

***Sharing the halal snack-pack:
multiculturalism as neo-assimilation in
Australia***

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to examine the intersection between multiculturalism, neoliberalism and the rhetoric of left-right politics within a 'post-multicultural' critical framework as articulated in two media examples. The first: a brief exchange in a television interview between leader of the One Nation party Pauline Hanson and former Labour Party senator Sam Dastyari where Hanson strongly rejected Dastyari's invitation to "share a halal snackpack" (Bungard 2016: 1). The second: from the ABC current events panel discussion program *Q&A*, when – during a debate over the attributes and problems associated with a proposed travel and immigration ban for citizens from Islamic countries – two Syrian migrant brothers codify themselves as valuable multicultural-entrepreneurial subjects, posing the rhetorical question "why ban people like us" (*Q&A* 2017). I situate this process of self-identification as a form of neo-assimilation and contextualize the subjects within the broad descriptor of a 'post-race' and 'post-multicultural' periodization. Following work by Lentin and Titley (2011), Lentin (2012) and Gozdecka et al (2014) I argue that the nexus of neoliberalism and multiculturalism oscillates as a contradictory binary of competing rationales between national security, western liberalism and individualization. However these tensions are resolved via assimilation of the minority subject into a cultural environment underpinned by a market logic.

Government policies concerning multicultural society have been "central to shaping the economic, social, political, religious and cultural contours of the

Australian cosmopolitan nation” (Collins 2013: 161). The objective of developing a culturally inclusive society notwithstanding, Australia’s multiculturalism project has become invested in a process of subject creation through various political stimuli: nationalism, the securitisation of the nation state and the political pre-occupation with economic efficiency. Here migrants are both encouraged to perform as colourful subjects of a seemingly tolerant national collective while simultaneously being disciplined into modes of behaviour that serves to negate any critical response to the systems and politics of the host nation in the interests of maintaining the economic and political status quo.

Multiculturalism and post-multiculturalism: urban elites against the others

Since the turn of the century – significantly marked in the geopolitical order by the 9/11 attacks – multiculturalism has increasingly become the focus of critique in the global discourse. The cultural divide between the Islamic east and the secular west may serve as the most obvious signifier of this critique, but this is underpinned by broader questions of the increasing economic, cultural and political impact of globalization and its perceived adverse effects on domiciled populations.

In Australia the re-emergence of the nationalist One Nation party in the 2016 General Election gave political legitimacy to anti-multicultural perspectives. As in other territories, the critique of existing multiculturalism policies is divided into two arguments. The first is about economic stability for the citizenry; the second is about national security and promoting policies that are seen to negate

the threat of terrorist attacks. Whilst these positions are often made explicit, the discussion is also used to suggest that multiculturalism is the cause of disruption to the accepted national culture. I suggest however that the reverse is true, and that in its current incarnation multiculturalism is less a process that incorporates difference into a homogenous national narrative, but instead functions as a tool of neo-assimilation.

The Australian multicultural narrative is diverse and extends across a range of historical periods of cultural exchange (Healey 2005; Collins 2013). Since the turn of the millennium, the integration and political and cultural actions of Muslim communities have been the primary focus of the discussion over multiculturalism (Dunn et al 2007; Kabir 2007; Hopkins 2011). Notwithstanding the cultural and ethnic difference between Muslim migrant communities to Australia, the popular rhetoric surrounding these Muslim communities often focuses on the aesthetic and cultural difference between them and mainstream Australia. Following Hopkins, the fluidity with which identity and subjectivity may be enacted by individuals becomes politicized in relation to Islam in Australia. The adoption of hybrid identities – the suppression or intensification of particular aspects of one's cultural/religious self - encourages either a sense of inclusion of or alienation from the cultural mainstream. The agency of hybridity serves to highlight generational cultural difference, notably in relation to intra-community hierarchies (Hopkins; Pardy and Lee 2011). But the wider socio-cultural ramifications of adaptable culture is also salient to the way cultural and political hierarchies are organised, especially in relation to

established contemporary notions of socio-economic inclusion into the neoliberal society.

