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Free Speech as Shibboleth: on the Danish Cartoons

By Benedict Seymour

How did the racist provocation of Muslims turn into a debate about free speech? If the discourse of freedom acts as a mechanism of exclusion and both classical bourgeois rights and their crisis-ridden multicultural corrective reproduce fundamental inequalities, should we assert our right to free speech, or listen instead for determined voices in the growing political silence?, asks Benedict Seymour

The spectacular controversy over the Danish cartoons, which came to a head in January of this year before rapidly dissipating, neatly summed up the meta-racist dialectic of multiculturalism.

The right-wing *Jyllands-Posten* newspaper kicked things off with a direct, but strikingly unremarked, racist provocation. Although very few liberal commentators seemed capable of recognising this for what it was, preferring to pass immediately to the heroic position of defenders of free speech, tolerance, etc., the basic racism of the cartoons is the primary issue. The cartoons cannot be treated as a free floating instance of 'free speech' but should be situated squarely in the context of the ongoing and intensifying repression of Muslims in Denmark and other European states. The notion that *Jyllands-Posten's* only offence was to trample over religious sensitivities is also misleading. Not only was the representation of the prophet Muhammad in the cartoons per se calculated to provoke (many if not all Muslims indeed consider pictorial representation of Muhammad blasphemous), but the direct reference to Islam as a source of terrorism – without any simultaneous critique of Christianity or capitalist imperialism – was simply racist. In this respect the cartoons' ideological effect consists both in what they put in – the prophet, the bomb in his turban, etc. – and what they left out: any indictment of the real sources of terror in today's militarised multiculturalism.

One might object, as some of the cartoons' authors have, that religion is not the same as race, and that criticism of religion is not racism. This is true, in the abstract, but in the concrete conjuncture in which Islam is both a target of the West and a (dubious) refuge of the working class it is more than disingenuous to pretend the playing field for religious criticism is level. Formally neutral though the space of representation might seem, it is in fact never equal, since context and content overdetermine form. We have mentioned the context, what about the content? The chain of 'different' but ostensibly equally valid perspectives given in the 12 cartoons – from a semi-abstract 'modernist' image of Muhammad with a stylised sickle face and starry eye to an apparently sympathetic image of a young 2nd generation Danish Muslim boy who derides *Jyllands-Posten's* journalists as reactionary etc. – is overdetermined by the instances of direct provocation: the prophet with a bomb in his turban, the scimitar wielding Muhammad, etc. In fact, the more anodyne or auto-critical images act as an alibi for the ideological pay load. Between the lines – the true level of ideology's operations – the statement is clear. This kind of 'diversity' of perspectives is already close to the macro-logic of multiculturalism which hides the truth of *inequality* behind united colours of *cultural difference*.

Jyllands-Posten's editor Flemming Rose is not himself a proponent of multiculturalist diversity, however, as his comments to *The Washington Post* on 19 February show. His defence of a (forced) inclusion through the imposition of pseudo-equality should remind us of similar acts of coerced initiation performed in the camaraderie of Abu Ghraib:

The cartoonists treated Islam the same way they treat Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism and other religions. And by treating Muslims in Denmark as equals they made a point: We are integrating you into the Danish tradition of satire because you are part of our society, not strangers. The cartoons are including, rather than excluding, Muslims.

But to return to our argument, although their content was already a racist provocation, the cartoons themselves were only the raw material for the meta-racist multicultural position in which the particular status of Muslims in relation to a fundamentalist fringe demands not equal treatment, but rather renewed and intensified acts of discrimination. Rather than interrogating *Jyllands-Posten's* attempt to present the initial affront as a free speech issue, itself a way of claiming victim status (we are suffering from self-censorship! Muslims have no right to special treatment!), liberal responses ignored the asymmetrical economic position of whites and Muslims in Danish society and focused on the (stage managed) violence of the Muslim response to the cartoons. Racist provocation was displaced by a fascinated disgust for the 'extremist' protests and calls for yet another inquest into the 'problem' of Muslim (dis-)integration into democratic societies. The focus of liberal commentators and police became (some) Muslims' reaction to the cartoons, rather than the cartoons' content itself. Earnest homilies on the tensions between freedom and faith, or rousing statements about the need for a consistent application of equal rights (with some rights reserved) covered over the racial insult that began the affair. Through indifference to the real asymmetry between different instances of 'free speech', the liberal centre accomplished what the right on their own could not.

