

BOOK FORUM

Multiculturalism, moralism, and the politics of a “new” nationalism

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Comment on JONATHAN FRIEDMAN, *Politicamente corretto. Il conformismo morale come regime*, edited by Piero Zanini, translation by Francesca Nicola and Piero Zanini, Milano, Meltemi, 2018, pp. 348.

Jonathan Friedman has written powerfully about the political and economic transformation of Euro-American societies since the 1970s (Friedman 1995; Friedman and Friedman 2008)¹. Friedman rejects the view that finance capital represents a particular stage of capitalism. Instead, he sees present-day decentralizing of capital accumulation as the recurrent rise of finance and withdrawal of capital from production. He is in the excellent company of Fernand Braudel and Giovanni Arrighi – as well as John Maynard Keynes – in underlining the conflict between long-term, fixed capital and the speculative nature of finance capital (Braudel 1982; Arrighi 1994; Keynes 1936). As hegemonic centers of capitalist accumulation rise, so do the costs of doing business, which encourage the export of capital and the increasing importance of credit and finance to feebly, and fleetingly, step into the breach. The powerful industrialized nations that settled World War II, and rebuilt the global economy through the establishment of the Bretton Woods multilateral system, are presently experiencing economic decline, the unraveling of social institutions, and the rise of political instability that has accompanied growing disparities in wealth.

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The politics of multiculturalism has emerged during the same period when European and North American financial and political leaders have turned against Keynesian economic policies, especially capital controls, and implemented policies that exported capital and simultaneously rolled back social provisions of the welfare state (Baca 2006; Baca 2010). Befitting of Friedman's iconoclasm, *Politicamente corretto. Il conformismo morale come regime*, highlights the moralistic nature of multicultural politics by taking aim at Sweden, for many, the poster-child of the welfare state. Friedman takes the reader beneath these positive images of Sweden to illustrate how neoliberal economic policies encouraged mass immigration from the Third World and readjustments in the welfare state. Moreover, he argues that a «rising elite», directing these social changes in the organization of Swedish society, have embraced multiculturalism. Furthermore, political leaders and prominent opinion makers have fashioned a sense of political correctness to shield questions of immigration from criticism. Those who dare to question mass immigration risk being classified as racists or right-wing extremists.

Friedman tends to present multicultural narratives that celebrate immigration as if they reject nationalism and the nation-state. However, nationalism, much like PC discourse, does not have a fixed content. Politicians and citizens are continually revising and elaborating national myths and symbols in relationship to social, political, and economic transformations. Many writers, including Friedman, have been too quick to announce the decline of the nation-state amid contemporary shifts from Keynesian macroeconomics to neoliberal economic policies. Rather than a dissolving nation-state, I see national politicians and financial leaders adapting the myths and symbols of the nation to meet the challenges represented by the export of capital and the retrenchment of the welfare state. In this process, multiculturalism – and its discourse of tolerance – exerts immense ideological power in elaborating nationalist myths of the liberal democratic state at a moment of increasing economic inequality. Moreover, these frames create a sense of creates a sense of sympathy for elites who are trying to maintain social solidarity in the face of anti-democratic threats – a theme being played in the United States as corporate elites embrace multiculturalism, and ideals of democracy, as they struggle with Donald Trump's regime.

Friedman's reluctance to conceptualize multiculturalism in relationship to nationalist politics stems partly from the unique impetus for this work. During the late 1990s, many Swedish social commentators, scholars, and anthropological colleagues attacked his wife, anthropologist Kajsa Ekholm Friedman, for being anti-immigrant and racist. The pain and duress that

Friedman experienced during this awful ordeal animate the book. *Politica-mente corretto* reads like one part defense of his spouse and one part extended case method of Manchester School fame (see Gluckman 1940; Turner 1957). Friedman employs a version of the extended case method to examine the twists and turns of the national controversy that enveloped his household for a decade. The controversy erupted in 1996 when Ekholm Friedman agreed to give a talk to a political group called The People’s Will and Mass Immigration (PWMI)². Before she appeared, a major news show had already reported that she was a leader of the PWMI. Sweden’s largest national newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* expanded the sense that she had breached proper norms of a multicultural society by falsely reporting that Ekholm Friedman disparaged African immigrants for infiltrating the country with fake college degrees. In an attempt to quell the drama, she wrote a commentary in *Dagens Nyheter*. She admitted it was a mistake to speak before the PWMI and went on to clarify that she was not anti-immigrant. Instead, she came to understand, through her ongoing research, which was Guggenheim funded, that «ethnification» and ethnic politics during periods of increasing unemployment and economic decline represent a «serious problem».

Friedman’s depiction of the social drama lacks necessary details. Max Gluckman developed the extended case to focus analysis on the emergent qualities of a social formation, to examine cultural politics beyond the «apt illustration» and to bring the underlying issues of conflict under sharp analysis. Friedman arrays the data in ways that do not capture the emergent qualities of Swedish political economy. After all, Friedman argues that PC culture, and the sacred object of multiculturalism it seeks to protect, is part of the processes of the decline of western hegemony and the nation-state. However, he does not provide enough details of the various, and contradictory arguments and how these changed throughout the social drama. He tells us little about PWMI, dismissing them as an unthreatening group of elderly people who were concerned about mass immigration in Sweden. More problematically, Friedman does not provide the full text of Ekholm Friedman’s comments about immigration during the entire ordeal. Instead, he paraphrases her main idea: the Swedish government has implemented immigration policies in ways that has furthered processes of «ethnification» in ways that could threaten the Swedish welfare state. In other places, he tells us that she argued that multiethnicity is a real problem and it has explosive potential and must be taken seriously. Nevertheless, the primary question re-

2. Folkviljan och massinvandring.

mains: what, and how, is multi-ethnicity potentially dangerous? In addition, how did Ekholm Friedman's perspectives on ethnic conflict, immigration, and the decline of the nation-state develop throughout the social drama?

