

Claiming whiteness

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Ethnicities

0(0) 1–6

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DOI: 10.1177/1468796819838710

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The rise of populism across the globe is a pressing public issue, cutting across familiar class divisions as the basis of support for political parties (especially in Europe). In many places – India, USA, Brazil, Italy, for example – religious or ethnic majority populations have been mobilised around nativist identity claims against minority others. In Europe, the populist focus has been immigration and the potential threats that are posed to ‘European’ (or national – ‘British’, ‘Italian’, ‘French’, etc.) values. Here the growing and visible presence of Muslims has been a particular focus.

Kaufmann (2018) is interested in populism in white majority countries. He believes it to be an expression of white identity in the context of demographic change brought about by a combination of differential birth rates, intermarriage across racial divisions and immigration. White racial self-interest, he argues, is legitimate and ignoring it is what fuels populism. However, the demographics mean that the economic well-being of current white majorities requires immigration. Kaufmann posits a positive possible future which is mixed-race, albeit one where white symbols of belonging continue to organise a core dominant identity.

Simply put, Kaufmann’s proposition is that public policy should facilitate a politics of assimilation of non-whites to allay current white fears of loss of identity through loss of their majority position. This goal, he argues, requires an immigration policy that favours those who are more easily assimilated (as indicated by rates of inter-marriage with whites, similarity of religious belief or propensity for secularisation). Future immigration should only be from groups that are readily recognised by the white majority as assimilable; preferably, they should be visibly similar (not too brown) and secular (or, if religious, they should be of a religion that shares a cultural history with the white majority – i.e. not Muslim, Hindu or Sikh). Of course, such a policy would represent those that do not meet those criteria but who are currently British citizens (as former subjects of Empire) as

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not assimilable. To use Enoch Powell's chilling phrase from his 1968 'rivers of blood' speech, they are the 'immigrant-descended' reproducing 'otherness' in each generation.

He contrasts his approach with what he calls a hitherto dominant 'left-modernist' promotion of multi-culturalism which has supported all identities except that of the white majority. Worse, it has promoted white guilt, to which populism is an affirmative counter-response. White racial self-interest, Kaufmann asserts, is not racism. The book promises to show how this conclusion derives from a careful examination of data, especially census data on population change, attitude surveys, voting studies and fine-grained small surveys offering respondents different vignettes about past and future. These data are primarily from white Anglophone countries, such as the USA, Britain and Canada, with supporting evidence from other European countries. In addition, there are chapters – or sections of chapters – devoted to the history of immigration and its politics in these countries. However, these discussions are both partial and tendentious. For example, there is no discussion of settler colonialism or of the place of first Nation populations and enslavement of African Americans and Jim Crow segregation in the USA.

These are serious – in fact, fatal – omissions in a book concerned to rehabilitate symbols of white identity. When they are mentioned, his statements are frequently crass and diminish the enormity of what is being ignored. For example, he writes that, 'reducing cultural inequality is an important goal but not an absolute one. Sometimes inequality is egregious and simple to resolve, like ending slavery or racial discrimination in law. But we have picked this low-hanging fruit' (2018: 329). Is slavery to be understood as 'cultural'? The 'we' is both lazy and disingenuous. Are 'we' to forget lynching and the low-hanging fruit on Southern poplar trees ('blood on the leaves, blood on the roots', as Billie Holiday sang)?

It is a very large book – 619 pages – but it is also poorly edited, repetitive and, I have suggested, partial. It is predicated on the idea that 'multiculturalism' has failed, but it presents no evidence for that claim. It is familiar from mainstream politicians in Europe over the last decade, more or less coinciding with the rise of populism. Yet, Kaufmann ignores this conjunction. In so far as he argues for assimilation, the presumption must be that he also believes that multiculturalism has failed in terms of integration. Yet, the group that he sees as least assimilated – British Muslims – shows the strongest commitment to British values (Karlsen and Nazroo, 2015). For some – Louise Casey (2016), for example – the problem is the self-segregation of ethnic minority communities. However, as Kaufmann allows, the spatial distribution of ethnic minorities is largely a consequence of white self-segregation.

