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Review essay

## Review essay: ‘They think it’s all over. . .’

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Susan Neiman, *Learning from the Germans: Confronting the Memory of Evil*, Allen Lane/Penguin: London, 2019; 432 pp.: 0141983426, £12.99 (pbk)

Sivamohan Valluvan, *The Clamour of Nationalism: Race and Nation in Twenty-First-Century Britain*, Manchester University Press: Manchester, 2019; 288 pp.: 1526126141, £12.99 (pbk)

**Reviewed by:** Rod Earle , *The Open University, UK*

One of the inspirations that propelled the development of this Special Issue on race and racism in criminology was the vitality of recent race scholarship.<sup>1</sup> This is reflected in a flurry of books and articles in journals such as *Ethnic and Racial Studies* and *Identities* that urgently address the ‘return’ of racism, race and nationalism to a political and cultural landscape that appeared to have wished them away to a post-racial, post-nationalist Neverland. The election of a paradigmatically white President in the USA and the UK referendum on membership of the European Union, and its aftermath, represent political conjunctures in which racism and nationalism have been undeniably dynamic. The work of any and all criminologists in those countries will be shaped by these events but without attending to this vibrant critical literature on race criminologists will be ill-equipped to account for their dynamics in their teaching, research, analysis and theorization. The two books reviewed here are chosen for the way they interrogate or open up a recurring problematic in British criminology, namely its deference to US perspectives and narratives on race and racism, and a corresponding lack of attention to the particularities of racism and nationalism in the British Isles (see Phillips et al., this issue).

Susan Neiman’s book was a revelation. I grew up in England during the 1960s and 1970s when the triumph over German Nazism in the Second World War was a staple feature of children’s comics and other reading. I can just remember England’s victory in the 1966 football world cup final over West Germany and how it was adopted as symbolizing a post-war ascendancy that was otherwise rather absent. Wishfully more than actually, it signified Britons’ wider destiny to be the best in the world at everything, and the ghost self-image of their fading empire. Beating Germany in two World Wars *and* the world cup was all the proof anyone could want. Neiman’s book told me how little I had really learned since then about Germany’s efforts to address its past and the profound implications of defeat, division and unification on what it meant to be German. Two

post-graduate degrees in criminology and more than half a lifetime committed to radical and left-wing politics did not prepare me for the extent of my ignorance. This is a beautifully written book, richly detailed with personal anecdotes, philosophical erudition and political commitment springing from every page. From the first she quickly sets the scene and the book's ambition with a story that locates the relevance of her white American Jewish background to the analysis unfolding through the book:

The question of whether Jews should count as white people was not quite settled in the South where I was born. 'There's an old saying,' Reverend Wheeler Parker, who was Emmett Till's cousin, told me. 'If I was Catholic and I lived in the South I'd be worried. If I was Jewish, I'd be packing up. If I was black, I'd be gone.' (p. 3)

The Prologue establishes Neiman's American and Jewish reference points and the resurgent racism that has accompanied Barack Obama's impact on the USA's racial vision and how the book will compare this to her experiences of living and working in Germany. It also introduces the leitmotif that runs through the book. Seemingly acknowledging that a narrow appreciation of all things German is not mine alone, Neiman explains the significance of a characteristically compositional German word, *vergangenheitsaufarbeitung*—'working-off-the past': '[it] was one of the first words I added to my German vocabulary, which was slowly freeing itself from images of tight-lipped men in uniform barking *Jawohl!*' (p. 8). I put my hands up and read on. Tellingly, while there are several subtle semantic variations of the German word, each doing slightly different work, there is no similar set of concepts in the English language. Without labouring the linguistic implications, that is the story of the book. No words, no work. Work needs to be done, and it is not easy work finding the right words.

The book is divided into three parts with the first focusing on the German context of race and racism. It lifted veil after veil that appear to have been laid over an English understanding of the aftermath of Nazism and the way the two Germanies avoided or confronted the atrocities of their past. It is a history living in the present more than most European countries would be comfortable with. Only in Ireland, another country divided by war in the 20th century, and among Irish people have I encountered a need to keep history alive to the present, and recognition of its work for the future.

Neiman speaks frequently and necessarily of the crimes of racism, their triumphant institutionalization in German Nazism and their deep insinuation into US public life. Any criminologist sympathetic to the theoretical insights of desistance where a similar 'working-off-of the past' might be applied and worked through at a personal level, can see how the existence of race and racism are calling for that work to be done. We know what happens when it isn't. The procrastinations, avoidance and neutralizations that obstruct the work of moving on from an Empire are not exclusive to Britain but Neiman calls Part I of her book 'German lessons' for good reason.

