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Racism, the media... *and alternative (sonic) culture*

Abstract

This essay develops Titley's discussion of racism and the media through a concerted engagement with popular culture, and specifically with sound and YouTube video culture. Expanding Titley's notion of 'debatability', it asks what alternatives to racism are held in popular culture, and in a time of nationalist, racist and authoritarian assertion, why the identification of such alternatives might matter for a leftist anti-racist project.

Keywords

racism, media, YouTube, sound, cultural studies, popular culture

Main Text

Gavan's Titley's *Racism and the Media* is a wide ranging and authoritative account of racism *and* the media. Unlike texts which discuss racism as an aspect of the media or accounts that engage with media as a conduit for preestablished racism, this text places equal weight on both. For Titley, racism cannot be reduced to a study of the media just as the media cannot be condensed to an aspect of racism. To this end, Titley develops an approach in which racism, society and the media are held in dynamic relation, an approach familiar to cultural studies.

Within *Racism and the Media* readers will find capacious analytic frameworks, literatures, historicizations, theorisations and cases with which to think through debates on representation, social movements, hate speech, free speech and anti-racist digital culture. The book's dual attention to racism *and* the media, means that those well versed in the study of racism but struggling to keep up with the mediated rise of nationalism will find answers to their inquiries. Equally those well-grounded in media theory but uncertain about how that relates to transforming social relations and racial hierarchies will find a welcome dialogic partner.

The book will then grip readers in different ways, and to my mind Chapter Four on the far right and networked media environments is a particularly instructive. In that chapter, Titley demonstrates how the contemporary far right (which include such diverse actors as Breitbart, Donald Trump, EDL and Golden Dawn) are not spectacular manifestations but rather exacerbations of already existing racist pathologies. They exist on, and intensify, the terrains of pre-established biological, cultural, phenotypical, colonial and xenophobic racisms. As Valluvan also shows, far right, authoritarian and nationalist actors grow from the ideological fabrics of everyday political culture, not in some imaginary poisonous vacuum (2019).

Through the networked media environment, the fascistic and racist ideas of these various actors spread. As they spread, the networked media environment's tendency to decontextualization and continual reinterpretation means bits of digital debris get scattered about. Some of these are 'racial debris' – fragments of digital material left behind for racist reconstruction. Recompiled in local contexts they transmit new meanings for new audiences; meanings that are connected trans-locally into general, if incongruent, ideologies of racial supremacy, outsider threat and ethnocentric protectionism.

Racial debris on the ‘refugee crisis’ is then pieced together in Greece to confirm anti-Turkish and anti-Muslim sentiments and the Greek civilizational myth, and is then intensified by far-right movements like Golden Dawn. The same fragments also coalesce in the US to substantiate anti-Mexican racism and US melancholia (Make America Great Again) which are intensified by Donald Trump and Breitbart to raise the demand for a border wall. Connected trans-locally both endorse ideologies of racial hierarchy, white supremacy, and the Manichean logic of Occident and Orient(s).

Titley leans on a social movement framework to make these points, but importantly, and unlike his some of his political sociology interlocutors, he not arguing that we consider the interplay between racism and the media in terms of already established far right actors finding political opportunity in a networked media environment. Rather, we should take stock of the ways in which various actors and their ideologies gain their materiality through the networked media environment. The ideological and material spread of the contemporary far-right are not pre-constituted and then enabled by the media but are assembled with it.

“This media ecology must now be seen as an enhanced political structure for the transnational far-right, one that is connected to and motivated by movements, but which, through the scavenging and laundering of digital debris in and across platforms and discursive spaces, must be approached as integrated and influential within a ‘hybrid media system’ in ways that both transcend and evade movement logics and practices (Titley 2019, p.133).”

The original concept that ties this and other analyses together in the book is ‘debatability’. Debatability is the idea that the dynamic relation between racism and networked media environments produces conjecture and contestation as a presiding condition. That conjecture and contestation meshes with racism’s scavenger ideology furthering its reach and intensifying its claims. Racism has a productive affinity with the unfixed, unmoored spread of contemporary media.