By a logic of retroactive inculpation, Muslims became de facto, and sometimes de jure, responsible for the whole debacle. In kicking back against their aggressors they were found to confirm the cartoon's initial diagnosis of Islam as predisposed to violence and intolerance, incapable of respecting the multicultural virtues of pluralism, democracy and respect. The racist diagnosis implicit in individual cartoons in the series (Islam is violent, terroristic), disavowed through their formal multiplicity of perspectives (not all Muslims are violent and terroristic), returns, at a higher more insidious and effective level in the liberal decision on the affair's outcome (some Muslims do not understand or indeed actively oppose liberal freedom, we need to redouble our efforts to help them integrate).

This meta-racist dialectic not only serves to blame the initial victims for their victimisation, but provides the conditions for a reassessment of the terms of all Muslims' 'inclusion' as citizens. (See Matthew Hyland's 'Proud Scum', p.44) While most European governments condemned the cartoons as regrettable and tactless, expressing sympathy with Muslims as a vulnerable group in society, and in some cases opposed the reprinting of the cartoons in their press (Britain's media and politicians showed exquisite sensitivity on this point, given their support for the ongoing slaughter of Muslims in Iraq), they nevertheless used the incident to reopen discussion on the 'problem' of cultural incompatibility and the need to integrate the non- or dis-integrated. The racism of false equivalence articulated by *Jyllands-Posten* thus returns as a racism of differential treatment once it has been processed by multiculturalism's pragmatic approach to rights. Precisely because we are not all in reality equal, Muslims deserve special treatment. Multicultural racism thus accepts some of the assumptions of the right-wing version, but in the mode of redress and compensation accepts the need for a particularised response to specific 'problems'. The problem with both the classic bourgeois notion of equality and the multiculturalist supposition of cultural difference is that neither challenges the underlying economic conditions of these propositions. Where the right acts as though equality exists in principle and must now be imposed in practice, the liberal centre prematurely dispenses with the illusion of equality and invokes the need for special treatment, more refined interventions and intensified scrutiny.

In the UK, *The Guardian* was swift to call for an appropriate and considered response to the Muslim protests which would not simply fall back on 'Britain's strong tradition of tolerance'. No dupes of formal equality, they advocated not only the immediate limitation of Muslim protestors' free speech which had passed into a 'hateful' state of provocation, but also the intensified monitoring of UK communities to weed out the rotten apples. ('Muslim protests - Threats that must be countered', Leader, *The Guardian*, 6 February, 2006). We can't just sit around while a few extremists terrorise people by dressing as suicide bombers, went the argument, we have to act pre-emptively. Again.

Muslim communities should not be censured en masse, of course, we know that only a hardline minority are responsible for these outrages. Rather we must pay them EVEN CLOSER ATTENTION to make sure we can isolate the fanatics. *The Guardian* had no doubts about the limits to Muslim protestors' freedom of speech, or indeed of their other liberties as (presumptive non-)citizens. Unlike Jyllands-Posten's carefully qualified act of intimidation, *The Guardian* argued that the protestors' open threats of violence should be punished with arrest and if necessary imprisonment. Having invoked 14th century legislation to back this up, it concluded by affirming the equality of Muslim fanatics and white racists before the law. In the final invocation of the need to defend our 'tolerant way of life', there is a striking conjunction of an exaggerated (fundamentalist?) resort to the authority of the past, an indifference to the immediate context for protest, and the reassertion of the very abstract equivalence – colour and class blind – which multiculturalism was supposed to compensate for. Such statements suggest that multiculturalism's efforts to correct the de facto inadequacy of capitalism's formal freedoms with new formal inequalities (such as positive discrimination) has reached a terminal impasse. We will return to this in a moment.

Like the egalitarian coexistence of multiple particular viewpoints supposedly offered by the cartoons themselves, the open series of different ways of life offered by multicultural societies at the formal level is overdetermined by one particular content (liberal democratic capitalism), rendering this multiplicity ultimately monological. The supposed universality of freedom then functions not only as the particular property of those that advance the interests of a specific social class, but as the mechanism by which stratification itself is (re)produced. Again, wasn't this the condition which multiculturalism was created to overcome?

