The white fear factor

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The White Fear Factor

When can we speak of “white fear” and when, if at all, can this term be used to illuminate the active forms of racism that are alive today? And how do we link this particular postcolonial legacy to the amorphous concept of terror that leeches into our contemporary fears of each other?

In 2000 I was visiting Johannesburg, famous as the crime capital of the world, and I saw a Stop sign under which someone had stencilled Being Afraid. The effect was electrifying: in a city just liberated from one of the most brutally enforced regimes of segregation the world has ever known; in a forest of security fences, guard dog signs and barbed wire, the sign spoke of the political choices open to New South African citizens faced with the task of learning to live together. In this context of apartheid and the struggle to end it, the links between fear and terror do not require spelling out.

In Britain we are not living in a comparable situation. The New Labour government signed us up to fight a war on terror itself, exploiting all manner of fears including the unspecified fear of random attack by terrorists bent on destroying our collective, ‘British,’ way of life. The word terror has become shorthand for Islamic fundamentalism, Al-Qaida, suicide bombers, burkas, uranium enrichment, and other threats emanating from the Islamic-majority world. The anti-war declaration ‘We are not
afraid’ represented a refusal to behave like sheep, a recognition that militarisation and war itself involves the manipulation of information as well as the deployment of armed forces. Post July 2005, the same slogan was more likely to be directed at the would-be bombers themselves, mingling patriotism (the Blitz spirit) with defiant pride in London’s cosmopolitan reality. Today, fear and terror are still clearly linked within a discourse of securitization, but there is a danger that these terms have become increasingly disconnected from the legacies of colonial war that have shaped global geo-politics up to this point. The solipsism that locates fear and terror in the breasts of the majority population threatens to obscure the effect of the racism-as-usual that continues to poison social and political life. The phenomenon of white fear helps to identify a connection between these two currents: the reaction to perceived and imagined threats coming from outside the country, and the undertow of white supremacism that determines a predictable response to all manner of insecurity.

Anthrax Culture

As Zygmunt Bauman suggests, what we are afraid of tells us more about the epoch in which we live rather than the substance of the fear itself. In an essay entitled ‘A Catalogue of Postmodern Fears’ he writes that: ‘Each era of history had its own fears which set it apart from other epochs; or, rather, each gave the fears known to all epochs names of its creation’ (Bauman 105-6). But the threats
themselves seem to have been always, stubbornly, the same. Summarising his citation of Freud, we might agree that the fears stem from three directions: from the decay of our own bodies, from the underlying chaos of external world, and from other human beings. And behind each of these, Bauman continues, is the mother of all threats, death itself. This is why to be human means also to experience fear.

Here I will speak about patterns of racism in the UK, but our insights and analytical terms are only sharpened by reference to other places to which we are connected, especially through shared experience of fear. Ghassan Hage, writing from Australia in 2002-3, suggests that we name the political culture that emerges out of the general al-Qaida induced climate of fear as anthrax-culture. (It) prevails when a generalised culture of ‘threat’ permeates the whole society. The national interior becomes subverted; the citizens begin to perceive everything and everywhere as a threat, as a border; a supposed Islamic threat on the border becomes an Islamic threat everywhere. Every breath of fresh air becomes imagined as a line behind which the enemy (always ready to infiltrate the nation) lurks (Hage 45-6).

In the US, where for months after the September 11th attacks the country was subjected to a baffling succession of colour coded alerts, local authorities busied themselves devising new emergency
measures intended to secure residents, visitors and assets from the threat of terrorist actions. In the jurisdiction where I was living, each household received a personal letter from the mayor assuring us of their efforts, and exhorting us to develop our own plans for ‘preparedness’, a word I had not encountered before although its meaning was clear. Few would argue that this is the rational response to imminent danger, calling for a state of mind as well as a series of practical measures that anticipate disaster. Given what has already happened, people need to know what might happen in the future. But in anthrax-culture, or what might be now called suicide-bomb culture, asking people to live in a state of perpetual alert has costs: it corrodes the sense of a good life, increases suspicion and distrust among citizens, and encourages them to look unquestioningly to the military for protection at home and abroad.

