THE STRANGE LIFE OF FREE SPEECH TODAY: A TRANSNATIONAL REFLECTION ON NATIONALISM, RACISM, AND NOISE

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The Strange Life of Free Speech Today?

The 2021 EFACIS conference theme focused on dialogue and exchange as conditions of tolerance and interculturalism, particularly in light of what it termed the worrying "resurgence of toxic nationalist discourse" in Europe today. My research in recent years has focused on understandings of freedom of speech, an important – if not sufficient – condition for dialogue and exchange. However, this essay reflects not on insufficiency, but disruption.

The contemporary articulations in question unsettle normative relationships between free speech and democratic goods, as these dominant understandings have become bound up in articulating the resurgent and openly aggressive nationalisms in question. Freedom of speech has become symbolically incorporated into some highly exclusionist political projects, and it is this strange life that I propose to reflect on here. This strange life, it turns out, can be rendered legible by examining it, despite its relative novelty, in terms of something more enduring – the reproduction and contestation of forms of racism in Europe. This essay considers these interconnecting developments in a range of contexts. Somewhat unusually for this publication, the analysis takes quite a while to turn to developments in Ireland. It started life as a keynote for the conference, providing a wider context for considerations of these contemporary themes. In the conclusion to this essay version, it speculates on the reasons for their relative absence in Ireland.

Strange Turns

Over the past years I have been writing about understandings of freedom of speech across several European polities during a period punctuated by recurring and patterned 'free speech controversies', or declarations of free speech crisis. Curiously, for a media studies academic, this focus has not emerged directly from questions of communication, as for all its public valency, the idea of "freedom of speech" is of far more disciplinary significance in law and political philosophy (Bonotti and Seglow 2-16), where the emphasis is predominantly on the nature and limits of freedom, rather than the question of what constitutes "speech" and how it is communicatively produced, circulated and experienced. Instead, this interest has been formed by the extent to which these controversies are suffused with the politics of race and racism in a number of involved ways, which can be best introduced through some initial sketches.

My first serious engagement with these questions began in 2015, after the attacks on the office of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris. I conducted a research project with colleagues examining the extraordinary political and cultural generativity of these acts of terror in France and elsewhere (Titley et al.). Unsurprisingly, given the lethal targeting of journalists and media workers, the attacks were powerfully hailed as an attack on freedom of speech, and both media organizations and ordinary people rallied in defence of a profession that, as Reporters without Borders noted, was being increasingly targeted by lethal political violence designed to silence (101 journalists were killed globally in 2015; Freedman 217). At the same time, a different politics took shape, one that did not promote solidarity but instead demanded that Muslim people in France *désolidariser,* that is, actively declare and prove their non-solidarity with the terrorists. This essentialist tethering of Muslims to communal and religious difference through pressure for proof of national loyalty centrally involved demands for declarations of fidelity to freedom of speech as a defining European or national value. Thus, one process of essentialization co-produces another, as this powerful rhetoric rendered it as a property of the nation, one that the nation's others must prove they do not refuse, or lack.

While this demand for Muslims in France to prove their non-solidarity with the killers had a particular valence in time and place, it is coherent with a broader 'integrationist' turn in the governance of lived multiculturalism in Western Europe. This shift in governance, prevalent from the mid-2000s onwards, did not demand assimilation as such, nor integration to an ethnicized national culture, but instead fidelity to liberal, republican and democratic values. The problem, as Sivamohan Valluvan lays out in his important book, *The Clamour of Nationalism*, is that "[r]acialised minorities are intuitively represented as having to learn and adopt these liberal principles that are definitive of the nation. The presupposed white citizen is instilled, by default, with a civic universalist ethos while the racialised citizen, first-generation and otherwise, acquires these qualities" (71). This is the first strange turn – what happens when a democratic value is inscribed as a cultural, even civilizationary property?

Another brief vignette serves to introduce a second dimension. In 2017-2018, I spent a year at the University of Helsinki. During this time the presidential election took place, and the candidate for the *Perussuomalaiset* – True Finns party – contested the election on a platform defending free speech against presumed assault from un-named quarters. This, to say the least, was a curious campaign headline in a country consistently ranked near the top of the World Press Freedom Index and assorted civil liberties indices, and at no point did the candidate feel the need to define more clearly the threats it was facing. Instead, and in openly strategic attempt to import this theme from politics elsewhere, the campaign sought to cultivate a sensibility often associated with what is reductively termed "right-wing populism". That is, an affective contention that ordinary people are not free to express themselves, and especially on questions of immigration, where they will be silenced by the accusation of racism. In the familiar 'playbook' of this political performance, the reluctantly political far-right

populist must speak for the people, as the people are not allowed to speak for themselves.

