are both denied the ostensible rights and freedoms conferred by liberal democracies while at once accused of fundamentally undermining them (Collins [2010](#), [2017](#)). Debates in some academic and popular circles over trans rights and the definition of “woman” have shown us that even radical and thus ostensibly inclusive strands of feminism can be fundamentally averse to asserting the humanity of some women and to

accepting the centrality of a critical and fluid understanding of gender to the movement, under the guise of maintaining female unity and / or progress in the gender movement. The emergent theories in the book around liberal and illiberal racisms, the far right and populism are thus incredibly useful, broad decolonial and critical tools for those teaching political theory, political science and sociology, instructing us as academics and pedagogues interested in meaningful social justice aims to go further in our critique of western liberal democracy – its principles, processes, outcomes – and our destabilization and deconstruction of both novel and existing political binaries. It lays bare the consequences of universalizing and abstracting political ideologies which have long failed to fully acknowledge their own emancipatory limitations at the detriment of not only the most vulnerable members of society but the democratic polity at large. The discursive, ideological and political shifts and struggles under discussion in the book are also applicable not only beyond race to intersectional and trans rights struggles but geographically far beyond the UK, US and Europe, increasingly relevant to the exclusionary nation-building practices of India, for example.

In terms of their concluding thoughts, Mondon and Winter argue that the focus of our politics must be oriented towards challenging the scope of injustices carried out largely unchecked and unchallenged rather than on defending a clearly broken status quo (208). However, we must question how far there is to go to reach just the initial stage of reconceptualizing interconnecting emancipatory struggles on gender, race, class as the basis of a genuine democratic project. In stressing the need for criticality when approaching the analysis of the far right, populism, and the inherent illiberalism in liberal ideologies and political systems, they concede that radical alternatives to challenge both the discursive and structural underpinnings of this are unlikely to be deemed acceptable. This is even the case in a moment of national introspection about our colonial past and the viability of our democratic political apparatus to deal with health crises like COVID-19 which have put current levels of inequality in the UK into sharp focus. Nonetheless, the calls to arms for a radical approach

rooted in liberatory grassroots politics and scholar activism rings clear. As the authors state, the very future of an anti-racist, anti-sexist and anti-classist democracy is at stake.

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