Corey Robin suggests that fears become political when they emanate from society or have consequences for society (Robin 2004, 2). He uses the term ‘political idea’ to explore how fear becomes political when it refers to a collectively held emotion expressed in response to the threatened well-being of a particular group, especially where that emotion is readily mobilised by political forces. Our priority now as we struggle with the consequences of living in suicide-bomb culture, is that we analyse the source of our current fears and devise political strategies to deal with them.

Border Politics
I want to take two stories as a way of exploring this proposition. The first involves the siting of a proposed asylum dispersal centre in a hotel in Sittingbourne, Kent, in January 2003. According to media reports the reaction to the proposal was immediate.

*Since the news broke last week, residents have launched five petitions - one already boasting over 1,000 signatures - and demonstrated outside the hotel. Others have thrown eggs at the building and, most disturbingly, there are widespread rumours of threats to ‘burn the place down’* (Watt and Branigan np).

*The Guardian* reported that locals in Sittingbourne rejected the tactics of the British National Party (BNP) which had a history of organising in the south east around the ports connecting the UK to mainland Europe. The party immediately attempted to exploit this controversy by distributing leaflets that suggested that the ‘immigrants’ had not been checked for diseases such as tuberculosis and Aids and that they ‘could be war criminals or paedophiles’.

But, the article continued, even if there is little direct support for the extremists, their messages appeared to be taking root. ‘We’ve been told [the asylum seekers] will be coming directly from airports, but we have received no assurances that they will be screened for diseases like TB,’ said one resident who owned a guesthouse next door to the site.
Our worst fears are that things could become intolerable if the place is badly managed and we are subjected to loud music, fighting and vandalism.

We are willing to give them the benefit of the doubt, but it’s the wrong choice of area. It’s close to the town centre and local schools. It’s a nice residential area.

His remarks were echoed by another resident who said people would be too scared to go out in case they ran into gangs of asylum seekers. ‘It’s not a racist issue at all,’ she added, saying plenty of black and Asian people lived there. ‘I just wonder, if there was a world war, how many of “the asylum seekers” would go to war for Britain?’

The story requires further investigation; it is after all a media report. I chose to outline it here it because it represents the phenomenon of border politics: strategies of inclusion and exclusion in operation at the physical, logistical borders of countries. Asylum seekers constitute a particular category of threat to those who believe that Britain is full up. Coercive controls introduced by Tony Blair in 2003 - which breached the spirit if not the letter of the Geneva Convention on refugees - cut asylum applications by almost two-thirds by 2004. But ‘Thanks to the drip, drip, drip of distorted tabloid reporting, the public became so bemused that an Amnesty poll found the British believed they
were taking in 24% of the world’s refugees when the whole of Europe was only absorbing 3%.’ (Dean np)

This ‘racial situation’ tells us as much about the government handling of the situation, their embarrassment at the lack of local consultation and their readiness to back down in the face of ‘scaremongering’ than the predictable fears of the residents, though it is important to know exactly what people are scared of (Hartigan 280). The open expression of racist views directed against asylum seekers is muted by the rejection of fascist propaganda. But the message is repeated nonetheless: asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants bring disease, violence, rape and anti-social behaviour. The question about whether the prospective immigrants would go to war for Britain certainly tells us more about our time we live in than the notion that their loud parties might disrupt a nice residential area.

