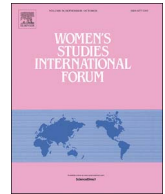




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The 'crisis' of white hegemony, neonationalist femininities and antiracist feminism

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ABSTRACT

The rise of neonationalist politics and racist activism has characterised many European countries in recent years. Moreover, there is a growing public focus on gendered and sexualised intimacies. These two tendencies have increasingly intertwined and sexual violence has become a site for struggles over feminist and (anti)racist politics. The article examines what I call the 'crisis' of white hegemony arising in the aftermath of the arrival of a large number of refugees in 2015–2016 and the different strategies that women's and feminist activism has developed. Within white nationalism, there is an upsurge of 'white border guard femininities': white women who mobilise on social media and in far-right groups. Simultaneously, antiracist feminist activism has strengthened. It seeks to confront racist discourses of foreign perpetrators and to redirect the discussion by addressing structural aspects of racial and gendered hierarchies and voicing experiences of harassment that are bypassed in the public discussions.

Introduction

Gender and sexuality have not only been by-products of colonial and racial encounters, but essential for their (re)structuring. According to Ann Laura Stoler (2002, 39) the 'control over sexuality and reproduction was at the core of defining colonial privilege and its boundaries'. The sexual threat discourse that portrayed racialised other men as rapists of white women was a central means to uphold racial hierarchies and to carry out colonial politics. White women took part in and benefited from the racialised norms, but at the same time their sexuality was restricted by these moral codes. Likewise, in the racially segregated South of the US the portrayal of black men as sexual threat legitimated the control of black sexualities and actions to prohibit interracial intimate relations (Collins, 2000, 144). In current Europe, sexuality and sexual violence have become what Ticktin (2008) calls the 'language of border control': public focus on the (alleged) sexual threat posed by migrant or racialised minority men serve to define the boundaries of the nation-state, belonging and citizenship.

Sexuality and sexual violence also bear an important role in the neonationalist and racist politics that has strengthened in many European countries during the last decade. Right-wing populist parties with anti-immigration and 'natives first' agendas have gained support from the electorate; in addition, centre-right parties and some leftist actors have engaged with similar rhetoric (e.g. Hervik, 2011; Lentini & Titley, 2011). Moreover, blatant racism and white nationalism have found new channels through social media and developed multiple

platforms on the Internet (e.g. Horsti & Nikunen, 2013; Keskinen, 2014). In neonationalist rhetoric, racialising discourses of violence against women are drawn upon to invoke the cultural otherness of migrants and racialised minorities, for example when so-called honour-related violence or sexual assaults by minority men are debated (e.g. Keskinen, 2011, 2012). Moreover, right-wing populists have sought to capitalise on the rights of homosexuals to promote anti-Islamic views (e.g. Norocel, 2013).

This article examines the role of gender and sexuality in what has been named the 'refugee crisis' when a large number of asylum seekers entered Europe during summer and autumn 2015. The focus is on Finland, a country that has a relatively low share of migrant and minority population in European comparison but received close to 30,000 refugees within those autumn months – a number that was nearly tenfold to previous years. Most of the arriving refugees were Iraqi men, which raised intense debates in media and politics in a country where the corner stones of national identity are built on welfare state, gender equality and white Western-ness. In this article, I characterise the societal responses in Finland as 'moral panic', referring to the extensive media coverage and statements by authorities and politicians that grouped individual events together to produce interpretations of a specific (racialised) phenomenon (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978, 16–17). The discussions and suggested actions went well beyond what was known to have happened, evidencing that the entering of the refugees was regarded as a threat to societal values and interests by several, although not all, segments of the society.

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In this article, I investigate the development of the ‘moral panic’ in the aftermath of the arrival of the refugees and the different responses of the Finnish society. The events showed that it was not only the authorities and governmental actors who sought to define the problem(s) and actions at stake, but also women activists across the political spectre participated in and actively shaped these processes. In the public sphere, the most visible groups of women activists came from the white nationalist movement and the feminist movement. In the following, I examine the actions and strategies of these two groups and their part in the wider societal processes. An analysis of the two different groups enables a multifaceted understanding of how gender and sexuality shape racial politics.

The article argues that the societal responses following the arrival of the refugees should be understood as a ‘crisis of white hegemony’ that has specific gendered and sexualised dynamics. In the following, I first discuss the central concepts and theories in order to develop a post-colonial feminist analysis of racial formation. Second, the data and method are introduced. The analysis is divided into three sections. I first detect the role of politicians, authorities and media in the creation of the crisis atmosphere; then examine women's role in white nationalism and its racial politics; and lastly present the discourses and strategies forwarded by feminist activists. In conclusion, the article discusses the gendered and sexualised politics of white hegemony, white domination and their contestations that the results give rise to.

