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## Black Skin, White Masks Revisited: Contemporary Post-Colonial Dilemmas in the Netherlands, France, and Belgium

Eric Mielants

Fairfield University, emielants@fairfield.edu

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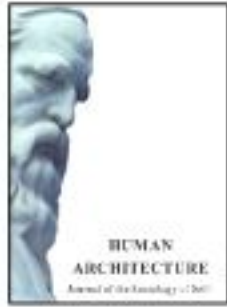
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## **Black Skin, White Masks *Revisited***

### **Contemporary Post Colonial Dilemmas in the Netherlands, France, and Belgium**

**Eric Mielants**

*Fairfield University*

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emielants@mail.fairfield.edu

**Abstract:** Several problems beset the immigrant communities and academic scholarship in Belgium, France, and the Netherlands. The current politicization of higher education—who gets tenure or governmental financial support for what *kind* of social science research—results in timid criticism of existing public policies. The greatly differential integration models used in the Netherlands, Belgium, and France have resulted in different ways of collecting data and analyzing the ‘other.’ This article addresses how divergent discourses about the ‘other’ have been constructed over time: according to the French assimilationist model, ethnic minorities do not (officially) ‘exist’; the Netherlands, until recently, embraced a ‘tolerant’ multi cultural model that conceptualized ethnic minorities as ‘units’ that could be measured and classified according to gradual progress and development; meanwhile Belgium, due to its linguistic divisions, has created another hybrid. This article, in dialogue with Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*, argues that the social sciences and existing paradigms in these three countries will need to be de colonized in order to facilitate de colonization and anti racist practices in everyday life.

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#### **INTRODUCTION**

Civilized/Barbaric; Modern/Pre Modern; First and Third World; Mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity/*gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*; Capitalist and Asiatic mode of production. These are just a few examples of binaries that have permeated social science over the last century. The conceptualizations of influential Western scholars of their own countries as modern (in the age in which the nation state needed to be legitimized, if not created) have often been intertwined with homogenous depictions of ‘others’ who were fundamentally

‘different’ and pre modern. In Durkheim’s *Social Division of Labor* (1947) and Bourdieu’s *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1972), Northern Africans were used as a counter point. For the former, Northern Africa was an example of the mechanical solidarity that France had abandoned in the wake of the Industrial Revolution; for the latter, ‘they’ were a different entity, perhaps only sharing some similarities with traditional peasants in the Bearn.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It should therefore come as no surprise that ‘mere’ journalists and politicians also use binaries of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ in a slightly more simplistic jargon.

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Eric Mielants is Assistant Professor in Sociology in the College of Arts and Sciences at Fairfield University. He has written articles and essays on racism, social theory and contemporary migration issues. His book, *The Origins of Capitalism and the ‘Rise of the West’*, is forthcoming from Temple University Press.

It has become evident that one cannot separate academic models and conceptualizations about the 'other' from existing public policies about immigrants and ethnic minorities. In the three countries that form the focus of this article (the Netherlands, Belgium, and France), the current politicization of higher education and academic productivity (i.e., who gets tenure or governmental financial support for social science research that advocates certain types of public policy recommendations) results in timid criticism of existing public policies or related academic paradigms. Although the revolving door between academia and political power has declined over the last 30 years, a public debate on important matters such as immigration policy, integration models, anti discrimination legislation, and the conceptualization of 'self' and identity is rarely initiated by independent specialists and academics, nor by the immigrants and minorities themselves (Grosfoguel & Mielants 2006). The multiple and greatly differential 'integration models' used in the Netherlands, Belgium and France have therefore resulted in different ways of collecting data and analyzing the 'other' and in imagining as well as 'managing' the 'other.'

When Frantz Fanon wrote his now famous *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967) in the early 1950s, it caused such a stir because it was written by an intellectual outside the prevailing white power structure who deliberately took from what we would now call the epistemic side of the subaltern, rejecting the notion that colonized blacks, or non whites in general for that matter, could somehow 'evolve' to an almost state of whiteness if they only tried hard enough. In that book, one might recall how Fanon devoted an entire chapter to language (decades before literary studies were influenced by Edward Said's contributions, the South Asian subaltern school, or the post structural turn) to illustrate how 'proper' French was used and subse-

quently internalized by colonial subjects to measure one's successful 'modernization' after having been exposed to civilization, or its corollary, whiteness. It is followed by a chapter on how 'whiteness' is subsequently associated with different degrees of sexual attraction. Marrying into whiteness is considered to be a (sub)conscious (Fanon 1967:100) strategy of upward mobility both within the colony as in the metropole. This upward mobility is characterized by transforming the self, in an age when the white man's burden and the mission civilisatrice were there to assist in the transformation of both the colony and those living within it.

In retrospect, it should come as no surprise that in the 1950s the decolonization of Africa ushered in paradigms and related policies geared towards 'development,' central to Modernization Theory, that were remarkably similar to the aforementioned belief in 'stages' of differential civilization and racial ethnic hierarchies that could be obtained by certain 'evolues.' (Hence, the logic of Nazi racial supremacy in the early 1940s bestowed the title of 'honorary Aryans' on the Japanese not only because of their need to symbolically explain a de facto military alliance with a non Western race, but also because it was grounded in the belief that specific racial and ethnic groups had evolved more highly than others.) Modernization theory, and most notably Walt Rostow's (1960) famous stages of development, assumed that the white Western capitalist developed nations were also at a higher stage, and that this could also be reached by non Western areas if they copied the policies, and ultimately the way of life, of these Western nations.

