

Interview with Tobias HübINETTE

You have been writing about the moment when the anti-racist and the racist tendencies are meeting in the form of whiteness, can you explain more about this?

The idea behind this specific Swedish whiteness crisis is that, if we generalize and divide the Swedish population into two camps, one would be the racist and the other one the anti-racist, both are characterized by being white and Swedish although on the surface they appear to be enemies, which they surely are. There is something which is very striking and which makes both of these camps similar to each other in the way that they are both mourning a Swedishness and a Swedish nation, which is on the wake of disappearing. That is the good old Sweden, that is homogenous Sweden, and on the other hand anti-racist, progressive, feminist Sweden, and everything that comes with it. So the analysis, which is of course controversial, is that both the Swedish racist and the Swedish anti-racist camps long back to the same Sweden and the same Swedishness. And they do not find the current state of Sweden with non-whites Swedes to be a comfortable situation.

So if I understood right, the good Sweden is the anti-racist white Sweden and the old Sweden is racist and white Sweden? If the racists and the anti-racists are sharing the same whiteness, are there any criteria for distinguishing them from each other?

Such analysis privileges whiteness as the main analytical concept and if you are not interested in using concepts such as race and whiteness, there are of course also other ways of looking at the situation. I can understand that such an analysis can sound a bit weird, strange or absurd, because the racist camp would normally be associated with the Far Right and the anti-racist camp with the Left. These two camps are dominated by white Swedes, but ideologically speaking they are very far from each other. So if you are not interested in race and whiteness, I can see that the antagonism is certainly there politically, ideologically, philosophically even. But I am interested in making use of a race and whiteness perspective as I think that it is necessary today in Sweden and also in the other Nordic countries to speak of race and whiteness, as whiteness is really, according to my view, the main core of being Swedish and of Sweden. That is in a sense quite unique if you compare to many other Western countries, where whiteness is surely one way of being US American, British or French, but there are possibilities for non-white Americans, Brits and French to belong to the nation.

You say that whiteness as a concept is widening. Is it also the case in Sweden?

If you look at the migrant population and of course also their children and descendants, most of them are white Europeans. There are a lot of Finns, but also from Norway, Denmark and other neighbouring countries as well as from Germany, the Netherlands and so on. The common way of distinguishing population segments in Sweden would be to divide between Swedes and immigrants, and immigrants also meant the white immigrants, but that has changed, especially within the last

decade. Swedishness has expanded to white migrants and especially the descendants of white migrants, those who are born in Sweden, they are included in this Swedish whiteness. So migrant or immigrant in colloquial speech of today means a non-white person and also more and more in religious terms it means at least a non-Protestant person.

So there are cultural artefacts included in Swedish whiteness and the concept is widening. Is it possible that one day also a Black Muslim is included in Swedishness?

Talking about Swedish whiteness and the Nordic whiteness is to talk about the whiteness de luxe, the whiteness that is the most white of all whitenesses in the Western world. There are historical reasons for this, but it is not just about history. It is also still very strongly the imaginary world of the nation. Of course there are some groups that are liminal, like for example the Christian minorities from the Middle East, yet another example are Muslims from the Balkans, another Catholics from the Latin America, and groups like these do challenge this structure of the Swedish whiteness. But a Black Muslim would be very far from being included within Swedishness.

So there are certain groups that are challenging this concept of whiteness. Is there not any possibility that whiteness or even colour itself would be arbitrary in definition of whiteness?

Race takes out class, religion, culture, ethnicity, but there are minorities and individual cases that challenge this master-signifier of race. One example are people like myself who are adopted, who come from Third World countries, like in Asia, Africa and Latin America, and who are adopted by white Swedes. All adoptees challenge this racial structure, racial regime, and racial hierarchy of Swedishness. But on the collective level there are also examples that these have difficulties in finding employment, and in advancing socially. Another group that might be interesting to bring up

here are the mixed race Swedes with a white parent and a non-white parent. And it is actually the mixed race Swedes who are on the forefront to challenge this regime.