For several decades scholars have argued that social and economic hierarchies are normalized via the inter-connection of multiculturalism and the socio-cultural elements underpinning neoliberalism (Fish 1997; Žižek 1997). Far from operating on the behalf of minority actors disadvantaged by modern paradigms, multiculturalism (as a subject position and discourse, as opposed to a set of policies) has become an enabling mechanism for the dominant echelons within society. Such an argument certainly deserves some critical analysis and I suggest that the wider impetus towards inclusion and tolerance offered by a self-recognized liberal multicultural society outweigh any problematic social or economic hierarchies. But notwithstanding the clear progressive advantages of cultural tolerance, diversity and acceptance, multiculturalism is not politically neutral (Manciel 2013: 384). The nexus of multiculturalism and neoliberalism is broad and complex, and is suited to analysis framed around class and socio-economic distinctions, notably the role played by 'urban elites' for whom the cultural conditions of neoliberalism, globalization and multiculturalism are inherently favourable.

The creation of these subjects occurs via two specific phenomena. Firstly the representation of the multicultural subject as the aspirational urban elite; and secondly the multicultural subject made legitimate through entrepreneurial activity, thus normalizing the processes of market capitalism and individualism as a means to compliance and security. Again, I am using single media examples

to demonstrate these two aspects of the multiculturalism-neoliberalism nexus, but I maintain that each exemplifies a familiar archetype. In the first example race is a commodity; in the second, the normalized valorization of the entrepreneurial self. Both of these elements partly contribute to a de-essentialisation of race where notions of identity become subject to “personal preference” (Goldberg 2007: 1713). The ability for minority subjects to deftly exploit race demonstrates a keen knowledge of the hierarchies operating in contemporary society and how they may rise through them (a trajectory that may be elusive to disaffected supporters of nationalist/populist political movements). However, as noted, the rhetorical transition that is occurring will not result in a more equal or peaceful society, but one where race exists primarily on the plane of visible representation and where the economization of everyday life begets a process of neo-assimilation.

Hanson, Dastyari and the ‘halal snackpack’

The re-emergence of the One Nation party in 2016 saw a return to the national limelight of the party’s founder and highest profile member Pauline Hanson after 15 years in the political wilderness. In the 1990s Hanson had gained a significant following and notoriety through voicing anti-Asian immigration rhetoric. In 2016, Hanson’s position remains largely unchanged except now her target is Muslim immigration rather than Asian. Hanson’s policies and persona make her both a figure of fun and a target of condemnation for the mainstream media. The days after the election, the Channel 7 news broadcast a joint interview with Hanson and Labour Party Senator Sam Dastyari. Here the Iranian-born and, by

his own admission, non-practicing, Muslim, proffered an ironic invitation for her to visit him at his Sydney base and share a “halal snack pack” (Bungard: 1). Hanson quickly rejected the offer, stating she “wasn’t interested. Not one bit”, her blunt refusal being a re-affirmation of her belief in both the danger and worthlessness of non-western cultural within everyday Australian society. The exchange between Hanson and Dastyari was taken up by the Australian media as evidence of Hanson’s inability to discriminate the nuances of multiculturalism: the differentiation between benign multiculturalism – of which the internationalization of food culture is central – and the threat posed to national and personal security and the national economy by terror groups. Hanson’s assumed belief that the former functions as an enabler of the latter was portrayed as the butt of a joke shared by the media and the informed audience.

This discussion of race may have attracted more media comment, but it is underpinned by the equally provocative issue of class, locality and demographic. Thus the ‘liberal urban elite’ is positioned in opposition to the populism/nationalism voiced by One Nation. In this context those supporters of multiculturalism have (discursively and politically) come to be associated with the political and economic status quo. This alignment refers only to particular minority group actors, but it is this group that, in Australia, was represented by Dastyari and his invitation to share ethnic cuisine. The exchange between Dastyari and Hanson thus represents the incorporation of multiculturalism into a particular classification of behaviour that advantages (and is advantaged by) neoliberal globalization. The application of such a narrative has a number of positive elements – the presumed final eradication of racist modernist

hierarchies being arguable the most significant – but any attempt to retreat from race or culture as something that underpins political or legal logic must be undertaken with care as not to reduce all difference and all forms of social or economic disadvantage to the level of individual capability.