Part II is called 'Southern discomfort' and is equally strong stuff. As the chapter title 'Everybody knows about Mississippi' implies, this is now more familiar territory but dogged fieldwork and illuminating interviews are leavened with harsh personal experience. Atrocities and trauma remain shockingly present, Southern Gothic much more of a personally sensed threat than a literary genre. The detail of Neiman's sustained empirical

work and her emotional intelligence as she encounters horrors that hide both in plain sight and dark corners are moving beyond words, frequently because she lets her respondents speak for themselves.

Echoing, if not actually citing, the recent work by, among others, Katheryn Russell-Brown (2019) on the value of Black criminology, Neiman is gently insistent that we allow ourselves to 'be touched by a piece of art' (p. 255) to fully grasp the magnitude of the task to which she turns in Part III—'Setting things straight'. Some might disagree with the exclusive sweep of her claim that '[t]he arts are the only thing that have the power to shake you up' but I have less quarrel with '[a]ll the facts in the world don't matter until they move you, and the arts, broadly speaking, can do that better than anything else' (p. 255). As good as her word, Neiman enters the controversy over the representation, by Dana Schutz, a white artist, of the mutilated corpse of the murdered Emmett Till. This controversial debate on the further crimes of white power, white privilege and white impunity are drawn into fruitful correspondence with Anselm Kiefer's 'ravaging paintings that floodlit German crimes' (p. 255). Drawing Kwame Anthony Appiah into her defence of cultural appropriation and condemnation of Schutz's work, Neiman would, I think, recognize the vitality of the Black criminology being developed by Katheryn Russell-Brown (2019) in the USA and Martin Glynn (2021) in the UK.

My only disappointment in reading this book was that there was no reference to Stan Cohen's *States of Denial*, not least because Neiman begins her book exactly as Cohen does his, with an early childhood memory of her almost identical encounter with the disorienting pull of race and the 'inchoate feeling not exactly of guilt. . . but that something was wrong' (Cohen, 2001: ix). Cohen's book is propelled by his childhood experience of apartheid in South Africa just as Neiman's is by hers in the Jim Crow South, and both are inflected with personal knowledge of anti-Semitism and other racisms as well as, more positively, Jewish teaching traditions and wisdom that can be mobilized against them. Perhaps between the two books and their ignorance of each other, lies the groundwork of a new criminology.

Stan Cohen's selection of epigrams at the start of *States of Denial* includes an extract from George Orwell's (2018) *Notes on Nationalism* and Sivamohan Valluvan's book picks up on the nationalism that Orwell knew lurked ominously but often silently throughout British politics. Across 200 pages of densely argued prose, Valluvan extends and expands Richard Seymour's observation that 'the national question, which in Britain is always a racial question, has become more, not less, central' (p. 183) as we have moved through the Brexit debacle. Again, unfortunately without reference to *States of Denial*, it is the deep-seated and persistent denial of the umbilical connection between racism and nationalism that hobbles a genuine liberation from both. Meticulous and Marxist, for the most part, Valluvan's analysis is an essential guide through some complex theoretical and empirical arguments.

One of Valluvan's achievement's is to demonstrate the concurrence of the relationship between 'nationalism and nations' and 'racism and race'. So much ink has been spilled explaining that 'races' do not actually exist that some people labour under the illusion that, as a result, neither can racism. As Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015) has been quick to stress 'race is the child of racism, not the father'. That same sequencing issue has not troubled the coupling of nation and nationalism to anything like the same extent, and

Valluvan's analysis offers valuable insights into why this might be the case, and the urgency of recognizing the ideological currents that run between one as problematized and the other as naturalized. While nationalism depends on exclusions and boundaries of belonging (borders) in ways that are analogous, if not identical, to racism, the results are far less contested. Nationalism, according to Valluvan's core definition, 'is the recourse to understanding a society's perceived problems through extensive negative reference to the presence of those who do not belong—outsiders who are often construed according to their many ethno-racial guises' (pp. 129–130). It does to geographical space what racism does to the body.