How is whiteness visible, taking place? Is whiteness an ideology?

Well, it is a huge academic problem when you introduce the concept of whiteness and there are of course other famous analyses of power structures in Western society, one would be patriarchy, another the bourgeois society if you are a Marxist and so on. But whiteness is a new concept in the Swedish setting. It depends on which theoretical standpoint you take when you bring up such a concept. I mean, on one hand there are parallels to class certainly. There are also interesting parallels to patriarchy and gender; when race and gender meet, and whiteness and patriarchy meet, something happens. And you can approach whiteness through bodily concepts, for example, as a beauty ideal if you look at concrete corporeal aspects of whiteness. But if you are more into psycho-analytical analyses of Swedishness and contemporary Sweden, the concept of a master signifier would be one way of describing and talking about whiteness as a fantasy or a phantasm even.

Let's imagine a subject, who is homosexual, established in cultural life, wealthy, and black. How is whiteness influencing this ideal subject? And how does this master signifier of whiteness influence and interpellate this subject?

By looking at the US and the UK through media and popular culture we are all familiar with the fact that there are non-white Americans and Brits who have power and are famous, even celebrities. There are of course those also here in Sweden and in the Nordic countries, but they are very few compared to the US and the UK. You can even talk about a black Afro-American bourgeoisie, if you want to, which is also self-producing. This is not the case in Sweden, there are only certain individuals. It is

a little bit forbidden to talk about this, but if you believe in my analysis of whiteness as a master signifier in Sweden and in the Nordic countries, one conclusion would be: it is absolutely necessary that a powerful, successful non-white Swede must be together with a white Swede, whether heterosexual or non-heterosexual. I am saying this, although it is very painful to talk about this, but the fact is that you will not find a successful, rich, powerful non-white person in Sweden who is together with another non-white person. It is almost like a cultural, social or political law saying that you have to be together and to reproduce with a white person, as a non-white person who strives for power and wealth, otherwise you will fail. And this is not the case in UK and the US where there is a non-white bourgeoisie. They can be black, they can be Arab, Indian, Chinese and so on, and they are self-producing, reproducing themselves mainly within their own group.

So whiteness will come through a partner? What about legislative whiteness, are there any traces of it in the legislation, in the constitution?

Not anymore, but it is interesting to know that still as late as the 1950s there were restrictions if a Lutheran wanted to marry a non-Lutheran. At that time, when Sweden was much more white than today, religion and race were related. Race has always been there, more or less. But there is no history of prohibitions against mixed couples in Sweden.

If whiteness is not traceable in law, then what are the apparatuses, how does it develop? Is it spontaneously or through some structures?

Historically it was through science, which was then politicized and the political sphere implemented these ideas and practiced race science on the population. So in Sweden in the 1920s, 30s, 40, 50s, half a century ago, there were not many minorities, thus racism was practiced mainly on the majority population, not on the minority. The minority were also affected, especially the

Roma and the Sami, but these minorities were tiny compared to the majority population. One consequence was the infamous sterilization programme in Sweden where the vast majority of the people who were forcibly sterilized, because it was decided by the state apparatus that they were not fit for reproduction because of this race science idea, were white Swedes, not minority Swedes. In US it was mainly the minorities who were sterilized, the native Americans, black Americans and so on. And of course in Germany and other fascist states this sterilization was projected toward the minorities.

Until when was the sterilization programme practiced in Sweden?

It was implemented in the 1920s and it was dissolved in the beginning of the 1970s. But there are other arenas of society where this extreme form of whiteness gets articulated and one of them would be, perhaps vulgar, but still very popular, the spheres of beauty contests, of fashion and of sexuality. You can call it an economy of desire, where the Swedish and Nordic white bodies, both female and male, are idealized as the perfect bodies. You can see that even in such a profoundly multicultural society as the US where the white bodies that are privileged, for example in beauty contests and in cinema, and in the world of commercials and ads are the white bodies that resemble the Nordic white bodies.

Is the master signifier of whiteness also reproduced in the scientific production, in knowledge production?