“Why ban people like us?” – Omar Al Kassab on Q&A

The second example is a brief exchange that occurred on an episode of the ABC’s high profile weekly panel program *Q&A* on February 7, 2017. Here audience member Omar Al Kassab spoke against the moral and economic value of migrant travel bans, such as that ordered for the United States during the first weeks of the Trump administration¹ in the United States. Al Kassab, who was accompanied by his brother Saad, arrived in Australia as refugees from Syria where they had escaped the Assad regime in the wake of the Arab Spring in 2011. Since arrival the brothers have earned significant academic achievements (Omar studying business, Saad the dux of his high school and now a medical

¹ This refers to President Donald Trump signing the Presidential Executive Order 13769 (titled Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States) on January 27, 2017, seven days after his inauguration. The executive order placed new limits on the visa status of citizens from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Sudan and Yemen, even those currently residing in the US, and an indefinite visa ban on Syrian citizens (see The White House)). The order was introduced with immediate effect, causing disruption and uncertainty at various entry points. The order was announced to widespread condemnation including public protests, reaction from Trump’s political opponents and the international community. In addition a number of groups lodged legal claims against the executive order on the grounds that it breached the US Constitution. By the end of January a number of judges had ruled in favor of individuals caught without legal status because of the ban, a legal reaction that established an oppositional discourse between the White House and the judicial branch. As of February 2017, the White House has claimed to be re-drafting the executive order to avoid disrupting the maxims of the Constitution. (see Zanora 2017)

student) and Omar noted that he and his brother were - and would become - highly productive and worthwhile members of their new national community (see *Q&A 2017*). In response to panellist Helen Andrews claim that restrictions on immigration promotes national security, Omar Al Kassab posed the question: "why ban people like us?". Within the context of the *Q&A* episode the designated rationale for the presence of the Al Kassab brothers was to personalize and accentuate the value (and potential value) migrants bring to the nation state.

Dastyari and the Al Kassab brother occupy two different aspects of the post-multicultural framework. Dastyari personifies Goldberg's (2009) position that race has been subject to the taxonomies of liberal politics long enough for its descriptive/prescriptive elements to become unacceptable evidence of archaic colonial hierarchies and instead be re-articulated as personal choice (1713). As a perceived member of the urban elite, Dastyari is able to engage with his race as a commodity and in his exchange with Hanson, personal identity is exploited order to make a political point. Conversely, for the Al Kassab brothers race is, for now, foregrounded in their persona but they are active in constructing a counter-narrative to this archaic categorization by positioning themselves as entrepreneurial citizens. If the current global, neoliberal trajectory continues – and is not significantly disrupted by movements of popular nationalism – the Al Kassab brothers will achieve their objective. Like Dastyari, their economic selves will be more prominent than their race (Lentin 2014: 1270). The narrative pursued by both Dastyari and the Al Kassab brothers speaks to separate-but-intertwined aspects of the post-multiculturalism framework: the de-

essentialization (and commodification) of race; and the intensification of the migrant subject by the state in the interests of national security.

Dastyari, Omar, Saad and the logic of post-multiculturalism

Following Gozdecka et al (2014) the notion of post-multiculturalism is inherently paradoxical (p.58) as the influences of national security (underpinned by a cultural of racism originating in the political culture of colonialism and nationalism) inter-sects with the cultural values and pragmatic economics of globalization. The face-value paradox notwithstanding, the significant and obvious contradictions emerging from this intersection is generally resolved through the ideological mechanisms of neoliberalism (Larner 2000). Lentin (2014) illustrates this resolution by situating current discussions of race within the conventional 'left-right' political divide. With specific reference to the ascendancy of President Barack Obama, Lentin observes that traditional leftist viewed the US's first black president as a victory for the decades-long civil rights movement; whilst the right wing saw Obama's victory as evidence that race was not a barrier to success (1268). This model is also applicable to Sam Dastyari who holds agency over this race and can adopt or ignore his own ethnicity as appropriate to the given situation.