Strange Turns, Familiar Echoes

This notion of a censorious antiracism, while now often indexed to seemingly interminable discussions of 'woke politics' in Anglophone media cultures, has an established, mid-to-late twentieth century transnational history on the conservative and nationalist political right. In *The Fire Is Upon Us*, Nicholas Buccola provides a contextual and narrative history of the debate in Cambridge University in 1965 between James Baldwin and William Buckley Jr. In this year of violence, repression, and resistance, Buckley, founder of the conservative journal *The National Review*, published an essay "Are you Racist?" in which he argued that the word "racist" was being used "indiscriminately", its meaning diluted by making everything into a question of racism, preventing both a focus on "real racism" – that is, Hitler – and also leading to innocent people being denounced for simply trying to describe difficult realities, and tell the truth as they see it (317). Thus, three years before the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., anti-racism was already too censorious, too indiscriminate and uncompromising, it had *already gone too far*. For Buccola, this essay was indicative of the "protean nature of right-wing racial politics in response to the civil rights revolution" (318). That is, as African Americans gained political rights and the focus risked shifting to inequality and the crushing legacies of slavery and segregation, a turn to "color blindness" (192) allowed conservatives to admit to some historical injustice but to use the threshold of civil rights to declare the past over, and thus racism over, and to focus, in the decades that followed, on arguing that inequality was largely the fault of oppressed groups themselves.

The maligned innocence of the ordinary person, cowed into near-silence by the weight of official anti-racist opinion, is also what animates Enoch Powell's so-called "rivers of blood" speech in 1968 to the Conservative Political Centre in Birmingham. While his first imagined constituent, a "middle-aged quite ordinary man" who feared that "in this country in 15-20 years' time the black man will have the whip hand over the white man" (Hirsch 48) is the most readily recognized, there is a second such interlocutor in the latter half of the speech, the "only white" living in a formerly respectable street in Wolverhampton, a "woman old-age pensioner" who simply doesn't want to rent rooms to "Negroes". For this she is ostracized at every turn – "when she goes to the shop she is followed by children, charming wide-grinning picaninnies. They cannot speak English, but one word they know. 'Racialist' they chant." (Hirsch 49)

The anxious pensioner is particularly anxious about the future consequences of the 1968 Race Relations Act, the very act Powell was campaigning against when he made his speech, and which introduced initial forms of anti-discrimination legislation to the UK, forbidding the refusal of housing, employment, or services on grounds of colour, ethnicity or origin. However, Powell's underlying objection was to migration as

a process of demographic violence that threatened the basis of specifically English nationhood by not only disrupting Anglo-Saxon heredity but also the socio-cultural reproduction of inherited national characteristics and values. Thus, as Robbie Shilliam notes, for Powell the Race Relations Act made "white English" strangers in their own country, and indeed minoritized them, as the laws denied the "English man" the right to manage his own affairs in his own country (242). This historical shift could only be contrived by elites such as politicians and educationalists shutting down political debate, lecturing ordinary people who knew that their society was changing profoundly about the need not to be prejudiced or "racialist". Powell must speak for the 'silenced' ordinary man, as anti-racism is an elite imposition that artificially re-engineers the nation.

Speaking under the threat of erasure is a key imaginative fixation of nationalist resentment; the authenticity and truth of what is said are an effect of who is trying to 'silence' it. Today, this imaginary is primarily advanced through claims to be defending freedom of speech. Facing down the censorship of the elites means breaking taboos – usually the same taboos, over and over again – and anything that is said in the interests of the people is legitimate. This is the second strange turn. A notion so clearly vested in the epistemological and democratic significance of speech is now taken to mean, as the anthropologist Joan Scott argued when discussing the attempts of the white supremacist Richard Spencer to organize lecture tours on US university campuses, "the right to one's opinion, however unfounded, however ungrounded, and it extends to every venue, every institution" ("On Free Speech" 4). It is the right to make noise, and to regard any response to it as an arbitrary restriction on the freedom of the people who matter.

