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Returning to *Reactionary Democracy*: reviews, responses and reflections

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It has been a humbling process to see *Reactionary Democracy* engaged with so thoroughly by scholars we respect and admire. We were pleased to read that the book provided food for thought for the four reviewers who each hail from different fields of expertise, and would like to thank them and *Ethnic and Racial Studies* for this symposium. It also provides us with an opportunity to revisit the book one year after its publication.

Reactionary Democracy was published in late April 2020. Needless to say, a lot has happened since the publication and the writing of these reviews. For these reasons, it was reassuring to see the reviewers stress how relevant the book remains, and as Nivi Manchanda notes, that it still offers “a prescient analysis of this latest ‘crisis of democracy’”. Manchanda’s review is particularly useful in highlighting many of the important developments and crises which have unfolded in the past year. While many saw Joe Biden’s election as resolving the rise of reaction, democracy remains in a fragile state. Despite a scandal-ridden term, Trump had managed to increase his share of the vote. This reactionary turn, which culminated in the storming of the capitol on the 6th of January, was soon represented by Biden and others as exceptional and un-American.

Somewhat contradictorily, we witnessed demands for healing divisions and reconciliation with the “other side”, which demonstrated that the scale of the threat and its institutional support was neither fully understood nor taken as seriously as it should be. Therefore, even if the mob and Trump were held to account, this would likely be as illiberal scapegoats, while those who supported and enabled them, and whose interests they serve, would remain part of the discussion. It was telling that the final straw for

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Trumpism for many was the attack on a powerful institution of American democracy, as opposed to those against racialised communities at the sharp end of Trump's rhetoric, policies and platforms. The exceptionalising of the far right also undermines Biden's promise to address systemic racism following the murder of George Floyd and Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, particularly considering the very different police responses to BLM and the mob storming the capitol.

The pandemic has hastened the move towards increasingly reactionary forms of democracy, whether based on further racialization of politics or through the authoritarian responses of governments. This is something that Manchanda outlines powerfully, building on her recent work and the growing literature helping us make sense of such dramatic changes.

One key aim of the book was to create a conceptual framework to map and trace the current reactionary moment and we were also extremely pleased to read that this has proven useful. We are of course hugely indebted to the many authors and colleagues who have inspired our research to date, and it is rewarding to see that *Reactionary Democracy* both builds on and adds to their work. The thread we tried to construct within the book resonated well with reviewers, from our tracing of the evolution of racism in the post-war period and the interplay between liberal and illiberal articulations; to the role played by populism in obscuring the scale of the reactionary wave and even legitimizing it; and finally to the way the idea of "the people" has been exploited to support elitist agendas, conning us into thinking we are witnessing bottom-up processes seeking to address inequality and injustice rather than top-down ones that defend and reassert the status quo and where our elite is wrongly portrayed as powerless and "the people" innately reactionary.

In particular, we are pleased that our outline of the role liberalism and liberals played in the resurgence of reactionary politics was well received. Chapters one and two sought to trace the ways in which liberalism both depends on an illiberal far or extreme right to displace and distract from its own racism and democratic failures, while at the same time platforming and legitimizing far right ideas under the auspices of liberal values, such as free speech. It was good to see the reviewers, notably Manchanda, Rima Saini and Nisha Kapoor, engage with this argument, as well as the centring of racism in our analysis, something we believe has been overlooked in much of the literature on the far right, which tends to see liberalism as a bulwark against the illiberal far right.

In terms of mainstreaming, we argue in *Reactionary Democracy* that this is a dual process and that without the mainstream's active agency, reactionary politics would not be where they are today. Furthermore, we believe it is essential to remember that liberalism has not always been against what we widely and wrongly consider antithetical to it. Nor is liberal democracy so virtuous and sacred that it must be defended at all costs from the far right. Such

defences include insulating it from criticism of its racist history and aspects, or even by legitimizing and mainstreaming racist and xenophobic ideas to fend off perceived electoral challenges from the far right. As Manchanda notes in her review, our aim is indeed to “demonstrate the imbrication of racism with ideas of democracy and progress”, and that while this does not have to be this way, it clearly is in our present context.

