Book Review of 'After Optimism? Ireland, Racism and Globalisation', by Ronit Lentin and Robbie McVeigh (Dublin: Metro Aireann Publications, 2006)

Document Version
Accepted author manuscript

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BOOK REVIEW

Ronit Lentin and Robbie McVeigh (2006) *After Optimism? Ireland, Racism and Globalisation*, Dublin: Metro Éireann Publications, paperback €16.00, 208 pages

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In 2001 when the US magazine *Foreign Policy* placed the Republic of Ireland at the top of the Globalisation Index, Ireland supposedly took its place for the first time among the most globally 'integrated' countries of the twenty first century.[1] Over the next few years however the numbers of 'racist' incidents reported in the Republic of Ireland began to rise indicating that there was a further need to analyse the *cultural* complexities of globalisation which had previously been overshadowed by the economic successes.

It is arguably in this vein that Lentin and McVeigh have set out in this book to (re)consider the intersections of the local and national phenomenon of racism in the context of the state's response to the global intensification of migration. Their desire to highlight what they see as the *political* nature of racism, often overlooked in discussions where 'race' is not referred to explicitly because 'ethnicity' or 'culture' are taken as markers of (essential) difference, is one with which many people would sympathize. However, their main contention that Ireland, previously a 'racial' state, turned upon the passing of the 2004 Citizenship Referendum into a 'racist' state, rests upon a series of arguments which at best only tenuously link discussions about the need to 'police' and 'control' multiculturalism and integration to 'new forms of racism' and finally to the conclusion that, "if you are in partnership with the state – *you are in partnership with an explicitly, unapologetically racist project*, despite all the denial" (p.174 Original Emphasis).

After Optimism: Ireland, Racism and Globalisation consists of ten chapters which aim to deconstruct the commonly conceived view of racism as an individual prejudice which can supposedly only be associated with people or acts that publicly endorse the idea of fixed racial hierarchies, segregation or genocide. 'New' articulations of race and racism in twenty first century Ireland are therein discussed by the authors in light of their often overlooked structural and dialectic attributes, in order to examine the manner in which they believe 'racism' has become increasingly normalized on the island as a whole. They do this in part by emphasizing the problematic nature of the concept of 'anti-racism' which is endorsed by states which they argue systematically and simultaneously "promote policies and positions which result in the exclusion, discrimination and (in

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[1] The indicators used to construct this global 'integration' index included finance, trade, travel and personal communication.

global terms) the domination of black and racialised populations" (p.170). Emphasizing the outcome of the 2004 Citizenship Referendum and the endurance of the British state's colonial influence in the six counties, Lentin and McVeigh conclude that the Southern Irish State and the Northern Irish 'statelet'[2] have become modern day examples of states implicated in the reproduction of local conditions of 'racist' exclusion.

The main weakness of the book appears to lie in the assertion that "the shift from 'racial' to 'racist' state is not a historical process; rather racial states always also operate as racist states" (p.10), as this forces the authors to go from usefully highlighting the increasing structural nature of racist discourse in particular instances, to less useful arguments of overall racist determinism. For example, the authors begin by comparing modern regulatory and exclusionary imperatives of immigration and criminal justice systems both north and south of the boarder with earlier racialised colonial discourses which affirmed the need to 'categorize', 'classify' and 'divide' the native population. They then go on to argue that because the rapid evaluation of Ireland as a globalised state can be *linked* to a new structural nature of racist discourse, all contemporary Republic and Northern Irish state endeavors should be understood almost *exclusively* in terms of an endeavor to justify the criminalization of immigration.

Unlike Robin Cohen's *Migration and its Enemies: global Capital, Migrant Labour and the Nation-State* for example, Lentin and McVeigh's racial state argument seems to *assume* rather than discuss explicitly whether all processes of Othering and exclusion should be understood as 'racist' in the first place and what exactly the implications of doing this are. Similarly, it appears as taken-for-granted that the word 'racist' refers to *all* acts which result in the systematic exclusion of particular groups of people. As a term it can therefore appear at times to be stretched too far.

