



1. **Sara Ahmed**

October 29th, 2009 @ 2:59 am

Peter Tatchell invites us to find evidence of "my Islamophobia, racism or support for imperialist wars or the "war on terror" in the articles that can be downloaded from his website. I would like to say that a brief glance at some of these articles shows some very serious problems in terms of the employment of racialised vocabularies, for example in: Their Multiculturalism and Ours; Why has the left gone soft on human rights?; The New Dark Ages (you don't need to read Frantz Fanon to discuss the problem with the use of the very term 'the new dark ages' though Fanon, as always would help) and Islamic Fundamentalism in Britain. I don't have the time in this brief informal response for the call to respond to go through all of the problems with these pieces, for example, with how some of the critiques of 'universal human rights' discourse which have been an important part of LGBT, feminist, socialist as well as anti-racist histories are represented as 'going soft'. I do intend to offer a systematic critique of some of the terms of the arguments used in due course, which I will publish where they can be downloaded, in the interests of sustaining and enabling a debate. But I do want to question here how Mr Tatchell is responding to the critique, and even to the critique of the response to the critique offered in this very thoughtful and careful piece of writing by Aren Aizura. Critiques of racism are reduced and misheard as personal attacks, which is what blocks a hearing of the critique. In the end, the situation becomes re-coded as a question of individual reputation and good will: we lose the chance to attend to the politics of the original critique.

We need to reflect on what we are talking about when we are talking about racism. Racism in speech does not simply depend on the explicit articulation of ideas of racial superiority but often works given that such associations do not need to be made explicit. So for example politicians might use a qualifier 'this is not a war against Islam' and then use repeatedly terms like 'Islamic terrorists' which work to associate Islam with terror through the mere proximity of the words: the repetition of that proximity makes the association 'essential'. In other words, proximities becomes attributes (they become 'sticky' as I suggested in my book, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*). The process of attribution is in turn bound up with the justification of action, especially in cases where actions are presented as moral whilst involving force (war on terror becomes about freedom from oppression/violence, or even liberation from the oppressors, where freedom resides here, 'in us', oppression resides there, 'with them'). So some forms of violence becomes represented as intrinsic to some forms of culture, and not to others (violence 'here' would be individual or exceptional rather than something that can be attributed to 'us').

One of the hardest aspects of this process is how even languages of liberation and freedom, which we might assume to be 'our languages', to be oppositional, to be about challenging dominant norms and making possible new forms of flourishing, can be used in this process: freedom can be what 'we' have or even what we are. Other critics have pointed out how the language of freedom can be a technology for distinguishing 'an us' from 'a them': from Judith Butler, to Jasbir Puar, to Jin Haritaworn, Tamsila Tauqir and Esra Erdem, the authors of the article, whose passing from print we are right to mourn. When governments justify war on the grounds of freedom from oppressive gender regimes, it helps to recognise that these justifications have a history, to refuse to hear them as in any way 'new'. As Gayatri Spivak taught us, empire itself was justified in these terms, with a description that remains extraordinary for its precision: 'white men saving brown women from brown men'. Homophobia too can be exercised as what 'the others' needs liberating from; it too can become attributed to others, and thus an attribute of others (homophobia can be seen as intrinsic to Islam but homophobia in the West would be seen as extrinsic, as an individual problem or a problem with individuals). The language of sexual freedom and

sexual rights can thus exercised as a political gift. When freedom or rights becomes a justification for war and empire, they become cultural attributes: what we have, what we give them, what we must force them to have. To become aware of this process is not to withdraw from a commitment to freedoms, but it must mean acquiring a certain caution about turning our commitments into our own attributes or even ego ideals (as if we as activists know in advance what is good or right for ourselves or for others). We must call for a recognition of how racism in speech can employ the languages of freedom, which conceal the violence of its mark (note the recent uses of freedom of speech to justify the freedom of some to articulate racist views, or the reduction of freedom of speech to 'freedom to be offensive'). When we are dealing with language and power we are dealing with how power often does not reveal itself: power becomes the capacity not simply to regulate speech but to generate ideas through proximity: freedom for example is put near certain other categories, giving them both value and force. My own work on Islamophobia for instance has looked at how 'being hurt or offended' by racism becomes seen as the 'problem' of Muslims who don't integrate, such that Islam becomes what offends our freedom, what challenges our freedom. None of these associations have to become articulated as a viewpoints, nothing has to be explicitly said.

It might be helpful to point out that homophobic speech can also work like this, by withdrawing from the necessity to articulate a viewpoint: for example, someone does not have to be anti-gay by saying 'all gays are paedophiles' or 'all gays endanger the well-being of our children', all they need to do is put the category of paedophilia 'near' to the category of homosexual to create this effect. Or note how if a lesbian or gay person is involved in child abuse, the category of lesbian or gay will be made explicit in media reporting, which becomes an implicit invitation to make queerness part of the problem of the abuse: but a heterosexual person will be involved in child abuse (much more commonly) and their heterosexuality will not be brought up in the description, which allows heterosexuality to disappear from the scene of abuse. The way in which problems are presented makes some people and not others into problems (this again involves a process of attribution: you make the attributes of x essential to the problem). A critical and complex understanding of language and power is needed to get at this mechanism. We must take the time we need to get at this.

It is my view that Mr Tatchell's writings on Islam and multiculturalism repeat and reproduce many 'problematic proximities' between Islam and violence, and thus participate in the culture of Islamophobia. It is because this culture exists that we must take care not to reproduce its effects. I refuse the call to express solidarity with such work. I would also say that the apologies given to Mr Tatchell are a symptom of the problem rather than a solution. One of the most problematic texts I have read in many years is in fact the apology produced by Raw Nerve: which helps to reveal what is going on in the situation better than anything (it not only grossly caricatures the original argument, but it actually represents those critiqued as the ones to whom we should be grateful, who should receive our thanks). Still we can do things with problems: some texts in their problematic associations can help us understand the world we are. As Audre Lorde (an early black lesbian feminist critic of racism and imperialism in both the women's movement and in lesbian and gay politics) taught me: we need to struggle to find better ways of describing what goes on in our world, which means staying proximate to the scenes of its violence.

I am aware that if there is any response to my comments it is likely that it will be to expose their error. But even if that is the case, its worth putting these words down. We all need to get words out there, words that attempt to offer new descriptions, to give us the possibility of imagining new worlds. Words can be offered as signs of hope; they get passed around, they can become line that connect us, in the political struggle for other worlds.