The BNP owe their continued existence to their attempts to capitalise on this type of crisis, showing how easy it is to exploit the connection between anthrax culture and routine white supremacy. In 2006 their leader Nick Griffin was acquitted on charges of using words or behaviour likely to stir up racial hatred after claiming that the Qur’an incited Muslims to rape non-Muslim women. He was reported saying:

Their ‘good book’ tells them that that’s acceptable. If you doubt it, go and buy a copy and you will find verse after verse saying you can take any woman you want as long as they’re not
Muslim...It's part of their plan for conquering countries. They will expand into the rest of the UK as the last whites try and find their way to the sea. (Wainright np)

I do not want to over emphasise the importance of the BNP, but they act as a valve – first for activists psychologically or ideologically drawn to fascism, and secondly, more worryingly, to an electorate motivated by despair, resentment and fear, and comforted by racist propaganda that appears to articulate their multiple grievances. Their limited ability to act effectively in public office is small consolation when a recent survey showed that a majority of British people supported BNP policies, even though a significant number were prepared to disown the policies once they were informed of the association. The patchy electoral successes of the BNP requires close examination, not least because of their disinformation tactics designed to demonise asylum seekers, whether African or Albanian, and to exacerbate Islamophobia. Looking outside the UK it is clear that these patterns are reproduced across Europe, including former Soviet Union, and in Australia.

A second aspect of this ‘racial situation’ is the explicit connection between political discourse on asylum and issues of security, a slippage that demands attention in the light of ever-tightening immigration control in the period since 2001. The government is reliant on the way its performance is represented in
a popular media that is predominantly anti-asylum, and this entails investing enormous resources in the presentation of an agenda that sounds authoritative and yet responsive to public opinion. In the House of Commons, the then Home Secretary David Blunkett distanced his own office from those responsible for not carrying out the necessary consultation with the local community, adding,

*Anyone who pretends that there is a simple answer, any more than any other country has found a simple answer, is not only deluding themselves and those around, but unnecessarily whipping up scares which can do no good in terms of our security measures and every harm to our community and race relations which are often fragile and can so easily tip over into a situation we can't control.* (Allison np)

Blunkett’s reference to other countries is clearly intended to deflect criticism of UK policies and to emphasise the intractable nature of asylum as a modern phenomenon. But it is also a reminder that this particular incident in a small town in Kent cannot be properly understood within a narrowly national framework. In her historical account of restrictive asylum policy in the UK since New Labour came to power in 1997, Vicki Squire explores the link between popular anti-asylum discourse and government policy in an international context. She points out that some analysts have argued that New Labour has responded to electoral pressures to
restrict immigration, while others, such as Solomos and Schuster, have maintained that Labour have ‘heightened a climate of fear about refugees and asylum seekers’ (Squire 254).

She suggests that there is a more complex dynamic at work than either of these theories suggests: ‘Election campaigns are constructed according to a political party’s perception of popular opinion, yet the party political articulation of an issue also constructs it in a particular way within wider popular discourse.’ (255) First, in the UK it is important to look at party political issues across the spectrum, as well as other ‘conditioning factors,’ both domestic and international. ‘At the international level,’ she writes, ‘a range of events can be interpreted as creating the conditions for the emergence for the dominance of restrictive asylum discourse: the OPEC oil crisis, the end of the Cold War, the terrorist attacks of 9/11.’ Add to this the momentum of economic neo-liberalism, the mechanisms of European integration, and the development of internal borders within the EU, or Schengenland as it is often known. Seen in this light, the notion that asylum policy is really about stemming an overwhelming flow of applicants or managing local ‘abuse’ of the system appears quite unsustainable.

The politics of border control is not just about the massaging of white residents’ fears of being swamped, however, or appeasing the racist mob one hand while not wanting to tarnish New Labour’s vaunted commitment to the new doctrine of social cohesion on the other. The politics of the border envisages walls,
fences, and prisons (removal centres), policed by invasive screening technologies as well as ever-tightening regulations. Today, the heralded failure of multiculturalism as a doctrine that facilitates is overlaid by the Powellite rhetoric of the “enemy within”, coined in the 1960s, an era when the integrity of the nation state was comparatively secure.

Five years after Blunkett’s attempts to find that delicate balance between self-delusion and hysteria, Tony Blair was more direct in his attempt to address the politics of fear as part of his farewell series on ‘Our Nation’s Future’. ‘We like our diversity,’ he said. ‘But how do we react when that “difference” leads to separation and alienation from the values that define what we hold in common?