These are but two major aspects of this strange life, yet they suffice to illustrate a set of deeper problems. The first, as noted, is clearly political, and requires some more probing into why and how the articulation of racism is striated with appeals to freedom. The second, however, is that our traditional frameworks for understanding freedom of speech are inadequate for understanding the productivity of this political incorporation and appropriation. This requires some explanation.

Making Speech Strange Again

The paradigmatic literature on freedom of speech and racism is legal and normative. It reflects that, very often, conflicts over freedom of speech and racism predominantly focus on the limits of permissible speech (Bonotti and Seglow 5-16), such as debates over if and when racist expression comes to constitute hate speech, and what this then means for forms of regulation or redress (Bleich 1-3). It is not to diminish the manifest importance of these paradigms to suggest that the focus on defining limits does not really explain the politics of free speech and racism taking shape.

In part this is because recurrent debates about freedom of speech suffer from what John Durham Peters, in his wonderful book *Courting the Abyss: Free Speech and the*

Liberal Tradition has called their "recursivity", whereby a concrete incident or conflict is rapidly framed in terms of the normative principle and its extent and limits (12-16). These discussions are also often conducted through metaphors – "the slippery slope" most famously – all of which encourage a sense that freedom of speech is a state of achievement that we possess, and risk losing in large part or fully. However, as the linguist Nick Riemer argues,

> As real-life language-users, we never actually encounter some abstract thing called 'speech'. What we encounter is situated language-use [...]. It's a peculiarly modern idea that it could make sense to separate speech *as such* from its content, context and effects in the way that most freedom of speech discussions presuppose. To ignore the differences between different utterances, and sweep them indiscriminately up into the catch-all category 'speech' – as we do when we demand freedom for it – is to frame the debate at a level of generality and abstraction that we never actually experience. (n.pag.)

In his discussion of what he terms "modern liberal free speech theory", Anshuman A. Mondal argues that that tendency to abstraction conceives of freedom as extending across a flat homogenous plane. This landscape is flat and smooth, and, ideally, as you move across it, you should not encounter any obstacles until you hit its outer limits, which are the "legitimate restraints on liberty" enacted by law and institutions, such as tackling the incitement of violence. Any bump and disruption that you do encounter constitutes an infringement, or censorship, a slide on the slippery slope (503-508).

Mondal juxtaposes the "single homogenous plane of liberty" with a topographical model of discourse as liquid, flowing through an irregular and uneven terrain. Here, speech is blocked and diverted by topographical features – law and the state, yes, but also institutions, practices, a wider map of closures, foreclosures, and openings (509-10). But it also flows and moulds, shifting the terrain. This matrix of restriction and possibility is radically differentiated according to our social positioning. And, while it is an obvious point, it is often missed in these debates that context is formative – how speech 'flows' is regulated and enabled differently in different communicative contexts, from a current affairs debate on television, to a parliamentary speech, to a university seminar, to protest in a public place, or posting on a corporate social media platform.

Therefore, if we approach communication as a terrain of contingencies, of closure, foreclosure and exclusion, as well as openings, gaps, and flows, it becomes easier to understand the strangeness of free speech as a question of political, cultural, and media framing, whereby some issues can come to *publicly constitute a crisis of free speech, and others cannot.* The question that follows is why. While such an approach is often regarded, in smooth terrain-style arguments, as insufficient fidelity to a settled, foundational principle, the reality of speech and communication is that many people and communities globally experience repression and marginalization, including of their speech, and only some of this is recognized as part of any putative free speech crisis. That is, certain forms of speech are *rendered legible or illegible as speech that can aspire to be recognized as free speech*. Departing from Mondal's realist topographical model of free speech, we need to examine what can lay claim to recog-

nition as a “free speech issue”, and what forms of restriction, coercion, and limitation cannot, and why. This requires returning to the political dimension of strangeness, and laying out some basic coordinates for understanding the production of contemporary racisms.

Postracial Racism

The idea of postracialism is complex and contested, and freighted with varying questions and controversies across context (Goldberg 1-21). I consequently draw on a very limited understanding of it in this essay, which is to suggest that postracialism is not the straightforward denial of racism, but presumptive control over what it means. Opening this out means starting with thinking about racism as historical. Racism, as Ambalavaner Sivanandan famously put it, “does not stay still” (64). It is given shape through shifting social and economic relations, political practices and ideological inputs, national imaginaries and forms of representation. It demands that we pay attention to how particular populations are racialized in specific historical contexts, through practices and ideas that circulate across national borders. And it demands, as Sivanandan argues, being attentive to how political struggles transform its articulation (56).

