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Race and neoliberalism

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PART III

Social tensions
More than just a racist eruption: the co-constitution of race and neoliberalism

In 2010, Minelle Mahtani and I published an article challenging scholars of neoliberalism, especially within geography, to approach the connection between race and neoliberalism in a more sophisticated manner. The scholarship on race and neoliberalism, at the time, tended to focus on racialized outcomes of neoliberal reforms – what we called ‘the racist eruptions’ of neoliberalization (Roberts and Mahtani 2010: 248). We argued that it was problematic to understand and theorize neoliberalism and race as two separate social entities that only sometimes intersect. Instead, we demanded an understanding of race and neoliberalism as co-constitutive. Following Giroux (2005) we argued that while neoliberalism is saturated with race, it also modifies the way that race and racism are understood and experienced in contemporary society. I review and reiterate the main points of our paper below.

Since publication, the article has had significant influence on the theorization of race and neoliberalism, garnering nearly 100 citations at the time of writing this chapter. Here, I revisit the original argument and then proceed to briefly analyse how these arguments have been taken up by other scholars through a literature review of articles and book chapters that have cited the 2010 piece. Towards a conclusion, I work to plot a course as to what I believe to be the future directions in which the scholarship theorizing race and neoliberalism may want to go.

Neoliberal society: a postracial, level playing field?

As a foundational premise, we argued that the logics of neoliberalism have fundamentally reshaped the relationship between the citizen and society with the integration of a market-oriented notion of how one succeeds in society. To this end, we argued that, ‘ideally, within a neoliberal theorization of society, the success of the individual is directly related to his/her work output. Modalities of difference, such as race, do not predetermine one’s success as each individual is evaluated solely in terms of his or her economic contribution to society’ (Roberts and Mahtani 2010: 253). This is the quintessential level playing field – a postracial paradise where everyone is treated equally and each individual is valued and rewarded solely on her or his ability to contribute to society (or, more specifically, the economy). While this is the ideal that underpins neoliberalism, our work, along with others, exposes the shaky foundation
upon which the claims of some sort of achieved level playing ground are based. Specifically, we argue that, in Canada, media discourses about (racialized) immigrants to Canada work to reify a racialized hierarchy in which immigrants are denied complex identities and rendered to be not-quite-real Canadians. We link this reification to the neoliberalization of the Canadian immigration system. I expand on our research findings in the next section.

Our approach to examining the connection between race and neoliberalism follows in a similar vein to numerous amounts of scholarship that has been dedicated to demonstrating the disconnect between the idealism of this level playing field and the lived reality in neoliberal societies. In other words, despite the claims that we, in neoliberalized societies, live in meritocracies, there is overwhelming evidence that race and other modalities of difference continue to be salient in terms of one’s social position. Yet, even as many of the scholars critically engaging with neoliberalism recognize this, we argued that, at the time of writing the original article, the scholarship in geography examining the relationship between race and neoliberalism inadequately captured the ways in which these two processes are co-constitutive in nature.

The discourses of immigration in *The Globe and Mail*

The empirical material for our 2010 article, ‘Neoliberalizing Race, Racing Neoliberalism: Placing “Race” in Neoliberal Discourses’, was obtained through a media analysis of stories about immigrants and immigration within *The Globe and Mail*, a leading Canadian national newspaper. Focusing on the time period spanning 1 October 2002 to 30 September 2006, we created an initial dataset through collecting all articles, letters to the editor and editorials that contained the term ‘immigration’ in their title, abstract, and/or within their text. This produced a dataset of 3,754 articles. From this dataset, we pared the sample down to 896 articles by eliminating those articles not ostensibly about immigration, immigrants or refugees in Canada. This pared down dataset was then analysed and coded based on the dominant themes in each article, editorial, guest column and letter to the editor. Through this process, 55 sub-themes emerged covering a wide range of topics. These sub-themes were later grouped into major themes focusing on the dominant discourses of immigration being utilized by the authors of the pieces, including immigration as important to increased economic success (14 per cent of the articles) and the linking of immigrants to criminal activities or terrorism (24 per cent of the articles), for example. These sub-themes and major themes significantly influenced our argument, which focused more specifically on the ideas and discourses that seemed to be underpinning much of the coverage of immigration and immigrants in *The Globe and Mail*.

What emerged was a strong tendency to describe immigrants in terms of their utility to Canadian society – both positively, often in economic terms as workers, and negatively, to highlight links to criminality or to describe them as a drain on Canadian social resources. Bauder (2008) found a similar tendency in the German press with regard to immigrants in that country, linking this discourse on immigration to the neoliberal restructuring of Germany’s immigration policies. In the process, Bauder (ibid.) highlights the link between discourses focused on the utility of immigration and immigrants and the neoliberal approaches to immigration, and we concur in our findings.