Our historical and case study approach also seemed to prove useful to provide a more complete understanding of the current situation. Indeed, we believe that only through a longer view and comparative historical approach can we understand the current reactionary trends, something which is often lacking in political and social scientific research focused on the here and now. Our case studies aim to illuminate the fact that, while broad trends can and should be found, a more precise contextual and comparative approach is needed to understand the conditions, processes and character of each reactionary project. One cannot understand the US situation without slavery and the backlash to civil rights movements, or the UK without empire and post-colonial nostalgia, or France without secularism, or any of these without the systemic and material inequality that reactionaries seek to deny and maintain. We were particularly pleased to see how Saini connected such historical, political and ideological strategies (such as the reactionary “culture war”) with the unequal material conditions upon which reactionary ideas sit, what they reinforce and where they have their greatest effect.

It was reassuring that all reviewers praised the clarity and accessibility of the content. As Marta Araujo notes, “Reactionary Democracy is easily read, without much academic jargon and likely to appeal to a wide audience, from the general public to journalists, those interested in political affairs, as well as students and researchers of political and democratic theories”. She also praises how we manage to overcome disciplinary boundaries and draw much needed links across related and yet often separate fields and areas of expertise, and notably the study of the far right which often leaves out a careful study of racism. Our aim was always to write a book that spoke across our respective disciplines of Politics and Sociology, but also reached beyond academia, without impacting the content or simplifying what we believe is a complex situation. Moving away from and adapting an academic style was not easy and while we felt more can be done, we were extremely pleased to see in the reviews and wider feedback we have received that this has been successful.

This is important to us as the role and impact of public intellectuals and the media has been key in this reactionary counter hegemonic project. For too long, reactionaries, racists and conservatives have sought to influence public understanding and debate, something Saini’s review focuses precisely on and which has been close to our hearts and minds for a while now. In recent years, we have witnessed an incredibly successful rise in of reactionary

academics and intellectuals who have represented themselves as victims and outsiders in elite institutions, misrepresented academic research and used their institutional positions, media platforms and liberal tropes to re-introduce and give legitimacy to what were thought of as illiberal, outdated, debunked ideas, including eugenics and scientific racism. We have let such trends develop, perhaps due to our complacency and incredulity that these would ever come back to the mainstream or perhaps because we, collectively, have privileged less public facing avenues for publication. As a results, having prominent academics and public intellectuals debate whether "rising ethnic diversity is a threat to the west" or argue that "racial self-interest is not racism" in the mainstream is no longer surprising, nor is the fact some are increasingly open in their attempts at rehabilitating eugenics and fascism.

One of our aims was to address the tendency to look at the rise and mainstreaming of the far right in a bottom up manner, whereby the demands of "the people" must be met by a passive elite, whether they agree with them or not. However, Kapoor is correct in stating that "populism cannot simply be thought of as a top-down affair but one where multiple and varying class interests are able to simultaneously advocate for a particular agenda in parallel but mutually reinforcing fashion". This is something we agree with. The key, we believe, is to start by challenging the dominant narrative that legitimizes racism and reaction through the "people" (who are racialised as white and working class), and blame them when the project fails or becomes too extreme. Indeed, we should not remove the agency of "the people", however understood, in any of this, and just as such agency could precipitate us towards the legitimization of racism and more reaction, it can also be the source of hope and a way of challenging inequality across racial and class positions and interests.

Kapoor also argues that the "liberal-conservative variations of racism have seldom sought to disguise or sanitise the exclusionary, criminalising and dehumanising discourses that have held firmly the place of racially othered subjects". While we agree that these discourses and effects are long established and that overlap and continuity exists between liberals and conservatives, we may differ on the matter of the issue of disguises and sanitation. Central to our critique of liberalism and conceptualization of liberal racism is that the latter serves to displace, disguise and sanitise racism, however transparently, in ways that not only allow for denial, but mainstreaming. Particularly amongst liberals and liberal "post-racial" societies that may reject illiberal articulations of racism as unacceptable, but do not recognize systemic forms (and are open to debating illiberal racists), or conservatives who reject the far right, but deploy moderate versions of their ideas. Of course, the lines between the illiberal and liberal blur as the latter opens the door to more illiberal forms of racism, racists are emboldened and the place of "racially othered subjects" is enforced more strongly and explicitly.