While capitalism is indeed, at one level, the 'Eden of the rights of man' – liberty, equality, property – this (political, contractual) equality is the form of appearance of (economic, social) inequality. Marx added to the liberal capitalist chain of universal rights the ugly, all too material supplementary term 'Bentham', i.e. the father of utilitarianism and ideologue of self-interested economic reason. Bentham is the item that overdetermines all the others. We should understand multiculturalism as an attempt to add yet another supplement to this bad supplement. Rather than taking on capitalism's constitutive economic differential whereby, however free and equal the act of exchange, those with the capital to buy labour-power have an inherent advantage over those with only their labour-power to sell, the ultimately conservative logic of multiculturalism has been to add another level of qualifying inequalities to the basic capitalist freedoms. Affirmative action, preferential treatment in allocation of certain resources, etc., in the guise of correcting the economic disparities of the system not only create new divisions and internecine rivalry in the working class 'beneficiaries' of the multicultural supplement, they effectively jam the potential for finding common cause with other culturally-defined particular identities, and allows capital to suppress the fundamental class antagonism at the origin of this cultural conflict.

Instead of seeing fundamentalism as excluded from and radically opposed to multiculturalism, then, it is more correct to view it as its symptom or product. This is apparent in the eagerness with which reactionary Muslim clerics fanned the controversy in this case, seizing on the issue and turning it into another opportunity to articulate opposition to western imperialism in cultural rather than economic terms – the basic depoliticising move of fundamentalism and multiculturalism alike. The priority of the economic over the political, or rather of the already political character of capitalism's economic arrangements, is effaced by multiculturalism's presentation of class as one form of difference among others rather than the overdetermining element in the series race, sex, class. While the media focused on the cartoons affair, the contemporary struggles of Muslim workers in Iran against the theocratic state's imposition of neoliberal reforms passed almost unmentioned. The possibility of a universalising political articulation of economic divisions – an exercise of freedom which as Å½iÅ¾ek puts it would politicise the economic sphere – is what multiculturalism and fundamentalism alike exist to prevent.

So what should the response to the cartoons have been? How are we to confront racist (free) speech acts? In a situation where the state seems to be shifting its emphasis from the multiculturalist 'respect for cultural diversity' (however cosmetic) to a programme for increased security through the imposition of 'shared values', giving the state new powers in the name of anti-racism seems short sighted. It would be more useful to dedicate our energy to finding new ways to talk to each other outside the framework of the state than attempt to bolster its powers of discriminatory action. The *Jyllands-Posten*'s provocations would have had little impact if Muslim 'community leaders' had not demanded that the state 'do something about them', an example of the circular and mutually-empowering dialogue between these ostensible antagonists.

Rather than getting involved in the rush to demand new restrictions, should we instead assert our right to do and say nothing? A right to remain silent, or, a la Melville's *Bartleby*, to enunciate only our refusal of the pseudo-options on offer? 'I would prefer not to' (join in the debate on free speech). But this does not mean simply remaining silent. In response to the question, 'free speech or anti-racism?', we have to first withdraw and point to the unspoken racism of the debate, the inherent injustice concealed and effectuated by both the classic bourgeois discourse of rights and the multiculturalist meta-language which tries to drown out the ground bass of economic inequality under the prattle of fetishised difference. Above all, we should listen out for others who, like us, have problems pronouncing the liberal shibboleth of freedom. While the fundamentalist clerics and other media manipulators were working on their publicity materials to create the outrage the right had anticipated, the non-citizens in the French banlieue were rioting against... what? These free and rightless products of the post-Fordist enclosures, though native Francophones, speak no language the political class can understand. Though they may have failed to articulate demands, or a politics in the terms recognised by the statist and social democratic left, they at least express the true autism of the situation. Their empty 'No' perhaps opens the space for a programmatic response to capitalism's intrinsic racism in a way that speech codes and affirmative action today cannot. We have reached a point where in antinomic counterpoint to the discourse of particularised rights, a vast global surplus population, 'supernumerary' in respect of state and state-constituted humanity, is starting to speak a potentially more universal language of its own.

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