‘For the first time in a generation there is an unease, an anxiety, even at points a resentment that our very openness, our willingness to welcome difference, our pride in being home to many cultures, is being used against us; abused, indeed, in order to harm us.’ (Blair 2006, Ware 2008)

By acknowledging the possibility that the country’s hospitality was being abused, the former prime minister cemented the notion that the forced removal of unwanted asylum seekers was justified, no matter how terrified they might be of being sent back to situations from which they had escaped. Thus the routine deportations continue as a necessary evil, carried out with the help of private security personnel armed with handcuffs and leg irons, and often in
secret, well away from public scrutiny. Fear is used as a political tool to gain the nation’s complicity, and state institutions continue to commit harsh injustices that might otherwise be challenged as breaches of human rights.

Meanwhile the battlefield itself is represented as the site of the ultimate defence of Britain’s integrity. In 2008 Foreign Secretary David Miliband declared that the military operation in Afghanistan was as vital to national security as the war against the Nazis. Speaking to a Daily Mail journalist while on tour in the Middle East he declared: 'Why we are there is straightforward. Sixty or 70 years ago the Armed Forces defended Britain on the White Cliffs of Dover. Now to defend Britain we have got to be in the toughest areas of the world like Afghanistan. So the purpose of the mission is absolutely clear, it is to make sure Afghanistan does not become a safe haven for people who want to plot against the UK.' (Brogan 2008)

The politics of the border represents one of the most important issues of our epoch, one that calls for consistent vigilance and intervention by those who are opposed to fortresses of wealth and privilege surrounded by the dispossessed, the starving and the desperate, whose temporary services are required as labor but who have no rights as citizens. However, by focusing on the points of exclusion, the term “border politics” can distract attention from the spaces where the rich and poor, the haves, the have-nots and the have-mores come together and from the struggle to live with, and alongside, those marked out as racially
or culturally threatening.

**Colonial Paranoia**

My second story explores the undercurrent of a slightly different category of fear that might tell us something more about the epoch in which we find ourselves. It emerged from the reporting of Hurricane Katrina in the British tabloids in September 2005. During the aftermath of the hurricane the following scenario appeared on the front page of the *News of the World* newspaper under the headline: ‘Brit Girls’ Hurricane Rape Hell’. ‘Two female Brit survivors of the hell-hole aftermath of the New Orleans hurricane told yesterday how a band of brave men saved them from being raped.’ Together with ‘other white women’ they sat ‘huddled in the city’s superdome, ringed by male tourists to protect them from rampaging mobs’. (Maung 1, 8-9)

One of the young women was reported as saying: ‘I’d heard stories about girls getting raped inside the dome... The way the men protected us when we thought we were going to be attacked was so selfless and inspiring.’

Inside the story continued, under the banner: ‘Anarchy USA Brit Survivors tell of Horror’ and in even bigger capitals: ‘Our Death Dome Hell’. Next to a full page colour image of the body of a dead woman, clearly black, floating face down in the water, the two girls are shown smiling, relaxed and cheerful with the quote
‘Our men sat round us in a circle to keep rapists at bay’.

As the British citizens who were caught up in the aftermath of the hurricane were flown home, conflicting reports of their experiences were siphoned through print, internet, radio and TV media. The Brits who were unlucky enough to end up in the Superdome were portrayed as unlucky, exposed, abandoned, terrified, and justifiably angry that the relevant authorities took so long to come to their rescue. Some clearly expected preferential treatment: after all, they were not the same as the poorest people in New Orleans who were left to rot. They had places to go and credit cards in their pockets – but they found themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Listening carefully it was possible to hear individuals trying to explain that it was hell for everyone in the Dome, that it was the National Guard who had started frightening them with orders that the men make a circle around the women and protect them from the indigenous marauders. Some realised that there was increased tension because residents of New Orleans thought that the foreigners were getting preferential treatment. Of course it emerged that this is exactly what happened. The timetable of events published in many newspapers showed that the Brits were removed from the Dome on the Wednesday, at least two days before the rest of the thousands were airlifted out.