Rather than engaging in constructive debate, anthropologists, including graduate students from Lund University where both the Friedmans taught, reacted bitterly to her words of redress. By questioning national immigration policies, they associated her with the subversion of the multicultural social order and its mores of tolerance. Most notably, four prominent Swedish anthropologists – Professors Gudrun Dahl, Ulf Hannerz, Kaj Århem, Karl Erik Knutsson – wrote a joint letter to *Dagens Nyheter* denouncing Ekholm Friedman for not only being destructive regarding immigration but for also confusing anthropological concepts of culture and ethnicity. For me, the most telling aspect of this «anthropological» response was that it highlighted the ways that multiculturalism works with, rather than against, nationalist politics. Hannerz et al., in a patriotic tone, declared that Sweden was «born as a country in relation to enriching long distance contacts. » From this nationalist mythology of long-distance contacts as an essential feature of the nation, they credit immigrants with further contributing cultural imports, ideas, and people that have «added to the wealth of the culture and tradition». Instead of criticizing this dreadful use of anthropological knowledge to support a nationalist politics, Friedman trivializes their claims as «cute, cozy, and consumerist». There is nothing cute about the way that these anthropologists used their authority to use multiculturalism to engage in politics, during a moment of downturn, to create the image of a «new» and «enlightened» version of the liberal nation-state (see Brown 2009; Povinelli 2002). Many years ago, Talal Asad pointed out this nationalistic aspect of British multiculturalism by showing that the idea of «rich culture-and-tradition» of the nation is already in place, as «an essence» which foreigners can contribute. This narrative of the nation creates an affinity «between what they bring and what is essentially there» (Asad 1993: 242).

These relationships of power raise a problem in how Friedman uses the term «rising elites». He draws this idea from previous criticisms of globalization discourses of the late 1990s whereby authors like Arjun Appadurai deployed the term globalization to invoke the sense of new and overwhelming cultural forces (Appadurai 1996). Such narratives conjured a sense of rupture whereby new and sweeping cultural forces have transcended borders and undermined nation-states and sovereignty. Friedman countered by showing that theories of globalization were elite representations, of a new cosmopolitan and transnational class, as opposed to analytic categories for the ex-

planation of these processes (Friedman 2002). However, the contemporary elites in Sweden, with their embrace of multiculturalism, are not simply a new and rising force. Indeed, many of these groups have profound connections to the interwar political establishment that embraced Eugenics, anti-Semitism, and fascism.

After the War, Friedman points out, Swedish leaders began fashioning a new image of the nation, following Ernst Renan's dictum «forgetfulness», or perhaps «historical error» are essential to nation-building (Renan 1990 [1882]). Postwar political and economic leaders silenced this unsavory past and promoted a new image as the «global good guy». Friedman jumps to the conclusion that this new project was a shift from a «strongly nationalist to anti-nationalist positions». Postwar politics changed, and Swedish leaders revised the narratives and symbolism of the nation. Swedish nationalism changed partly because of the disastrousness World Wars. Also, the US-led Bretton Woods system integrated the major capitalist countries into a multilateral system based on the ideals of cooperation. Moreover, the changes continued and moved in a different direction after the 1970s. With the shift away from the Keynesian political economy and the influx of Third World immigrants, dominant political and economic interests in the West have found multiculturalism a dominant discourse for revising of nationalism and its models of state power. In this way, multicultural politics carries forward the narrative of Sweden as a global good guy after the shift from Keynesian economic policies.

There is one important aspect that *Politicamente Corretto* does not fully address: the ways that the politics of multiculturalism seeks to discipline and structure the integration of immigrants into Europe, the US, and now, even South Korea. The guiding theme of the political correctness of multiculturalism is the discourse of tolerance. Tolerance works as a mode of governance that «iterates the normalcy of the powerful» at the same time it regulates the presence of the Other both inside and outside the liberal democratic nation-state (Brown 2009). In Korea, for example, the state has developed multicultural discourses and institutions through the master narrative of the nation to culturalize politics by neutralizing inequality and the exploitation of foreign workers as an expression of cultural differences (Baca 2017). Much like in Sweden, Korean political and economic leaders deploy the cultural idiom of the nation to reconstitute immigration as the progressive development of the state through the incorporation of new cultural values, which are to be protected by new values of tolerance and acceptance. As Wendy Brown points out, the ethics of tolerance legitimates the most illiberal actions of the state by employing a term consummately associated with liberalism

(Brown 2009). Friedman, by focusing primarily on the way the policies of immigration have threatened Swedish workers, he does not delve into the way multiculturalism exploits Third World immigrants. Unfortunately, this caveat dovetails with the way conservative criticisms of multiculturalism uphold the belief that multiculturalism promotes a relativistic tolerance and that it provides immigrant with rights without proper duties.

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