The EFACIS keynote from which this essay is developed was conceived of in the wake of sustained struggle. From the summer of 2020 – responding to the extraordinary mobilization of Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests in the United States, following the police murder of George Floyd – vigils and solidarity protests sprang up across European towns and cities. Almost immediately, they became something more than acts of solidarity – they were acts of translation. They contended that if we look here, and not just over there, there is racism to be addressed. It is not exactly the same there as here, but we can make connections. Thus, marches in Paris and elsewhere in France linked the murder of Floyd to that of Adama Traoré, killed by police in 2016. Activists in Greece linked the hyper-visible murder in the US to the invisibilized deaths at the frontier of Fortress Europe, and the implacable immiseration of the camps and grey zones of asylum-seeker containment. Refugee-led movements in Ireland made connections to the human damage inflicted by the inhumane direct provision system. In the Netherlands, campaign groups demanded whether the blackface of the traditional “Black Pete” / St Niklas celebrations could still be regarded as nothing but ‘innocent’ fun for children. Racism, they argued, does not stand still.

European governmental and official reaction to events in the United States initially chimed with the outrage and solidarity manifested by these events and protests. But the tone changed when these acts of connection and translation gathered pace. The response was defensive and prickly, but it drew on established histories of racial exceptionalism. As Sara Salem and Vanessa Thompson have argued (2-4), the twentieth-century history of images of anti-Black violence in the United States has

"served to universalise the North American experience of racism" in Europe, and thus to externalize it. Consequently, the attempt of activists to make links and forge transnational relations between experiences and processes of racism were met with predictable outbursts of political *amour propre* – in the United States there is real racism, but not here, where we all agree racism is wrong, and you cannot accuse Greece, Ireland, France, the Netherlands, of something as serious as racism.

These events capture something very important about postracialism in Europe. Following the defeat of fascism and in the aftermath of the Holocaust, both popular rejection of fascist politics, and state and institutional efforts to repudiate the concept of race, resulted in the profound marginalization of politics explicitly committed to hierarchical, scientifically-inflected ideas of racism (Camus and Lebourg). The discrediting of the idea of race, and of regimes and movements that have come to symbolize the totality of racism, has informed a prevalent sense that racism is predominantly of the past, and defined by its pasts. Barnor Hesse summarizes it in the following way:

> Since the ending of the US civil rights movement, the Cold War and the apartheid regime in South Africa, political discussion of the meaning of racism seems to be over in the West. Its sociality is overwhelmingly conceived as a problem that has largely been overcome. (10)

This historical narrative, of course, has many important contextual variations. Some nations, particularly those forced to contend with fascist and imperial pasts, are freed or have freed themselves of racism. Other nations, of course, have always been free of it. Regardless, it is very different from the historical sensibility advanced by Sivanandan, which refuses how this narrative extracts racism from political economy and social structure, locating it principally in the realm of bad ideas, such as far-right ideology and individual prejudices, which then manifest in the world as racist acts. And, this kind of postracial presumption has important political effects.

The first is a dominant investment in the 'correct' definition of racism. Alana Lentin has described this as a stance of "not racism", that is, that "calling something racist" is only legitimate if it is based on "the predominance of individualist moralism; the reliance on an overly narrow, strictly biological and hierarchical account of racism; and the universalisation of racism as equally practiced by all groups independent of status and power" (411). Further, this investment in a correct definition is not simply about shared understanding. It is a particular kind of demand that is being made in societies dominantly imagined as anti-racist and white, and it is a *demand for substantive control of what racism means*. In the tumult of conflict over what is recognized and recognizable as racism, those, like BLM-affiliated activists in Europe that refuse to restrict themselves to these agreed elements of 'what is really racist', become the ones who are restricting public discussion, and shutting down debate.