The digital circulation of the Jihadi John (Mohammed Emwazi) beheading videos show precisely that (James 2016). Created as propaganda by ISIL in their mediated campaign against US, Israel and the UK, and coming to prominence in 2014, those videos showed the execution of Western journalists and aid-workers. They laid down racial debris for the ideology of Manichean difference pursued by ISIL in its war against the West. That racial debris also circulated in the UK where the videos played into fears of the barbaric Muslim Other abroad, on the frontier, and within (Emwazi was a British student), culminating in the British government’s successful prosecution of a bombing campaign in Syria (against the trend of public opinion). The racial ideologies of ISIL and the British government while seemingly opposed were then also trans-locally connected.

In detailing the affinity between digital media and racism, Titley adopts an anti-racist stance – identifying racism to unmake its hold on social and political life. But whereas many texts in the field stop there – a leftist critique of racism – Titley extends this commitment by exploring anti-racist assemblages in the same networked media environments. Titley is not arguing for a level playing field here, one in which racism and anti-racism are evenly assembled with the media. The overriding message of the book is that ‘debatability’ facilitates racism. He is, however, avoiding the downward vortex beloved of race and Marxian pessimists by noting that there are contradictions. Racial capitalism is dominant, but it cannot be total.

Through a closer focus on popular culture we can take these observations further. Every year at the University of Sussex I teach Stuart Hall on popular culture to media students. Our approach to media at Sussex is broadly speaking a cultural studies one. In that discussion I introduce a famous quote, in which Hall explains why he gives a damn about popular culture, of which the media is part.

“Popular culture is one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is also the stake to be won or lost in the struggle. It is the arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured. It is not a sphere where socialism, a socialist culture – already fully formed – might simply be ‘expressed’. But it is one of the places where socialism might be constituted. That is why ‘popular culture’ matters. Otherwise, to tell you the truth, I don’t give a damn about it” (Hall 1981, p. 239)

Here, Hall is explaining that in popular culture (and therefore the media too) we should expect to find ambivalence and conjecture – ‘debatability’ in Titley’s terms – and that is the reason to study it. Hegemony vies with nascent ‘socialism’ – ‘social justice’ for the New Left, or ‘alternatives’ to domination for Raymond Williams (1977). Racism is constituted with its alternatives, not as a distinct movement.

To clarify this approach to debatability, and its utility, I want to explore two examples, one a re-appraisal of the Alan Kurdi case that Titley develops, and another a discussion of grime YouTube music videos, which have interested me for some time (James 2015, Forthcoming 2020). These examples allow us to engage with the different ways in which racist and alternative assemblages co-exist, and to consider what the latter might entail for leftist anti-racist work.

As Titley explains, Alan Kurdi was a three-year-old boy who died at sea, leaving Bodrum, Turkey for Kos in Greece in 2015. Like too many others, Kurdi would have been forgotten by Fortress Europe, had his lifeless frame not been photographed, and those images distributed through the networked media environment. Transformed into digital debris, and detached from Kurdi’s own story, the images then took on their own lives. They became ‘debatable’. One media life coalesced around the various libertarian and race debates that surrounded the secondary representation of those images in the Charlie Hebdo cartoon, in which the dead boy was imagined in his future life as an ‘ass groper’ – a reference to the supposed tendency of Muslim men to be sexual terrorists. Titley explores that life comprehensively in Chapter One of his book. But the image had at least one other life. In that life, the image of the policeman carrying Kurdi’s insensible frame became part of a mediated assemblage that led hundreds of people to leave their jobs across Europe and beyond, and to head for the Greek Islands of Lesbos, Samos and Chios to care for people they didn’t know (James 2019).

This was not a straightforwardly humanist impulse, because it also called on scripts of patriarchal protection (the policeman) and therefore too on wider normative registers of welfarism and beneficent colonialism (the saviour syndrome). Kurdi’s image was further contextualised in the racialised narratives of European grievability (Butler 2004). He was a light skinned Syrian boy and his death was publicly mourned in ways not available to black adult male refugees also arriving at the shores of the Mediterranean at the same time.

But at the same time, the image became part of an assemblage which included caring people travelling to the Greek islands. They moved geographically but also politically across the dominant Manichean designations of ‘them’ and ‘us’ (established locally and trans-locally) in which the refugees were framed. These people did not simply pick up their mobile phones and send out a tweet, but took time off work, found alternative arrangements for their children and pets, broke from the tramlines of routine, and flew to an unfamiliar place to care for people they had been otherwise told were less grievable than them.