The rationale guiding neoliberalism as an economic philosophy is the affirmation of personal choice. But further to this - and more specifically connected to post-multiculturalism - neoliberalism represents a decades-long process of individualization and focus on the *productive self* as the principle unit of human

economy. This underpins an aspirational discourse that situates the new migrant into a framework with the mainstream neoliberal agenda. Notions of diversity are celebrated in the neoliberal ideology as long as there is no disruption to the market economy (Harvey 2007: 165). In this respect, ethnic and cultural diversity is most celebrated at the representational level where its visibility conveys the benign, affluent, multicultural society. When considering the situation of Muslim Australians, the state's interactions vary depending on individuals place in the economic and political order and in the way they adhere to either othered or assimilated forms of Islamic expression. For Sam Dastyari, the halal backpack allows him to express his benign multiculturalism in a way that advantages the inclusive liberal state, thus cementing his personal legitimacy as a post-multicultural subject, insofar as his affiliations are overt without being problematic.

Unsurprisingly, given the narrative of post-9/11 geo-politics, it is the Muslim subject that experiences the most intense scrutiny, either as the focus of analysis or of direct state power (Kabir 2007). The Muslim subject is represented in the media and elsewhere through a series of othering binaries: of cultural divides, clothing and appearance, social activities and adherence to religious versus secular modes of identification. For both Dastyari and the Al Kassab brothers, their process of identity construction (Dastyari as the urban multicultural elite; Al Kassab brothers as the productive citizens) functions in silent contrast to this othered image. Ostensibly the compliance Dastyari and the Al Kassab brothers demonstrate towards the benign and productive objectives can be framed solely in terms of neoliberalism. But operating in conjunction with neoliberalism's

broader elements is an additional series of features identified by Gozdecka as representing the 'post-race' and 'post-multicultural' environment. I argue that engagement of these elements that results in the generalized condition of neo-assimilation for migrant subjects in the west.

In defining the post-multicultural world, Gozdecka identifies five phenomena that contribute to a transitioning cultural-political dynamic. These elements occurs across a range of spheres, from cultural practice and everyday discourse to policy and law.

These are:

- i) the shift from ethnicity and culture towards religion;
 - ii) the emphasis on social cohesion and security;
 - iii) the emergence of new forms of racism;
 - iv) the relativisation of international and transnational human rights law;
- and
- v) an excessive focus on gender inequality within traditional minority cultures. (Gozdecka et al: 54-58)

Each of these elements is becoming increasingly common in the west. Ideological assumptions form the basis of western liberalism and underpin basic humanism from which the popular narrative of multiculturalism is formed; a process that is subverted into an othering logic that serves to marginalize Muslim subjects. Thus stereotypes and misconceptions concerning gender equality and freedom of expression become discourses of exclusion, "culturalized women are denied agency and seen as inferior subjects who need to be appropriately corrected and

in need of rescue” (Douzinas 2013, quoted in Gozdecka et al 2014: 54).

Furthermore the scrutiny on national security, operating in tandem with greater emphasis on citizenship serves to alter the rhetorical construction of multiculturalism. Where once, as Robert Maciel notes, multiculturalism was defined by the autonomy provided to minority subjects through the legal and cultural protections offered by the host (p. 384), the post-multicultural environment is defined much more as a coercive space and, with that, there is greater mainstream acceptance for the state to curtail cultural practice that does not conform to accepted notions of national cultural identity.