Articles with such titles as ‘Labour Shortage Woes Loom, Research Says’ (Scoffield 2005), ‘New Canadians Can Keep the Lights Shining on the Prairie’ (Simpson 2005), and ‘Ontario Eyes Brightest Immigrants’ (Howlett 2006) are examples of the types of stories that appeared in *The Globe and Mail* in our dataset. Through such pieces, immigrants are depicted as potential solutions to many of the challenges facing the Canadian economy, from low population growth rates to a perceived lack of desire from Canadian-born individuals to work within service industries.
Other aspects of immigrant identities, interests and desires not explicitly linked to some notion of utility are rarely included in the articles that we examined. This tendency to focus on immigrants almost exclusively in terms of their potential utility for Canadian society significantly limits the complexity of immigrant identities within the news media and, we argue, is influential on wider social discourses and perceptions of the appropriate role for immigrants in Canadian cities. Moreover, a focus on immigrant utility is a clear reflection of the neoliberalization of the Canadian immigration policy that focuses on using immigration (and immigrants) as a way to improve the Canadian economy. This is manifested in the points-based system in which immigrants are awarded points for education, employability, etc. as a way of assessing the skills that they will bring to Canada. While there are other potential avenues for individuals to immigrate to Canada, such as through asylum or refugee routes, the primary available slots are through the points-based system. If anything, since the publication of our original intervention, the Canadian government has only increased its commitment to an immigration policy based on treating immigrants as an economic means to an end of an improved economy. For example, the number of temporary foreign workers in Canada tripled in the decade between 2002 and 2012 (Lemieux and Nadeau 2015: 1) largely driven by the expansion of temporary labour migration programmes, especially in care work, agriculture and service industries supporting the resource economies. This has occurred while the state is simultaneously making other, more permanent immigration avenues that are much more difficult to pursue (Goldring and Landolt 2013). The expansion of these temporary labour migration programmes produces a class of non-citizen immigrant workers whose lives and political status are characterized by temporariness and precarity. While immigration policies and the rise of temporary worker programmes were beyond the scope of our original article, it is clear that the expansion of a precarious class of non-Canadian workers in Canada to serve a neoliberal economic agenda works to buttress our observations about the connection between immigration, neoliberalism and race in contemporary Canada.

This media analysis provided the foundation for a larger discussion about the contemporary linkages between neoliberalism and race/racialization. We used this analysis to attempt to intervene in what we saw as the trajectory of scholarship, especially within the discipline of geography about these linkages towards a more nuanced analysis.

**Racist eruptions**

Several theorists of neoliberalism have recognized the link between the embrace of neoliberalism in policy, and more broadly in society, and the persistence or even exacerbation of racial inequality. At the time of our original article, the most common tendency within this work was to point to the disparate impacts that neoliberal policy interventions have had on certain racialized groups in society. In this type of analysis, scholars generally identified moments of racism (or racially disparate impacts) without providing much in the way of a theorization between the link between race and neoliberalism more broadly. Neoliberalization of policy took place; racialized groups bore the brunt of the negative social outcomes of this neoliberalization. In short, this type of scholarship identifies eruptions of racism without considering the broader social context in which these eruptions take place (see Wilson 2006 and Theodore 2007 for examples of this type of scholarship). While this type of work lays the foundation of critiquing neoliberalism for its disparate impacts, we argued that this form of theorization treats racism as an inevitable result of neoliberalization rather than mutually constitutive with neoliberalizing policies. The racist eruptions that result from neoliberal policies and practices are cited, but race is imagined as a fixed category, where
individual racialized groups are seen as distinct and mapped onto neoliberal policy outcomes.

(Roberts and Mahtani 2010: 240)

However, Mahtani and I argue that it is essential to think of these instances where racialized groups are disparately impacted by neoliberal policies in more complex ways than simply eruptions of racism or racialization resulting from neoliberal approaches. In doing so, we argue that it is essential that research on race and neoliberalism starts with understanding race as a fundamental organizing principle in society (Gilmore 2006; McKittrick 2006; Pulido 2006) and to understand the ways in which race and neoliberalism are co-constitutive. Moreover, we argue that race must not be understood as a fixed set of categories that are unchanging in society. While race is a fundamental organizing principle in society, racial categories, meanings or processes of racialization are not set in stone. Neoliberalism works to reify the importance of race in society as well as impact how it is understood, experienced, and contested. In other words, we argue that it is essential to understand neoliberalism as a facet of a racist society that works to both reinforce the racial structure of society, while also modifying the processes of racialization’ (Roberts and Mahtani 2010: 250).