Araujo makes a number of comments that do not seem to match our intent, which may point to a lack of clarity on our part, although they do not seem to be shared by other reviewers. One key criticism is that our focus on racism as a “bad idea” or “ideology conveyed in public discourse” with the focus on political figures and commentators, somehow neglects “race as a modern political practice”. This, Araujo argues, demonstrates a failure to clearly articulate a critique of liberal racism. It is true that we do not focus on policy in the book. Our stated aim is to study the discursive trajectory of reactionary ideas (which do not necessarily translate into policy). Yet, one of our main arguments is how liberals and liberalism more broadly focus on and use ideas to deny, distract from and displace systemic and institutional racism, but that these ideas play a role in the policy and practices which enforce and consolidate racial inequality and injustice. This is not just about our present situation and policies such as the burqa bans and UK hostile environment, but about broader historical trajectories such as slavery and colonialism.

Another criticism from Araujo is based on the apparent pre-emption of a “systematic analysis of the role of progressive forces, and mainly the left, in the perpetuation of racism”. Interestingly, this resonates very much with one of the key arguments made in the book, which is that much of what we believe is progressive can indeed be reactionary. It is therefore telling that in the review what is discussed as liberal racism is assumed to be necessarily right-wing. Liberal articulations of racism are very much found on the left, but we would not call these progressive, hence our title *Reactionary Democracy*. In fact, our work has been very critical of the liberal racist position liberal racist positions taken by the left. This is discussed in the book, through our case studies, whether it is a critique of the role played by Socialist Francois Mitterrand in propping up the FN in the 80s or Francois Hollande’s failure to revert the tide of reaction in his more recent mandate, the new Labour embrace of anti-immigration discourse or the Democrats’ post-racial approach and failure to address systemic racism. Needless to say, our predominant focus is on the right and for good reason as we are interested in hegemonic forms of discourse.

We are well aware that there are areas and issues that *Reactionary Democracy* does not cover. Some of which we would have liked to, but needed to maintain focus, but we tried to point readers to colleagues after colleagues: who do and whose expertise we are indebted to. Therefore, we appreciate the reviewers highlighting gaps and providing some useful criticism and conversation about such fields and potential areas of future research and we hope *Reactionary Democracy* can play a role in these discussions.

Saini rightly points out that more could have been said about gender and particularly the role played by white liberal feminists in the mainstreaming of reactionary tropes. We agree and think this is an important avenue of

research. While we touch on this aspect in the book and wider work on “Liberal Islamophobia”, the focus on certain articulations of feminism is not developed, but we tried where possible to point to the work of colleagues after colleagues, who examine this, notably anti-racist feminists. Manchanda also explores in her review a number of further avenues of research, broadening the scope of the remit of the book and drawing links with other literature and political projects. The latter is particularly important and exciting. One of the threads running through the book is the need to pursue and open up the space for more radical democratic alternatives. Not only in terms of going beyond existing theory and establishment political parties, but learning from and supporting activists, something Manchanda highlights convincingly. This is incredibly promising and thought-provoking for us, and where we see *Reactionary Democracy* fit: as part of a broader network of analysis and tools aiming to map the current reactionary moment so that we can better counter it.

Overall, these reviews show us that *Reactionary Democracy* does what we hoped it would. It is not perfect, and it does not cover everything we wished it could, but it appears to succeed in building a coherent conceptual framework to understand the current reactionary moment, something we believe is essential to then being able to counter it. It also withstands academic scrutiny, even though we also consciously wrote this book as a political intervention. Nivi Manchanda’s words could not summarize better what we hoped to achieve and we are grateful it carried across: *Reactionary Democracy* “is unflinching in its clarity of objective and the political stakes involved in the perpetuation of the status quo”.