The ideological function of neoliberalism thus serve as a universal means to revolve cultural tensions. Dastyari, as a member of the political elite, is afforded the ability to exploit identity as a commodity. However others, such as the Al Kassab brothers use the universalism of neoliberalism as a means to become enculturated into the host state. In keeping with David Harvey’s maxim of neoliberal world as one framed around “the commodification of everything” (p.165), or as described by Wendy Brown (2005):

Entails the erosion of oppositional, political, moral or subjective claims located *outside* capitalist rationality yet inside liberal democratic society, that is, the erosion of institutions, venues, and values organized by non-market rationalities in democracies. (45)

The notion that cultural difference and historic oppression can be erased through the distancing ethos of a solely economic set of principles may be attractive to marginalized but aspirational individuals. Problems, successes, failings, all fall into the realm of personal responsibility, with entrepreneurialism

(read: accomplishment within the accepted neoliberal framework) viewed as a panacea to all social, political and economic ills.

The foregrounding/erosion of race, and the concept of neo-assimilation

In the case of both Sam Dastyari's jovial invitation to Pauline Hanson and the Al Kassab brothers earnest rhetorical question to the Australian public, the migrant subject was re-assuring the interlocker that they posed no threat to mainstream culture. I suggest these individuals represent the particular moment in the narrative of Australian multiculturalism, where the co-existent streams of neoliberalism and post-9/11 securitization meet.

The cultural shifts that accompany neoliberalism over the past four decades – from the branding of nation states, to the normalization of highly mobile trans-national workforces, to the production and consumption of global media – all operate as by-products of the global neoliberal environment whilst also foregrounding race in a manner that identifies but de-politicizes the subject (Ong 1999: 3). Meanwhile the rolling trajectory of identity politics, from which the material policies of multiculturalism was born, has fostered a strong cultural antagonism towards the categorization of race that typified colonial hierarchies. The resulting culture is one where race has been re-imagined as “private preference” (Goldberg 1713) in a bid to promote equality in the age of secularism and neoliberalism:

Given the regime of equality before the law or of government protected rights, the state can no longer be seen to engage in or license racially discriminatory acts

with respect to its own citizens or legitimate residents. To do so would call into question the grounds of its legitimacy as the defender of both freedom and equality. (1713)

But if this position stops the state's capability for making overtly racist policy there is a subsequent disavowing of collective voices, as the individualisation of all actions is the norm. Thus hate crimes, racial discrimination perpetrated by private citizens or even the grievances of minority or indigenous peoples come to be articulated in terms of individual rather than cultural or systemic responses. The neoliberal environment has thus produced a punitive turn as the logic of individual responsibility becomes intensified in processes of law and incarceration. This has resulted in a strong anti-racism culture within both the legal system and the media. But one where the blame is levelled at individuals rather than systemic cultural factors. At the same moment, individuals from minority communities are "invited to police their own legitimacy by actively demonstrating that they are no burden on a public that, depending on the national context, has been unsettled, diluted or eviscerated" (Lentin and Titley: 163). This de-politicisation of representation serves as a 'double win' for a dominant culture that reaps the benefits of governing a diverse, colourful and benign society while avoiding the pitfall of accommodating the political and economic interests of disparate communities. Sara Ahmed describes this phenomenon as the "anti-performativity of multiculturalism" (p. 3) insofar as its titular definition does not match its objectives or outcomes.

Alongside the increased intensity on individuals of the neoliberal project and the impacts of multicultural policies and identity politics on the everyday narrative

of race, the third element in the post-multiculturalism nexus in the rise of the security culture (Forman 2009; Pugliese 2013). I maintain these elements produce compliant subjects, willing and able to simultaneously demonstrate the cultural contribution made by their community and the economic and political supremacy of the host nation. I describe this phenomenon as 'neo-assimilation' and suggest it is representative of the ideal of diversity devoid of politics. Being born of neoliberalism, neo-assimilation demands an active subject. As Goldberg and Lentin & Titley observe, under neoliberalism institutional racism becomes difficult to identify even as social and economic indicators of poverty rates, socio-economics, employment and incarceration show widening gaps drawn along racial lines. In this political climate the state cannot discriminate against (or for) particular communities. Furthermore but there can be hostility towards such action by the communities themselves as migrant communities build an individualizing narrative around both achievement and disadvantage and situate any resulting condition as a product of one's own endeavours.