Reification of the role of race in society

The reification of race and racial differences is clear in the treatment of immigration in the stories found within The Globe and Mail. Immigrants, especially racialized immigrants, are depicted as somehow different from white/standard/domestically born Canadians. While some of the values associated with these differences have changed over time, especially with regard to what qualities make a potential immigrant useful for Canadian society, racialized tropes are largely left intact. In highlighting this, we argued that,

Racism and its accompanying stereotypes associated with immigrants (high fertility, non-professional aspirations) are effectively mobilized as desirable whereas historically these were seen as negative attributes of immigrants. These presumed features of the potential immigrant population are part of a racist lexicon that was previously employed to denigrate immigrants.

(Roberts and Mahtani 2010: 251)

Thus, both the immigration policy that reduces immigrant identities to their contributions to the economy and the media discourses that largely do the same thing work to reinforce already existing racial hierarchies in society. Quite simply, it is a way of marking who is a real Canadian and who is a not-quite-real Canadian. The theoretical, neoliberal, even playing field is not fully available to racialized immigrant Canadians.

Modifying the experience of race in society

This is not the end of the story, however. In addition to reifying racial hierarchies, neoliberal policies, logics, and discourses also work to modify the way in which race is experienced in society. In part, this is a consequence of the argument that neoliberalism is colour- or race-blind. As Davis (2007: 350) explains,

Under neoliberal racism the relevance of the raced subject, racial identity and racism is subsumed under the auspices of meritocracy. For in a neoliberal society, individuals are
supposedly freed from identity and operate under the limiting assumptions that hard work will be rewarded if the game is played according to the rules. Consequently, any impediments to success are attributed to personal flaws. This attribution affirms notions of neutrality and silences claims of racializing and racism.

Neoliberalism ‘effectively masks racism through its value-laden moral project: camouflaging practices anchored in an apparent meritocracy, making possible a utopic vision of society that is non-racialized’ (Roberts and Mahtani 2010: 253). Consequently, lack of success in society – either by an individual or group – is understood as a result of individual or group failure or inadequacy. For immigrants to Canada, this is reflected in a perceived inferiority of foreign degrees and credentials and the consequential failure to recognize these in terms of employment, as embodied by the deskilling process (Gardiner Barder 2008). It is also reflected in other, broader, tropes about certain immigrant cultural practices or beliefs as potentially providing an explanation for group failure. This echoes one of Goldberg’s (1993) central contentions ‘that modern racist culture is marked, fundamentally, by its refusal to acknowledge the role that racism plays in everyday structures of society and how these structures work to fundamentally disguise and, simultaneously, reify the power of racism within society’ (Roberts and Mahtani 2010: 253).

The embrace of neoliberalism does more than simply disguise the workings of race as an organizing principle; it essentially mutes contestations of institutional or structural forms of racism (Giroux 2008). The argument that we have entered into a postracial era in North American society is symptomatic of this silencing (Omi and Winant 2014). Under such a logic, racism is now exclusively within the realm of the abhorrent behaviours of a few bad apples in society – hold-overs from previous, more racist times. As such, it should be understood and dealt with on a case-by-case basis, rather than through mechanisms that may address larger systems of racialization and racialized privilege. As such, such underlying structures are essentially left intact.

Given all of this, we argued that neoliberalism is thoroughly ‘saturated with race’ (Duggan 2003: xvi). Race and neoliberalism are not distinct social processes that sometimes collide in the outcome of particular neoliberal policy reforms, but rather should be understood as co-constitutive.

The reception of this argument

Since the publication of our original intervention in 2010, the reception of this challenge, to develop a more sophisticated approach to analysis and theorizations of the linkages between race and neoliberalism, has been substantial. The list of publications that cite and engage with our work continues to grow. At the time of writing this chapter, there were nearly 100 publications, in print, citing the original piece, ranging from books and book chapters to journal articles to Master’s and PhD theses. As the original piece was intended to be a provocation encouraging scholars writing about race and neoliberalism to add sophistication to their treatment, it is interesting and encouraging to see the various ways that our work has had an impact on scholarship.

Not surprisingly, a majority of the articles citing our original intervention have been published in journals focused on research in geography and cognate areas of study (such as urban studies). We still work in an academic world in which disciplinary boundaries have meaning and, despite efforts to engage in issues and interventions that span disciplinary divides, analysis of issues such as the linkage between race and neoliberalism tends to happen in siloed parallels along these divides. This unfortunately creates an uneven landscape of scholarship. That said, while the majority of pieces citing the original article are found within geography journals, there
is a wide range of other disciplines and subject areas represented in the work (and journals) that references our work. These include early childhood education (Nxumalo 2012), sociology of sport (Atencio et al. 2013), and racial and ethnic studies (Andrews and Mower 2012), to name a few. This indicates a budding cross-disciplinary conversation that can, in my mind, only work to add sophistication and nuance to all of our discussions of the links between race and neoliberalism as insights from different disciplines are brought into conversation. Given that neither the study of race or neoliberalism can or should be contained within geography, the discipline stands to benefit from how others approach the subjects.