This, therefore, is where the question of free speech enters the fray, as it is held that it is antiracists that refuse closure on what racism really means. In this insistence on a reasonable definition, there is racism, and "not racism", it is a question of categorical

certainty. And, if racism is fully located in ideas and ideology, and expressed through intentional speech acts and actions, it can and should be proven to be racism or "not racism". If it is racism, then ideas can be refuted, and attitudes can be changed, ideally through open debate. This operation is conducted on the smooth surface of liberty; short of a threshold of hate speech or incitement, a refusal to engage with the free flow of ideas is regarded as a refusal of democratic values and procedure. It is through this tension that postracialism informs the strange life of free speech.

Firstly, if the *pastness of racism* requires sticking to the 'accepted meaning' of racism, it is also taken as licence to position racialized knowledge, artefacts, and discourses as innocent-once-more, valid subjects of expression because we are all over race, and racism is rejected. The afore-mentioned blackface controversies, for example, have long been framed as free speech issues, where it is not just a right to expression which is claimed, but also, as Gloria Wekker has argued in *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* in relation to *Zwart Piet* ("Black Pete") in the Netherlands, a right to innocence. Innocence means freedom from the accusation of the racism we agree is bad-but-historically-overcome, but also freedom to enjoy the pleasures of racism without inhibition (3-16). Thus the freedom in freedom of speech is interpreted, in this postracial framework, as freedom from what is always seen as arbitrary inhibition, and thus to deny our innocence is to invite not just a resentful defence of freedom, but a desire to offend in the name of freedom, to enact freedom through offence.

It is this kind of desire which permeates the endless spectacles that comprise of contemporary 'free speech crises', spectacles organized by themes of restriction and limit, yet facilitated and shaped by the dynamics of abundant communication. As an example, take the familiar transnational figure of the 'contrarian', the 'controversial' figure who speaks their mind. The idea of the contrarian, if it has any useful meaning, suggests a countervailing public presence, politically ambivalent perhaps, but dedicated above all to seeking out and probing the seams of any stifling consensus or settled orthodoxy. The contemporary contrarian, however, who seeks to recycle familiar racist ideas as heterodox insight, thrives precisely because of the churn and instability of media culture. They depend on the affinity between media circulation and postracial openness to repetitively restage the same debates and confront the same predictable taboos. It is this that explains how Thilo Sarrazin, with *Deutschland schafft sich ab* (Germany Abolishes Itself, 2010), Éric Zemmour, with *Le suicide français* (The French Suicide, 2014), and Douglas Murray, with *The Strange Death of Europe* (2017), could essentially write variations on the same 'great replacement' theme while presenting these books as fearless interventions in the unsaid and unsayable. The value of dismally familiar racialized ideas can only be laundered through circulation, through the renewal that comes with actively seeking out opportunities to be volubly 'silenced'.

This genre thrives at the intersection of postracial presumption and speech idealism, recuperating racialized knowledge as an exercise in free thinking, as 'thought experi-

ments' that increase the reasonable plurality of the public sphere. With racism repudiated and closure achieved on its meaning, everything can and should be open, and opened up, again and again. And of course, this endless opening up, again and again, is the very lifeblood of the circulation of discourse in a media economy where people are competing intensively for attention, and where social media are predicated on the ceaseless production and circulation of opinion and reaction.

This combination of discursive closure (definition) and openness (media circulation) poses a real challenge for how we think about freedom of speech and democracy, because contrary to the kind of thin, absolutist ideas that now circulate in media debate, the democratic contribution of speech also involves moments, mechanisms, processes, and mobilizations for closure as a resolution of debate. But, there is no closure in a system of circulation where the same talking points, the same stereotypes, the same mythologies, the same memes, keep constantly demanding engagement, debate, dialogue, the generation of discourse. It is perhaps possible to see, from here, how these conditions have been so generous to one of the issues mentioned in the introduction: far-right and radical nationalist capture of the value of free speech. The freedom being claimed is liberty not from regulation but from any restraint on, *or refusal of*, engagement. The appeal to freedom of speech, in this calculation, means demanding that all contentions are treated as discrete goods in the market-place of ideas; racial science, 'race realism', theories of population replacement, and revisionist histories can be presented as arbitrarily stigmatized contributions to 'diversity of thought'.

The capture of freedom of speech by the complex networks of the transnational far-right should not surprise us. It is a longstanding tactic. Engagement promises to amplify ideas that have often sought pseudo-intellectual plausibility. Refusal to engage promises the publicity of victimhood, and suggests that opponents are the real anti-democrats, resorting to refusal and restriction because they cannot defeat their arguments. It is this tension which is central to the most recent iteration of free speech crises, the putative problem of 'woke' universities.