Sure: Let's take the example of migration studies for example. The whole super-structure of conducting research on migrants in Sweden would be solely to focus on the migrants, and more or less only blaming the victim when you find something that is wrong. So there is such a huge blind spot in whiteness although that is changing. There are people in the academia who try to challenge the silence around race and whiteness, but up until recently it has been ignored.

You are talking about passive involvement, the researchers not writing and talking about an issue, but is there any kind of active involvement of the notion of whiteness in the scientific production?

One good example, that is so naturalized that you don't even talk about it, is if you take medicine and natural sciences, again what makes Sweden different from the US and the UK, and France too, is that the ideal body that you use as norm and model is a white body. Again another, very ordinary field, but nevertheless interesting and valid, is the field of fashion and clothes. In the US, the UK or in France you would find sizes that fit non-white minorities as well, who are usually smaller than the majority population. But you do not find that in Sweden. And regarding commodities, also the visual representation of customers is a white body. So whatever field you come to, the Swedish whiteness is there.

So it is everywhere but not in the legislation?

Well, the constitution has never mentioned race, because at the time when the constitution was written, if we go back to the time when present Sweden was constituted, that is in the 19th Century, race science was of course big, and it was the truth at that time. It was part of the regime and the knowledge production at the Swedish universities. But race was never actually an issue to be written in the legislation like it was in the US where race was essential within the field of law, and it was necessary to demarcate the whites from the non-whites. Sweden was more homogenous, although some people that would today be considered white were racialised, but they were so small in numbers that there was no need to write it in the law explicitly.

How do you explain the Swedish involvement in the decolonization movement elsewhere in the world, in the Third World countries' emancipatory movements? Is the Swedish involvement in the 60s and 70s a foundational myth of Sweden as being modern and anti-racist, and good

Sweden? How did this interest in the Third World countries' emancipatory movements in the decolonization process historically develop?

Up until WW2 and even up until the 50s, the whiteness that was the norm in the pan-western spectrum was suprematist whiteness, which said that only whites were thought fit to rule the world. This whiteness was badly demolished through the decolonization movement. Let's call it the pre-68 whiteness that is today more or less only endorsed by the Far Right. So that is why today we find the rhetoric of the far right so out-dated, so anachronistic, although it was not such a long time ago when the prime ministers of Western countries were still talking about the right to keep the colonies and to rule over the Third World. Even up until the 1960s, many were prepared to fight to keep the colonies and rule over the non-whites. What happened after the 1960s was that a new whiteness was formulated and articulated on the ruins of the old whiteness. And Sweden and the other Nordic countries were the ones who monopolized, not alone of course, the formulation of this new whiteness that is the anti-racist, solidararian, UN-kind of whiteness. This new whiteness was very much involved in physical encounters with the other, through transracial adoption, mixed marriages, in friendships, in eating the other's food, dressing in the other's clothes and so on. We are taught that white anti-racists of the 1968 movement are the ones that challenged the old whiteness and the ones who are almost so inherently good that it almost becomes religious. For example a white woman hugging a non-white child, that is an iconic image that is within us and we need it more or less all the time in television, movies, in ads and so on. And it doesn't need to be an adopted, or mixed child it can be any non-white child. This could in fact be the prime symbol of the post-68 whiteness. Whereas a symbol of a pre-68 whiteness would probably be a Nazi or a British or French colonial soldier. But if you turn this table around and look at it from another angle, you can ask why Sweden and the other Nordic countries were the leading countries in reformulating the pre-68 whiteness. A step back would say that the pre-68 whiteness projected whiteness to



*"She does not know
Her beauty ..."*

the Nordic countries to such an extent that they saw themselves as the whitest of the whites, especially Sweden but also Norway and Denmark. And if this whiteness were going to survive in this new globalized, decolonized era, and also the era of international migration that also started from the 1960s, then it would have to be reformulated and reborn. But whiteness still has to be the leading principle, the leading norm globally on the planet. So why did Sweden take the lead? Because no other Western nation would actually dare to take the lead other than the Swedes and the Scandinavians. And it is actually not the Finns, usually the Swedes and the Norwegians, but also the Danes. It is because they are the whitest of the whites, and they still are, although they are the good whites.