The NoW report implied that the European tourists were in particular danger in the Superdome because of their colour. The
women were in danger of being raped and sexually molested, and their brave menfolk gathered round them in a circle to protect them. The steaming fetid air of the dome reduced everyone to near hysteria, and rumours of rape, suicide, stabbings, and other forms of violence were rife. The reporting spoke of human suffering and the failure of the authorities to protect life and property, but what made the headlines was the collapse of civil society: ‘Anarchy USA’ in which Brits were victims. The European woman were at risk from the predominantly black mob which had also been responsible for shooting at the National Guard and hampering relief efforts by their trigger-happy lawlessness.

This scenario, so luridly described by the tabloids, was yet another example of that racist paranoia that has been such a familiar ingredient of Britain’s colonial and postcolonial past. The juxtaposition of defenceless white (European) women threatened by proximity to dark-skinned men who, in this case, were clearly more unleashed from bounds of civilised society than ever, could not be passed up as an exercise in sensationalism. There were plenty of other reports that described the hell inside the dome over the course of that week, including the repetition of graphic rumours flying round a panicked, starving and furious population. As Gary Younge reported in The Guardian, when everyone was finally airlifted out of the Dome and the Convention centre, no one had come forward to report rape or bizarre murders rumoured to have taken place (Younge np, Usborne np). Later it
emerged that the inferno created in the Superdome was actually created by the authorities. As Rebecca Solnit wrote soon after:

The people within were not allowed to leave. The Convention Center and the Superdome became open prisons. Eyewitnesses reported armed authorities shooting at people who tried to walk out, including hundreds of stranded tourists who were forced back into the holding centres: That was not anarchy, nor was it civil society. (Solnit 23)

There is no doubt that the particular racist interpretation of the terror experienced by the tourists represented the frisson of colonial paranoia, evoking the deep cultural memory that white women’s bodies symbolised all that was valuable and vulnerable about civilization (Ware 1992). But in this current climate of fear there was another terrifying factor: the pictures of smiling white tourists alongside the body of a drowned black woman assumed that their lives had entirely different values. This points us in one direction to take more seriously the liminal figure of the tourist: tourism is after all the largest global industry, and the freedom to travel to other people’s countries is considered a key component of democratic societies. These tourists were caught off guard: they were visiting Europeans caught up in the US’s internal problems, and so, according to the way this was reported, they became victims of America’s racial codes. But this manner of
reporting their fate obscured the real nature of the catastrophe. As many have pointed out, disasters are almost by definition about the failure of authority rather than the collapse of humanity into an anarchic free-for-all. Blinded by the dazzle of smug white supremacy mixed with opportunist anti-Americanism, the paranoid fantasy of black rape and white chivalry totally obscures the role of government and the armed forces in keeping citizens in perilous, vulnerable conditions.

This shameful outburst of colonial paranoia refers us back to that other historical legacy in which the ever-widening gap between rich and poor, white and black, becomes further naturalised by being made racialised. By chance the BBC was running E.M. Forster’s luminous novel *A Passage to India* in their Book at Bedtime slot during this same period. Although this was a fictional account of what happened when a young white woman, ‘an English girl fresh from England’ (Forster 174), claimed that she had been assaulted by an Indian man, the book draws imaginatively on the claims of the white settler community that Forster witnessed as a visitor to India in the 1920s. Within a matter of hours the news of the alleged assault flew round the town, turning apparently reasonable individuals into a demonic herd.