In many (most) cases, there was seemingly only minimal engagement with the initial intervention, with the reference to our piece being listed in a string of references to other articles and chapters making arguments about the connections between race and neoliberalism. Thus, while our article is clearly widely read, in these cases it is unclear how our arguments, specifically, have influenced thinking, analysis, or methodology around issues of neoliberalism and race. This is not to say that the articles and chapters are not tackling concerns in ways that are sympathetic to ours; just that it is unclear what influence the original intervention had on this work.

That said, perhaps the most well-developed and nuanced theme that runs through many of the pieces focuses on ways in which neoliberalism has altered understandings and discourses of race in contemporary North American society (see Anderson and Sternberg 2012). Several pieces explore and contest the ways in which claims of racism or structural racial inequality are effectively silenced through a neoliberal appeal to meritocracy (Mele 2013). In part, these can be read as a rejection of the notion that the USA (or Canada) has evolved to a point where ‘overt forms of racial discrimination are a thing of the past, and that the United States is in the midst of a successful transition to a “postracial” society’ (Omi and Winant 2014: 257). The fantasy of a postracial society is just simply that, a fantasy appealing to perhaps the aspirations of a meritocracy, but one that refuses to address the historical and contemporary foundations of inequality that continue to exist along racial lines.

Despite the growing number of publications adding nuance to the analysis of the connections between race and neoliberalism, there is still room to add greater sophistication. In particular, there continues to be a need to add nuance and complexity to theorizations and scholarship examining the co-constitutive relationship between neoliberalism and processes of racialization. By way of some concluding thoughts for this chapter, in the next section, I discuss the challenge of researching this relationship.

**Researching the process of racialization**

While there has been greater attention paid to developing a more nuanced articulation of the relationship between neoliberalism and race, this work seemingly still continues to grapple with how to move beyond treating race as a set of fixed, immutable categories. Despite the widespread (and now rather longstanding) acceptance that race is a socially produced phenomenon (with material consequences), there is still a tendency to discuss it as a set of distinct, fixed, groupings. In part, this is a consequence of language and a lack of adequate vocabulary to really capture race as process, but this cannot be the only explanation. I believe that methodology also plays a significant role.

In writing about a feminist methodological approach in geography 18 years ago, Rose notes that,

> The feminist task becomes less one of mapping difference – assuming a visible landscape of power with relations between positions ones of distance between distinctly separate
agents – and more one of asking how difference is constituted, of tracing its destabilizing emergence during the research process itself.

(Rose 1997: 313)

The challenge, then, for feminist and feminist-inspired scholarship, is precisely one of researching processes in light of difference and diversity; processes through which socially constructed differences, like race, gender, ability, etc., come to be constituted and to have meaning. While we can see the influence of feminist, anti-racist, indigenous, post-colonial and other critical scholarship on the links between race and neoliberalism, we still have work to do in regard to methodology – in particular, methodology that is focused on processes – racialization as opposed to race and gendering as opposed to gender, for example.

In the original intervention, Mahtani and I were attempting to challenge scholars to understand race as much more complex than fixed categories you may find on the census – categories that we can place onto a landscape of power and that highlight the ways in which neoliberal reforms have disparate impacts. The mapping of race in this way might be interesting and evocative, but it also works to concretize and reify racial categories and social locations. We hoped, through our argument, that we might push scholarship (on race and neoliberalism specifically, but on race and space, more broadly) to move, both analytically and methodologically, towards understanding the social construction of race as an ongoing, evolving project. In other words, critical scholarship should ask how race and other aspects of difference are constituted rather than just map the differences. Taking seriously the notion that race and neoliberalism are co-constituted requires such a move as it necessitates examining how race and neoliberalism are fundamentally linked with each operating to create and give meaning to the other in contemporary society.

In many ways, I see our original intervention has having had the desired impacts. Scholarship such as that of Bonds (2013), Mele (2013), and Inwood (2015) is squarely focused on racialization and the processes through which race comes to have meaning and is experienced. The piece is being read and cited and likely having impacts that are not fully knowable or quantifiable through the methods I use in this chapter. This is encouraging and, hopefully, provides the basis for ongoing research supporting the struggle to dismantle the structures of inequality that so doggedly persist in society.

References