Chapter eight (entitled: Anti-Travellerism: Towards 'a final solution' to the Traveller 'Problem') is a case in point. Here the authors argue that efforts in the past to 'deal' with what governments north and south of the border have prejudicially misconceived to be a 'Traveller problem', have "constantly carried with it a genocidal logic" (p.131). What begins as an effective illustration – backed up with many examples - of the prevalence of anti-Travellerism on the island of Ireland throughout the twentieth and twentieth-first centuries therefore ends in the assertion (with only one example to back it up involving a Lord Mayor of Belfast who in the 1980s called for the 'incineration' of Travellers) that widespread incitement to hatred towards Travellers belies a supposed all-consuming state inspired genocidal logic:

> It bears emphasising, therefore, that anti-Travellerism in Ireland is not restricted to incitement to hatred. It pervades the logic of those who want to 'help' Travellers as much as of those who want to send them to the city incinerator…anti-Travellerism is not just a project of racists but also of political parties and, crucially, of the state (p.132)

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[2] "Under the Good Friday Agreement,…there is a series of excluded powers - including asylum, migration and citizenship policy – which are central to understanding state racism and which, as it stands , will *never* devolve to the 'racial statelet'" (p.147, original emphasis)

The concept of a 'racist state' appears as a blunt instrument in this context. As has been pointed out elsewhere, describing the state as overtly 'racist' in these terms presupposes a state defined in all-encompassing Marxist terms and thus ignores empirical distinctions between racism institutionalized within the state and racism within society at large.[3] The problems inherent in this stance are especially evident in chapter nine. Here an effort to theorize state racism in Northern Ireland in terms of loyalty to the British Crown, accordingly ignores the role which republicanism - albeit not a defining feature of the Northern Ireland 'racial statelet' – also plays in systematically excluding communities through exclusive definitions of 'Irishness'. The need here to theorize racism in terms of loyalism because "loyalism is a defining feature of the Northern Ireland racial statelet" (p.163), would appear to force Lentin and McVeigh to reduce understandings of racism exclusively to the state.

The remaining chapters of the book are well research and for the most part convincing, if not in terms of their over arching racist determinism, then in their assertions of the normalizing and dialectical nature of exclusionary practices throughout the island of Ireland which increasingly justify unequal treatment of certain groups on the basis of supposedly obvious 'cultural' differences. The authors' attempts to halt what Fintan O'Toole refers to as "the general drift of anti-racism" (Foreword, p.iii), forces the reader to revisit anew euphemisms such as those of 'accommodating diversity' and 'managing migration' on the basis that these are not, despite often being presented as such, unproblematic concepts. Whether they are discursive shifts that disguise old de facto hierarchical assumptions about 'us' and 'them', as Lentin and McVeigh argue, is however something which needs to be discussed further.

In conclusion, *After Optimism?* is a worthy endeavour which challenges current normalized practices, policies and discourses on immigration, citizenship and asylum by highlighting the contradictions inherent in state systems where celebrating diversity goes hand in hand with practices of exclusion. In many ways this book therefore speaks directly to the call which *Translocations* has made for *critical* political and intellectual intervention into contemporary problematics of migration and 'race'. The aforementioned issues notwithstanding, Lentin and McVeigh do make one very important point which should not be underestimated. This is with regard to the need to revisit the usefulness of the concept of 'race' in understanding the systematic discrimination by certain state practices in dictating the meaning of 'commonsense' responses to phenomena such as immigration and citizenship. As has been pointed out elsewhere however by Yuval-Davis and Anthias, it is important to always remember that "reductionism is the twin corollary to 'reification'".[4] While this work therefore attests to the importance of incorporating theorizations of the state within contemporary understandings of the operation of racism and globalisation, its implications that racism can be explained solely in terms of the state or the state can be reduced entirely to 'racist' tendencies, remains open to further debate.

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[3] Fanning, Bryan. (2007). "Against the 'Racial State'", Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review, Vol.96, p.3
[4] Yuval-Davis, Nira. and Anthias, Floya. (1989), 'Introduction' in Yuval-Davis, Nira and Anthias, Floya. (Eds) *Women-Nation-State*, London: Macmillan Press Ltd, p.2

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