All over Chandrapore that day the Europeans were putting aside their normal personalities, and sinking themselves in their community. Pity, wrath, heroism, filled them, but the power of
Forster uses the simple device of the rumoured sexual assault of a white woman to evoke the fragility of colonial order and the underlying violence that held it in place. The British elite imagined that their rule depended on mutual respect and esteem, and attributed the alleged attack to the breakdown of that compact. The ‘native’ crowds that gathered to protest at the unjust accusation were seen as harbingers of the independence movement, an ominous sign that the old order might never be restored without force. Although they maintained the semblance of due legal process in public, in private the colonisers were able to express their passions in unrepressed manner, as the Collector demonstrated once he returned to his bungalow:

When he saw the coolies asleep in the ditches or the shopkeepers rising to salute him on their little platforms, he said to himself: 'I know what you’re like at last; you shall pay for this, you shall squeal.' (175)

The way that some sections of the British media reported the chaos in the New Orleans Superdome is an ominous echo of this sentiment: ‘we know what you are really like, and you won’t get away with it.’ Thus in the cause of protecting our own freedoms and rights, we can use the excuse, not just that the dispossessed of
the world present a threat, a burden, a liability, but also that their sub-humanity justifies all manner of treatment in the name of protecting civilisation.

Faced with the startling traffic sign in Jo-berg, few people would ask: stop being afraid of what? There, local political literacy is derived from decades of apartheid rule and the terrible legacy of structural inequality and poverty. As I write this, the Sunday papers in the UK offer two versions of a South African future that indicate stark choices: white flight and the spectacular rebirth of Johannesburg. The first, yielding to fear, is filtered through the sympathetic ears of English journalist who has just rented out his house in Hertfordshire to a white family fleeing their gated compound in the city of their birth (Cowley 11). The second speaks more to the future, to the conquering of fears. This can be measured by factors such as the rocketing value of real estate which has risen 35 percent in six years, and by developments such as rooftop swimming pools, helipads, luxury apartment blocks and massive investment by international companies (Carroll 14). It is in these rapidly growing megacities that we see most clearly the spatial and racial configuration of this new global warming order: where power and capital work to create new axes of spectacular wealth and abject poverty, where privatized, securitized enclaves are surrounded by the masses, some of whose labour is required to service this economy, but the rest appears to be surplus to requirements.
In Planet of Slums, a terrifying assessment of the growth of slum populations in the global south, Mike Davis demonstrates that this pattern of urban development not only reflects the prevailing neoliberal economic order but inevitably perpetuates an uncompromisingly militarist response from those in power. His book concludes with the observation that the Bush regime has already decided that the ‘feral failed cities of the Third World’ will be the ‘distinctive battlespace of the twenty first century’. (Davis 205) He writes: ‘Pentagon doctrine is being reshaped accordingly to support a low intensity war of unlimited duration against criminalized segments of the urban poor. This is the true “clash of civilizations”.’

While it is crucial to retain a sense of global dynamics of power (and resistance), it is no less important to work close to home to dispel illusions of unbridgeable difference and to fight for social justice. Recognizing the role of white fear is an important factor in these related political tasks. In Britain there is a real danger that the blame for residential and cultural apartheid in the deindustrialised mill towns of the north is being forcefully placed at the doors of Muslim communities. As the military occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan become more desperate and futile, members of the government repeatedly vent their anger on Muslims within the UK, directing public attention to the potential disruption that they represent to some imagined harmonious British way of life and showing remarkably little sensitivity to the
'fragile' state of community and race relations' advocated by David Blunkett in 2003. Led from above, these successive official scoldings, warnings and threats to young Muslim women and men, their parents, and their teachers too, only serve to reinforce the borders held in place by intransigent racism and the ‘white fear’ it feeds off. This obscures the urgency of addressing the underlying causes of social and political conflict in our streets, schools and town halls. It also helps to divert a more inclusive and open public debate about the country’s role on the world stage, and the effects of a catastrophic foreign policy on domestic politics. An anti-racist politics that takes on the daunting task of unpicking the particular fears of our epoch must be able to formulate political responses that begin with, but go beyond the cry: We are Not Afraid.


Notes
1. The BNP saw unprecedented success in the local elections on May 4th 2006, winning 11 seats in one London borough, and making gains elsewhere. Their message on national media was about asylum seekers bringing disease, tribal warfare, rape, again insinuated in election material tailored to particular constituencies where they were able to exacerbate local anxieties and paranoia.
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