Gender, sexuality and Nordic racial formations

Finland and the other Nordic countries are often perceived as having been outsiders to the colonial project. While it is true that only Denmark and Sweden had colonies outside Europe and none of the countries ruled empires comparable to the British, French or Dutch, several studies have evidenced the various ways in which the Nordic countries participated in colonial endeavours, trade relations, missionary work and circulation of colonial representations (e.g. Keskinen, Tuori, Irni, & Mulinari, 2009; Loftsdóttir & Jensen, 2012; McEachrane, 2015). Recent studies have also detected the ignored histories and continuities of colonialism and racial categorisations that developed within the region (e.g. Gärdebo, Öhman, & Maruyama, 2014; Hübinette & Lundström, 2014; Naum & Nordin, 2013). These histories certainly differ from the ones of the former colonial empires; nevertheless, the multiple ties to and participation in the colonial project, as well as the outspoken wish to belong to the white European civilisation characterise the countries in the Nordic region. For a nation like Finland, which had a precarious position in relation to the East-West divide and racial categorisations, clear demarcations towards the racialised ‘others’ have been an important way to demonstrate belonging to the West (Keskinen, 2014; Urponen, 2010). Concomitantly, the Nordic countries' relations to colonial histories and their current effects have been theorised as ‘colonial complicity’ (Vuorela, 2009), which captures the logic of intertwining and participation while also recognising the specificities of the Nordic context.

Culture and gender relations have a prominent place in what has been called ‘neoracism’ (Balibar, 1991), which refers more to changing configurations of racism than to qualitatively new phenomena. Especially, the anti-Muslim racism that intensified after 9/11 in the western countries has elaborated ideas of inescapable cultural differences in relation to gender and sexuality (Keskinen, 2012). With reference to the bodily coverage and alleged oppression of women in Muslim communities, racialised notions of gender and sexuality have been weaved into claims of ‘too much’ respect for differences and the dead end of multicultural politics (e.g. Lentini & Titley, 2011). In the Nordic countries, national identities are developed around a self-evident white norm but also notions of exceptional achievements in gender equality (Keskinen et al., 2009). The national community is imagined as gender equal, tolerant towards sexual minorities and committed to strong work ethics that upholds the welfare state – constructed against notions of ‘bad

patriarchies’, intolerance and welfare dependency projected onto the bodies of migrants and racialised minorities.

In order to grasp how the connection between whiteness and national identity is both reproduced and challenged on a constant basis, I find the concept ‘racial formation’ useful. Omi and Winant (2015, 109) define racial formation as the ‘socio-historical process by which racial identities are created, lived out, transformed and deployed’. In Finland, as in the other Nordic countries, racial identities are not used in official categorisations, as the state policies are based on colourblind universalism; nevertheless, such identifications structure everyday lives and collective activities. The concept racial formation emphasises the role of racial politics in shaping socio-historical processes: this involves the actions by the state and civil society, as well as group formation and identity processes. Other scholars, such as Mulinari and Neergaard (2017), have argued for the concept of racial regime, but in my view this places too much emphasis on the role of state and ruling. In this article, I build on the idea that racial politics is not only about the hegemonic rule of the society but also about resistance and creation of alternative political narratives by those racialised as others. I analyse women's participation in white nationalism and feminist movements as part of the processes that shape the racial formation in Finland, viewing it as a continuous process that includes different actors and multiple claims.

In their analysis of the US, Omi and Winant (2015) identify three phases of racial politics that move from the rise of the civil rights movement through the white backlash to the colour-blind Obama era. In the Nordic context, Hübinette and Lundström (2014) have sought to characterise Swedish racial histories through a division into three periods: white purity, white solidarity and white melancholia. While I find Hübinette and Lundström's work inspiring, I have chosen somewhat different concepts and approaches to analyse whiteness and racial politics. They adopt the concept ‘hegemonic whiteness’ from Hughey (2010), who describes the dominant form of whiteness in a similar manner that Connell (1987) theorised hegemonic masculinity that subordinates other kinds of masculinities. Hughey (2010) argues that instead of identifying a range of white identities, researchers should focus on hegemonic whiteness that connects diverse groups such as white supremacists and white antiracists. I have instead chosen to write about ‘white hegemony’, with which I do not refer to one monolithic whiteness but an understanding of white hegemony as norms, discourses and structures. White identities are created in these settings, but they can be varied and changing. The idea of hegemony is important here, since it points towards consent, common sense and taken-for-granted notions (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2016; Gramsci, 1978) that place whiteness at the centre and reproduce material inequalities.

Moreover, I propose a postcolonial feminist analysis of racial formation that pays attention to the postcolonial legacies, global inequalities and gendered/sexualised aspects of racial politics. These elements have been largely ignored by Omi and Winant and while acknowledged by Nordic scholars inspired by the racial formation approach, such as Hübinette and Lundström (2014) and Mulinari and Neergaard (2017), further theoretical and empirical elaboration is needed, to which this article seeks to contribute. I have earlier developed a postcolonial feminist analysis of racial formation in relation to the rise of white nationalism and the gendered/sexualised threats expressed within this movement arguing that they are signs of ruptures to the hegemony of whiteness, i.e. that the self-evident white male norm has been questioned and its particularity has been exposed (Keskinen, 2013). I developed the concept *white border guard masculinities* to grasp the processes of defending the allegedly threatened gendered and racialised order through a reinstalling of white masculine power, yet in a form that requires a re-imagining of political subjectivities. Policing gendered, sexualised and racialised borders is central for such masculinities. In this article, I seek to develop this theoretical analysis by focusing on the role of different kinds of femininities and feminist activism in racial politics in the context of the racial histories and currents

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