It is not clear how a group which is both the majority and maintains separate sociality can be said to be disallowed self-expression. Perhaps it is an issue of institutions and the media? Yet most studies show these to be overwhelmingly white. Perhaps these are all white multi-culturalists, what Kaufmann calls 'left modernists'? But he offers no discussion of media content. Could it really be the case that white people do not recognise themselves in mainstream cultural

expressions? Or is this a familiar trope from discussions of gender (a topic that is strikingly absent from his book), where any move toward inclusion and fair representation is associated with an over-emphasis of its extent? After all, he accepts that this is the case for white majority perceptions of immigration and ethnic minority presence.

At the same time, the book is profoundly weak conceptually and this weakness undermines any conclusions. Let's begin at the beginning with Kaufmann's 'tell' of the cards he is going to play. He begins by invoking Lionel Shriver's (2003) novel about a school massacre, *We Need to Talk about Kevin*. "We need to talk about white identity" (2018: 1), Kaufmann states, but proceeds by ignoring the very message of Shriver's book. We need to talk about white identity, but "not as a fabrication to maintain white power, but as a set of myths and symbols to which people are attached: an ethnic identity like any other" (2018: 1).

If white identity is 'like any other', it is also relational with those other identities and those relations will necessarily involve power and domination. Yet, this is precisely what Kaufmann is unwilling to talk about. His account of all human groups defining themselves in relation to an 'other' is an ahistorical cultural anthropology that allows him to 'neutralise' the particularity of the present and its history. For example, his histories of race and immigration entirely ignore the topic of European settler-colonialism through which racialised hierarchies were constructed. Instead, there is a one-sided account of the gradual removal of colour-bars and formal discrimination in immigration policy and access to employment, etc., as a simple process of acceptance of assimilation by the white majority. It is an assimilation, however, that, in his view, is continually undermined by 'left modernists' who assert the relevance of that history, and thereby fuel a politics of resentment on the part of a white majority whose voice is suppressed.

The failure to address these questions undermines his analysis of his data, especially his framing of the 'vignettes' he offers to small samples of respondents through surveys via YouGov and MTurk. He is on stronger ground when dealing with larger secondary data sets where the questions have been set and have been subject to wider interpretation. For example, it is now uncontroversial that issues of race and immigration were key determinants of the Brexit vote and the election of Trump (Bhambra, 2017). It is also accepted that these were also not votes by those left-behind by globalisation (Dorling and Tomlinson, 2019). But Kaufman wants to go further and show that concerns over race and immigration are more widely shared even if they have higher salience for some voters than others. This poses a paradox. A general view that such views are unrespectable is a protection against them being articulated in elections. However, if that reticence breaks down, then the pool of voters for populist parties can be swelled. He seems to be oblivious to the possibility that he is part of that process, widening the 'Overton window' and then recursively claiming it as justification for his own argument.

Let me take one example from one of his small surveys (200 respondents in the one I shall report) through questions constructed by Kaufmann himself.

The survey at issue is presented as ‘challenging double-standards’ in ‘moderates opinion’ (sic, 2018: 382). White respondents in the US were asked whether it is racist for a white person to want fewer immigrants to boost group share and whether it is racist for a Hispanic person to want more in order to increase group share. Kaufmann regards the questions to be symmetrical and that ‘logically consistent’ answers are either Yes or No to both questions. Answers which respond Yes to the first and No to the second, and *vice versa*, are described by Kaufmann as inconsistent. Yet, in each case, the respondents refer to power and domination, which as we have seen Kaufmann doesn’t want to talk about! Thus, an example of liberal inconsistency (the moderates of the section heading) is this respondent: ‘the white person’s support for bringing in more Europeans is to maintain power over other racial groups, while the Hispanic person wants her group to gain power to bring them on an equal foothold with whites’ (2018: 383). On the other side, that of conservative inconsistency, the comment is this:

I do not consider myself a racist and I strive to not consider the color of a person in my daily dealings, but I know many do. I don’t want to turn it into a situation of groups feeling like they need to pay back whites and make us suffer for years of perceived injustice. (2018: 384)

These are only inconsistent answers as a consequence of Kaufmann’s own limited understanding; they are responses that require an understanding of historic and continuing domination. Notice, too, that the only ‘pay back’ is demands for equality (and the visited injustice that affirmative actions is perceived by Kaufmann to be).