The Transnational Attack on Academic Freedom

The relation of academic freedom to freedom of speech is often assumed to be one of degree, but it is far more vexed and contradictory. Across contexts that I am familiar with, academic colleagues have been noting a particularly acute kind of conflict between the two. They had encountered students influenced by the dense online networks of far-right ideological production – while not always realizing that this was what was happening to them – who were keen to rehearse arguments, particularly about race and gender, that they had become aware of. Talk about them in class, these YouTube personas would tell them, that's free thinking, that's what freedom of speech is for.

However, as Robert Mark Simpson and Amia Srinivasan have pointed out, academic freedom is not merely the extension of freedom of speech into the university (186ff). To put it somewhat idealistically, the mission of the university includes discriminating between ideas, and this involves closure, actively neglecting those which have been discredited or disproven. Therefore, as they argue in relation to the relation between participation and expertise in university events, "it is no intrinsic affront to the intellectual culture of the university [...] that a person should be deprived of a platform to express her views because of a negative appraisal of her credibility or the content of her views" (206). Similarly, Joan Scott has differentiated between freedom of speech as a "human right" and academic freedom as "a freedom granted in principle by the state to scholars (usually within educational institutions) because their critical activity has been considered vital to the public good, and because it is a self-regulated activity committed to processes of relentless questioning that requires disciplined forms of reading and reasoning" (n.pag.). As Scott notes, there are multiple ways in which states have come to increasingly violate this 'covenant', and a marked instance of this is the idea that academics who teach about, inter alia, race and racism, are abusing academic freedom, and they must be limited in order to protect free speech itself (n.pag.).

The most remarked-upon incidence of this is, of course, in the United States, where, since the start of 2021, there have been rolling attempts in state legislatures to ban the "promotion of divisive concepts" that, the accusation goes, suggest that the US, and/or white people, are "fundamentally racist". Much of this centres on a concocted moral panic about "critical race theory", a very specific theoretical field examining the historical intersection of race-making and legal provision, which is made to stand in for, particularly in the aftermath of the BLM mobilization, the frightening excesses of anti-racism, which seeks to divide the nation by milking white guilt.

Clearly, this is a variation on the established 'colour-blind' politics discussed previously, that to bring race into it is the real racism. But it is also a tactic that understands very well the decontextualizing dynamics of contemporary media and information systems. It doesn't matter that "critical race theory" is a fantasy projection which has nothing substantive to do with its academic existence. The point is circulation; not achieving mastery over meaning but preventing any accepted meaning from taking hold. So, not being able to 'defend your definition' doesn't matter as the politics being pursued is the noise itself, the production of confusion, the satisfactions of endless, repetitive debates.

Despite the very different conditions in which it has been engendered, the debate about academic freedom in France has strange echoes of the critical race panic in the US. It followed the horrendous murder in October 2020 of a high school teacher, Samuel Paty, in a Parisian suburb by a young man of Chechen origin who had come to France as an asylum-seeker. He targeted Paty after an online campaign was waged against him for displaying *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed in a classroom discussion.

Amidst the sorrow and tributes, what Mayanthi Fernando has described as a "political theatre" of re-establishing republican authority was launched, targeting Muslim associational life, but also, teaching the *wrong ideas* in universities (n.pag.). In early November 2020, the Minister of National Education, Jean Michel Blanquer, stated that "indigenist, racialist and decolonial ideologies imported from North America" were in part responsible for creating the conditioning that led to Samuel Paty's assassination. Emmanuel Macron criticized academics that "ethnicize social questions" and thus, like critical race theory in Idaho, split the Republic. In February 2021, the Minister for Higher Education, Research and Innovation, Frédérique Vidal, castigated the "cancer-like spread" of "Islamo-leftism" within French academia, accusing academics of misusing their positions to disseminate ideologies that promote division in the nation (see Gautier and Zancarini-Fournel 1-16).