The aspirational discourse that forms the visible, attractive imaginary of neoliberalism and its association with multiculturalism, may serve to demonstrate the appeal of liberal western states. But assimilation is intensified via the systems of classification, bureaucratization and observation that have become typical of the contemporary neoliberal state. These various forces, impacting on the subject via numerous directions, engender a process of "responsibilization" (Lentin and Titley: 176) on the individual, the expression of the self-regulating subject that is central to the psychological and philosophical dimensions of neoliberalism. For the migrant subject, enculturated into a

generalized state of subservience towards the host state, this abiding willingness to be assimilated becomes intensified by the politics and expectations surrounding multiculturalism. The celebration of benign diversity that is so much a part of the way multicultural liberal states are branded represents a form of governmentality insofar as it is demarcated in positive or negative terms. Whilst the state provides the institutional and cultural platforms by which diversity may flourish, its performance and representation is the responsibility of the migrant subject. As Lentin & Titley rhetorically pose, “How can there be racism when the official commitment to diversity is so manifest and so mediated?” (p.176). In turn migrants are obliged to promote the systems and ideals that helped create this state without racism (Safi and Code 2014).

The narrative of multiculturalism is, at its core, a system of management designed to benefit the existing elite political and economic order. For home populations multiculturalism is the branded veneer of the liberal, globalized nation state, its logic serves as a psychological salve to a variety of contemporary afflictions: from colonial guilt to the need for urban authenticity to the provision of a compliant but inexpensive workforce. The notion of diversity can be sold to minority populations as part of the narrative of inclusion. But there are perimeters to the discourse available to these communities, and in defining these perimeters – whether this constitutes media representation or access to state institutions – the state assimilates disparate and diverse communities into a particular set of economic, political and cultural objectives.

Conclusions

This analysis examines the contemporary Australian moment via the convergence of multiculturalism and neoliberalism. From the mid-twentieth century onward, multiculturalism has become an empty signifier: a political and cultural set of values capable of being incorporated into a range of dominant ideologies or governance systems. Over the same time period neoliberalism as an economic theory has morphed into free-market agendas carried by many nation states and, furthermore, into a broader cultural ethos that guides the lives of millions of people around the world. As Wendy Larner observes in her discussion of Stuart Hall, the deployment of neoliberalism in the pragmatic politics of the 'New Right' involved the constitutive elements engaged in a constant balancing act between various economic and social tensions. These elements include the macro and microeconomics of the free market and the individualisation of employment and social policy governance, combined with the "more traditional conservative ideology based on family and nation" (Larner 2000:10). The third concurrent theme running through the Australian agenda has been the intensified rhetoric of citizenship incorporated in the logic of security and defence.

Stripped to its base logic, multiculturalism constitutes the right to cultural inclusion that is protected by the host state (Maciel 2014: 383). Citizenship on the other hand, is rendered from an ethos of assimilation and the objective of forming a singular and uniting national character. Over the past two decades this contradiction has been gradually resolved via the prevailing logic of neoliberalism. As the constitutive element of multiculturalism, race as a signifier

of identity has been simultaneously promoted and de-politicized through the mechanisms of neoliberalism and globalisation. In the contemporary, competitive and trans-national environment, representations of race are foregrounded as nation states seek to brand themselves as tolerant, authentic and open to global entrepreneurialism. But conversely, as a taxonomical tool and technology of population management, the role of race has been radically diminished (Goldberg 2008: 1713), a process that lays the foundations for neo-assimilation.

Unlike the notion of assimilation born out of a colonial desire for a homogeneous culture, neo-assimilation (produced by multiculturalism) provides a celebratory platform for the representation of diversity. But informed by the prevailing agendas, this depiction of diversity must only represent the surface of cultural inclusion: the values and beliefs underpinning society must be uniform. As exemplars, both Sam Dastyari and the Al Kassab brothers represent the ideal neoliberal subject in the post-multicultural age. Dastyari can playfully exploit the cultural veneer for political gains; the brothers represent the individualization typical of the neoliberal/post-multicultural period and actively opt into the universal economization of the self as a means to negate connotations of their heritage.

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