Valluvan suggests that prevailing conventions of understanding nationalism as a politics of belonging contribute to its popularity but that it can be better understood as a politics of enmity. The arguments he develops through six chapters, sandwiched between a helpful summary introduction and a speculative conclusion, is that what racism and nationalism share and mobilize most effectively are 'matters of aversion' (p. 38). Chapter 1 examines the theoretical literature, pulling persuasively from a wide range of sources almost alphabetically, from Arendt, Billig and Cesaire through Fanon to Gellner and beyond. It is an essential primer in critical reading on nationalism that renders the familiar unfamiliar and the world's fixed jigsaw of nations little more than a ragged edged political conjuncture. It successfully reframes the map of Europe and specifically the UK as if through the lens of Basil Davidson's (1992) 'curse of the nation-state' in Africa.

Swinging cleverly from the profoundly theoretical to the unnervingly grounded, Chapter 2 alerts the reader to 'two red herrings: progressive nationalism and populism'. I was slightly less convinced by Valluvan's critical analysis of, and caveats about, the 'progressive nationalism' of the small and emerging nations of Europe, such as Scotland and Catalunya. It would be asking too much for detailed case-by-case analysis, but I felt the exigencies and contingencies of diverse and sometimes divergent struggles within and against the dominant states of Europe, were rather quickly dismissed. The tendency to read these struggles as importing post-colonial politics into the metropolitan heartland can certainly be prone to romanticization and simplification, but their capacity to break or deform the dominant nations is far from negligible. Populism suggests, Valluvan, is always best read as being 'within nationalism' and has little track record of substantive vitality without it.

Chapter 3 continues with the contemporary salience of 'liberalism, Muslims and nation-state values'. The figuration of the Muslim as ominously and disposably 'other' within liberal nationalism is explored with particular vigour and insight. By implying a supranational form of belonging that is global rather than national, metaphysical rather than material, 'the Muslim' occupies an especially hot place in the liberal imagination. Untethered from biological moorings, 'the Muslim' is cultural racism's ultimate avatar. For leftists unwilling to engage with the range and sophistication of Islamic scholarship, the orientalist blinkers offer only a narrow and hollow vision of vibrant and diverse political cultures. As a relative stranger to this literature I found Valluvan's energetic tour refreshing and inspiring. For any criminologist persuaded by the merits of Southern criminology it is essential reading.

Chapters 4 and 5 return to more familiar territory – ‘Conservatism and mourning the nation’ and ‘Unholy alliances: The neoliberal embrace of nation’ but it is in the final two chapters that Valluvan unleashes the full force of his critique: ‘Left problems: The left and welfare state nationalism’ and ‘Conclusion: Absences and futures’. The rising and rousing clamour of nationalism shows no sign of abating, but within it Valluvan finds hope where others despair. There are ‘openings’ to be found and taken. He is stern in his warnings of paths too often taken and it is not often that one finds the simple injunction ‘This won’t do’ in an academic text. He uses his ‘final few pages’ to advance what he calls a ‘corrective on how resistance to the new nationalism’ (p. 184) might be mobilized. The relationship between social media and public (broadcast) media is one field of struggle but the outcomes of the struggles within the Labour Party are another. Here, in the closing of this ambitious and timely book, Valluvan sides with Gilroy (2003) in finding hope for the future in youthful ‘vernaculars’ of both post-nationalism and multiculturalism.

Valluvan is also unusual in apologizing to his reader at the outset for trying to combine an accessible analysis with the conventions of academic rigour while aspiring for a ‘lively mode of writing and argument’. He confesses his ‘penchant for long sentences [. . .] is an affliction’ (p. 26). It only occasionally interferes with the momentum he develops through the force and enthusiasm of his argument. The style of these two books is, however, very different. The grace and ease of Neiman’s prose and narrative contrasts unfortunately with the weight and weaving density of Valluvan’s. Reading *Learning from the Germans* was a real pleasure as well as a revelation. Ironically, it completely fulfils Valluvan’s less well achieved ambition to ‘invite the general reader disposed to critical cultural commentary on the one hand, while still being worthwhile for the academic specialist of race, nation and ideology on the other’ (p. 26). Valluvan’s invitation may not appeal as much to the general reader but he has already secured the attention of the academic specialist with a Symposium on the book published in the June 2020 edition of *Ethnic and Racial Studies* attracting five critically engaged commentaries. Criminologists should consider themselves invited and join the conversation.

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## Notes

1. ‘They think it’s all over. . . there are fans on the pitch. . . it is now!’ is a quote from TV commentary of the closing minutes of extra-time in the 1966 football world cup final as England beat West Germany 4–2. It refers to English fans’ celebration of the first winning goal and then, almost immediately, the second. It has since become a widely used expression in England of emphatic and ecstatic finality.

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