Let us suppose for a moment that there might be some merit to the book of uncovering the wellsprings of white identity. After all, he is asking us to approach the topic with balance and an openness to persuasion. But is his own approach balanced? Left modernism in the academy is, for Kaufmann, represented by critical race studies. It is this approach that is responsible for the anti-white ideology of the cultural left that supposedly promotes a multiculturalism that has place for all identities except that of white majorities. This is a fiction that Kaufmann can sustain only because he refuses to discuss any arguments about power and domination as constitutive of relations among groups. But what is it to present ‘progress’ toward assimilation without a characterisation of preceding relations of exclusion and domination? Given that white identity is associated with its histories of belonging, aren’t the racialised nature of those histories precisely what is at issue, even if Kaufmann presents them as having been overcome in the present? Indeed, Kaufmann’s promotion of a positive mixed-race future is set against a danger of a ‘racist’ response. How are we to understand the risk of that response if there is no account of it as an aspect of white identity and, therefore, of which symbols might be benign and which not?

One other inconsistent response in the survey reported above is striking: “America should be a white nation but others are trying to commit white

genocide” (2018: 384). It might appear that in labelling positions as consistent or inconsistent, Kaufmann is adopting a ‘neutral’ position. However, it is clear that the inconsistent liberal is a representative of the ‘left modernism’ that is the primary target of the book. The inconsistent conservative – in truth, white supremacist – gets a very different and much more sympathetic account. In contrast to his failure to address the arguments of critical race theorists, Kaufmann elevates those of white supremacy to a social theory that merits careful consideration.

Thus, in an extraordinary section on claims that declining white majorities are an indication of genocide against whites – ‘is the white genocide theory entirely false?’ (2018: 482), he constructs a scale of ‘truthfulness’ of the claims associated with the theory finding that there is a core of ‘truth’. It is a core which is very extensive; no claim is without foundation, despite the evaluation appearing to move in the direction of dismissal. Thus, having acknowledged the truth of some claims he proceeds by, ‘moving down the scale of truthfulness, [where] we come to the claim that only white countries have liberals who oppose their own ethnic group and express majority guilt’ (2018: 483). This, he avers, is largely but not entirely the case. He moves on further down: ‘Do liberals intend to transform white societies into non-white ones through immigration and race-mixing?’ (2018: 485). He thinks this also contains a measure of truth. The only cavil is that here the impetus also comes from business interests and not only liberals. The question is then put, ‘are the only countries willing to permit ethnic transformation white ones?’ (2018: 485). He comments that other wealthy countries in the Gulf or East Asia allow only temporary workers, or are relatively closed, with the consequent conclusion that, ‘so here the white genocide theory is on solid ground’ (2018: 485). He suggests that there are other countries that are similarly open, among them, Latin America and the Caribbean, but seems blissfully unaware that in all cases he is speaking of countries that were ethnically transformed by white colonial migration and treats the movement by the previously colonised and displaced as the only migration that poses (or posed) threats of transformation. Finally, he asks if Jews and other minorities have sought to hasten white decline (2018: 488)? He hasn’t seen any systematic evidence, but then allows that ethnically conscious members of minority groups have wished to boost their own numbers for group self-interested reasons. In effect, Kaufmann endorses the claims of white supremacists by aligning them with a legitimate white racial self-interest. He is careful to distinguish self-interest from racism, but it is a very thin line if all that he is opposed to in white supremacy is the manner of expression (overt racism) and not the substance of its claims.

We need to talk about Eric. Kaufmann presents his own biography as illustrative of his arguments. As I have said, his animus is directed at left modernists and their promotion of multiculturalism. It is they who are to blame for the rise of populism because of their hostility to the legitimate expression of white identity. They put at risk the possibility of a positive future of assimilation of which he is an exemplar. He describes himself as part-Chinese and part-Latino, with a (non-practising) Jewish father. Unlike his cousins with similar heritage, he ‘passes’ as white.

He does not ‘blame’ his Hong Kong Chinese grandmother for taking advantage of liberal immigration laws for herself and her family, but he is not in favour of such laws. We have been here before. Professional middle-class Jews in Germany regarded themselves as assimilated and different from their fellow Jews from the *shtetl*. It proved to be no protection. Kaufmann’s own assimilation, in fact, depends upon the left modernist traditions that he decries.

*First they came for the left modernists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a left modernist.
Then they came for the ethnically different, and I did not speak out—
Because I was assimilated.
Then they came for me—(With apologies to Pastor Niemeyer).*

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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