These were not antiracist actors in any defined political sense, and it was not an anti-racist movement. Collected with a digital image, it was nonetheless an alternative humanist assemblage that moved across the racist and Manichean axes on which the refugee crisis was overwhelmingly set. While certainly not free from paternalistic and colonial beneficence, the digital materialisation of care transcended those boundaries too. In the context in which hostility is the norm, and racialised aggression central to political craft, those humanisms and mutualisms are important resources for anti-racist work.

If the Alan Kurdi images reveal the complex interplays of racism with alternative humanisms, an analysis of grime YouTube music videos offers insight into how alternative humanisms vie with normative scripts. Here then, we are moving away from the tendency to see grime YouTube music videos as anti-racist resistance – as a linear push back against the racist state – as we are also rejecting their similarly stereotypical characterisation as social malaise. Rather, through attention to popular culture we are seeking to understanding how grime YouTube music videos are debatable – how they are assembled with alternatives to racial capitalism *and* crosscut by normative culture. (In doing this we cannot avoid the sonic... and we should note that if the visual/symbolic has a particular affinity to racism, and media studies is interested in alternatives to racism, then sonics and phonics might receive from more routine attention).

Grime YouTube music videos are a broad genre. They encompass the high production value of Skepta’s *Shutdown* and the wider DIY feel of the scene (Charles 2018a, b; White 2017a, b). There isn’t the space to develop all these specifics, but some general points can be made. Most obviously, these videos extend from a longer history of black diasporic and working-class sound culture in Britain; a history central to the ways in which Britain relates to itself. In a post-war time frame dominated by nationalist, capitalist and racist assertion, black popular culture and working-class culture has become disruptively core to the story of Britain.

Grime YouTube music videos then provide alterative registers to Britain’s dominant myths, but that claim is ‘debatable’ too because they do not exist outside the various frameworks of danger and fetishization that have long been associated with black and working-class popular culture. They offer alternatives to normative scripts but are also produced and interpolated through them. Such that while the agonist sonics of grime YouTube’s music videos might disrupt racial order by resonating with the multi-ethnic British city, those same videos deploy normative scripts to make black and working-class performance intelligible. Indeed, it is specifically through YouTube video images that such racial and class designations are tightened around the bodies of performers. The visual has a particular affinity to racism, still.

So again, we have the ‘debatability’ of popular media culture in which registers of alternative humanisms exist with racial hierarchy. These stories are well enough told. But paying closer

attention still to the interplay of sound, the visual and the digital in grime YouTube music videos, we also find less discussed registers for anti-racist work.

The story of grime YouTube music videos can also be told as a shift from the heavyweight sonics of sound systems and raves, to a sonics of mobility, weightlessness and speed (mobile communications, networked media and digital information). In this newer assemblage, treble supplants bass. The lightweight hardware of our hypermobile media environment entails lightweight audio reproduction technology, which entails treble (Marshall 2014). In this assemblage, the bass frequency range said by Linton Kwesi Johnson to channel 'the moving, hurting black story', is supplanted by that which has had historical affinity with capitalist, and therefore also white, mobility (Johnson 1980). But 'the moving, hurting black story' does not end here, because black diasporic culture never resonated through one frequency alone, no human culture does. W.E.B. Du Bois, Frederick Douglass, and Abbey Lincoln all attest to this fact in the early to mid 20th Century... long before the tiny speakers of mobile phones are filling our cities.

To cut a long story very short, as treble supplants bass and lightweight mobility dispenses with heavyweight technologies, the vocal of the grime MC and comes to the fore. The treble range of the human voice is assembled with the mobile media networks of grime YouTube music videos. That voice returns a humanism momentarily absent in the more machinic music of jungle and UK garage (live MCs notwithstanding). At a time of racist assertion, neoliberal marginalisation, and decontextualized trans-local media flows, the human-voice-as-instrument then powerfully conveys the agonism and joy of the 21st Century multi-ethnic city through black diasporic form. When the work of racism is the work of dehumanisation, the return of that voice is then antiphonic. Its alternative register that cuts across the tightening visual racisms of the same videos.

This is all debatable. It all pertains to racism *and* the media, and it is through popular culture that we get to the grain of such workings, both in terms of the complex ways in which racism and the media are assembled with the networked media environment, and in terms of the various ways in which alternatives to racism flow sonically, visually and digitally through those same constellations. In our time of nationalist, racist and authoritarian assertion, those not-fully-formed alternatives matter. They matter because they exist, because they can give us hope, and beyond that too because they offer textures amenable to leftist anti-racist cultural projects.

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