So you really interpret whiteness as the master signifier and we can even say that Sweden is over-determined by whiteness. In this sense, was the engagement in the decolonization movement latently reproducing racism?

Let's go back to the 1970s. Sweden was still very white although there were some non-white migrants in place, but not many yet. The encounters with the native white Swedes at the time were such that they were very welcome as they had been fighting for example the Americans and the Brits. This welcoming was supported by the social democratic government. But on another level, the everyday ordinary production and reproduction of racial stereotypes and images were never challenged at all. There is an interesting study on how the white Swedes who supported the Vietnamese against the US and its allies, portrayed the Vietnamese in their solidararian magazines; although they identified themselves as being totally antiracist, totally solidararian, internationalist, leftist, and so on, they still had very racialized, stereotypical fantasies of the other, in this case of Asians. Another example would be the experiences of the non-white Swedes who have been living with the white Swedes intimately, such as adoptees like myself. Although I am very aware of the fact that there is a very strong image in Sweden, that white adoptive parents, who have children from the

Spontaneity

Third World are inherently antiracist, as if they have taken a kind of vaccination, a pill against racism because they have brought the other into their own homes. But if you talk to adoptees and also this is the case with mixed race people, there are numerous stories of how their white parents and also white siblings and even white partners would relate to them through the colonial and racial archive and library of fantasies and images of the others.

Now we come to the ideological sphere; These anti-racist people supporting the decolonization movement in the world come from the position of the Left. But considering the master signifier of the whiteness, it is somehow trapping the philosophies?

One of the reasons why the whiteness structure is still so strong and dominant, and has a hegemonic position in post-68 Sweden, is that antiracism has been and is so heavily associated with the Left, Marxism, socialism or at least with Left-Liberalism. You can say that it goes back to the Swedish labour movement, and in this case to the Swedish labour movement, social democracy, where class was the main category to mobilize around, and later on also gender. One could play with the idea that if antiracism was not so monopolized by the Left in Sweden, the consciousness surrounding issues of race and whiteness could have been bigger. I am giving an example; I attend lectures often, like most scholars do, and there are big names coming to Sweden often, many of them are non-white, often coming from the US and the UK, and many of them speak about race and whiteness. And these events, lectures and open seminars usually take place in the centre of Stockholm in the white bourgeois areas, or in the equivalent ones in Malmö or Gothenburg. And when you go to these events, you will find that the vast majority of the audience is white and leftist. Also the vast majority of the audience, probably all of them, identify themselves as antiracist, even more strongly as anti-Fascist or anti-Nazi and so on. Some of them are even militant anti-Fascists. What strikes me as the years pass by and as the silence around race and whiteness is still so strong in Sweden, is the discrepancy between



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the often non-white guest speakers, scholars, coming from abroad, the English speaking world, and the issues questions, problems, they are speaking about while the audience is white. This discrepancy is getting more and more embarrassing for the Swedish Left antiracist movement.

So there are no platforms, like in the UK, institutions like INIVA or Third Text and researchers like Paul Gilroy or Stuart Hall?

Not acknowledged, but there are spaces, spheres, even venues here and there. But you need to know them. Some minority groups have started, very much inspired by the UK and US spaces for knowledge production and dissemination. One good example would be the Swedes with an African background in Sweden. You can call it identity politics if you want to of course. The way of mobilizing their demographic group is to center on pan-Africanism and by doing that they can master also not just the Africans but also the descendants of slaves for example from the South and North America. They have their own venue, where they have lectures. Most of the speakers are not very well known, not even by the white Swedish antiracists, but some of them are. In the greater Stockholm area Swedish minority groups with a Muslim background have also started to create some non-white spaces, but you would not see them announced in the public arena.

Counter-constructivist Model

(La Fontaine stories for immigrants)

paper-film in nine acts

Sezgin Boynik & Minna L. Henriksson
Labyrinth Press
2012