It is important to note that Vidal's statement was met with significant push-back from within universities, and it also prompted a debate about the creep of far-right ideas into mainstream political discourse: as the data scientist David Chavalarias demonstrated, the idea of *islamo-gauchisme* – "Islamo-leftism" – was exclusively used on Twitter by far-right accounts between 2017-2020, before it started to appear in such key pronouncements (n.pag.). However, what is equally important to note is how this kind of political spectacle has been replicated across national contexts. Migration researchers in Denmark have, during spring and summer 2021, been subject to orchestrated attacks in parliament, named under parliamentary privilege, and accused of wasting public funds on gender, critical migration, and postcolonial studies (Meret n.pag.) These attacks have been instigated from the radical right, but found sufficient support from other parties. In the UK, in March 2021, the so-called Sewell report into racial disparities in the impacts of Covid-19 set out a definition of racism as "direct animus towards ethnic minorities", and thus that any racial disparities in the impact of covid must, in order to be discussed in terms of racism, be directly tracked back to this animus (Knox).

These attacks, clearly, have different political rationales, but their transnational synchronicity is not an accident. As the pandemic, in the rich world, dissipates in intensity, and after the anti-racist protests that may act as preludes to more dissent to come, a politics has formed that seeks once again to restrict political understandings of racism, and to deny its structural and historical formation. The problem does not lie in our societies, the wounded proposition goes, but in the ideas we use to misrepresent them. Anyone who does not accept closure on racism's meaning seeks to divide where there are no divisions, and does so by importing ideas – for instance, American ideas imported to France, French theory imported to the US – that they seek to impose on society, regardless of their lack of salience.

Stranger Still: The Particulars of the Irish Public Sphere

Keen observers of EFACIS publications will note something eminently strange about this essay – the almost complete lack, thus far, of reference to Ireland. Irish public

culture has simply not witnessed antagonisms being played out around the question of freedom of speech, and there are particular, rather than exceptional reasons for this. The most important is that, in the main contexts under discussion – France, the UK, United States – parts of the political and media establishment are mobilizing to delegitimate antiracist and decolonial social movements whose conjunctural politics is also informed by a demand for a reckoning with the colonial and racist inheritances of the not-quite-finished-past. In the other, more comparable contexts mentioned, such as Finland and Denmark, the 'weaponization' of free speech is primarily – though in the latter case, not exclusively – deployed in the radical right's populist ventriloquism; we can't say what we want in our own country anymore. The political generativity of declaring a 'free speech crisis' has little purchase in terms of politics in Ireland, where dominant forms of nationalism and statism are not overtly dependent on the 'migration/integration problem', and where the revanchist ultra-rightism that has ebbed and flowed in the European post-war party political spectrum has never had any political resonance (Camus and Lebourg 7-34).

Nevertheless, in an intensively transnational media environment, the set pieces from elsewhere constitute attractive repertoires of action. This is most evident among the nascent far-right groups that have emerged and mobilized unevenly from a wider, highly mediated radical right milieu, and who seek to adapt tactics and 'playbooks' from other contexts in search of any form of visibility or traction. The Irish Freedom Party, for example, proclaims "championing free speech" and "opposing political correctness and shutting down debate on vital issues" among its core concerns (McDaid), but in practice this is a predictably derivative word salad half-heartedly in search of a plausible referent in social or political life. This kind of rhetoric was briefly ramped up during a number rallies seeking to oppose the reform of hate speech legislation in early 2020; 'free speech rallies' were held that sought to marshal the defence of a 'sacred principle' as a front for far-right recruitment, but to no real effect (this 'front' approach would have greater, if ephemeral, success during the social dislocation of the pandemic and periods of lockdown, but the free speech framework was relegated to secondary status).

The far-right's half-hearted attempts to mobilize a framework that has proven to be profoundly giving in other political contexts are weirdly mirrored by media commentators' attempts to transpose patterned anxieties about freedom of speech into Irish public culture. *The Irish Times*, for example, published a baffling large selection of opinion pieces in 2021 about the scourge of 'cancel culture', but in every instance these articles moved from a brief exposition of a British or American controversy into abstract homilies as to the value of an embattled freedom of speech, beset from all sides by generational extremism (see, for example, McDowell, McRedmond). In this kind of referential grab-bag, 'free speech crisis' functions as a way of gesturing at manifest antagonisms over the legitimacy of forms of speech in the public sphere, while evading the hard work of understanding these contests over legitimacy by reducing them to the zero-sum game of gauging fidelity to a sacrosanct principle. It remains to

be seen whether there are sufficiently divisive issues vested in real antagonisms that could provoke a more sustained mobilization of this transnational repertoire.

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