Both the civilizing mission and Modernization Theory have similar goals: to shed the world of barbaric, primitive and underdeveloped traditions such as 'mechanical solidarity,' remaking them in the image of their former colonial masters—modern, developed and civilized. It is no coincidence that Lawrence Harrison's book

was titled *Underdevelopment is a State of Mind* (1985). Indeed, a central question of 20<sup>th</sup> century Western social science was: how can one reform/change the 'other' (the 'other' being the colonized or, from the 1950s onward, the recently de colonized) to become like 'us,' without fundamentally changing the status quo of privilege and power in the world system? Similarly, how one can 'civilize' and reform those 'others' who live within the Western World, without fundamentally altering relations of wealth and power has increasingly become a preoccupation of western academics and politicians alike.

The latter exercise has been taking place in a much more exposed manner in the U.S. for decades, due to centuries of mass migrations both of slaves and of impoverished immigrants. There, scholars such as David Roediger (2005) and Noel Ignatieff (1996) have attempted to historicize the attempts of various immigrant groups (e.g., Jewish or Irish Americans) in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to 'become white' by separating themselves from those lower than them on the racial ethnic hierarchy, such as the African American population. But of course, one cannot separate this 'agency' from the complex reconstruction and modification of the already existing social structure; racial laws also played a role. If early 20<sup>th</sup> century American law considered Armenians white (unlike neighboring Syrians), or if Italians were lynched on several occasions in the U.S. South, this opened up, as sociologist W.E.B. Dubois pointed out on several occasions, not only the possibility of collaboration with the African American population against such acts, but also the opportunity to become white by distancing oneself from those 'other' populations.

Given the American experience, one should question the extent to which, more than half a century after the publication of *Black Skin, White Masks*, the preoccupation with 'civilizing non Western' people outside of the West has shifted for countries

like France, the Netherlands, and Belgium, to a preoccupation with controlling, monitoring and reforming non whites on Western soil. Yet few people address the divergent ways in which colonial and neo colonial images and discourses about the 'other' transform the migrant from the former colony or neocolonial periphery, into a specific ideal type of 'ethnic minority,' and the degree to which various immigrant groups react to the challenges of hegemonic discourse. How *do* each of the various minorities and immigrants react to hegemonic discourses? I would argue that it depends on the way they are 'incorporated' into each country, how they are perceived by the majority, and how they attempt to cope with the existing ethnic hierarchy.

### OBSERVATIONS ON THREE 'POST COLONIAL' NATION STATES

In France, as in the French speaking part of Belgium, the assimilationist model still prevails: ethnic minorities simply do not (officially) 'exist.' The French census does not give anyone the opportunity to declare their racial ethnic heritage and as of 2004, the public display of religious symbols, such as veils, skullcaps and large crosses (which some people have referred to as the 'racialization of religion'), has been outlawed in public schools. Interestingly, official rhetoric has prevented any kind of affirmative action or any debate on the de facto existence of a racial hierarchy from emerging. But the practices of assimilationism have simultaneously translated into rather generous redistributive socioeconomic policies: a bloated welfare state with practically free tuition at public universities; universal health care for all; and a 35 hour work week that includes generous unemployment and retirement benefits. How then do minority groups react to this received 'model'?

Interestingly, observations seem to indicate that it depends on the specific location of a particular group within the ethnic hierarchy. African Americans who move to France are considered more American than black and have long expressed their amazement at how France is less racist when compared with the U.S. (e.g., Baldwin 1972). Black Frenchmen from the '*departements d'Outremer*' are usually overrepresented in various low skilled professions of the public sector, but still considered to be more French than the '*pieds noirs*' who arrived more recently. Nonetheless, ever since the emergence of the protest movements of the '*sans papiers*' (undocumented migrants) in the late 1990s, a realignment of Afro Caribbeans and Africans stressing a common destiny has been noted (Gueye 2006). The majority of the youngsters protesting in the *banlieues* in the fall of 2005 belonged to various immigrant groups, but were demonstrating against their common structural position at the bottom of the labor and housing markets.<sup>2</sup> Thus, despite an official policy that refuses to recognize the existence of hyphenated identities or racism for that matter, occasional moments occur in which "the collective black, as Eduardo Bonilla Silva (2004) calls it, coalesces around a specific issue, such as when the French National Assembly debated the merit of instructing the positive legacy of French colonialism in its public high school system in 2005. But generally, common cause has seldom occurred in France in the last three decades.<sup>3</sup>

Unlike France, most social scientists in the Netherlands and the Flemish part of Belgium are preoccupied with 'counting' and classifying various migrant groups

<sup>2</sup> It is not uncommon for these immigrants to be discriminated against on the basis of the postal codes in which they are located (read: segregated). In a way, the French dilemma can be conceptualized as the "discrepancy between French republican values of equality and the practice of forty years of state sponsored ghettoization (Franz 2007:103).

(known as "*allochtones*"), attempting to formulate policies that might allow them to reform them in such a way that they would be able to 'catch up' socioeconomically with the majority of the (white) population. As with the colonies in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century or with the recently de colonized nation states in the periphery in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, expertise is used to measure and scrutinize the problematized unit of analysis, be it the deviant, the criminal, the migrant, the ethnic minority, the underdeveloped nation state, etc.... But rarely is there a focus on systemic processes such as the development of underdevelopment, the reproduction of racism and discriminative practices, segregation, or unequal power relations. As a recent example, when the 'cartoon crisis' occurred in Denmark, Belgian and Dutch newspapers did not refuse to reprint the venomous cartoons; instead, editorialists immediately framed the debate as one of Muslim minorities refusing to accept Western notions of freedom of speech. Scrutinizing power relations between the Muslim world and the West, or in the case of Western Europe, between Muslim immigrants and the white majority, did not seem to be an issue.

In the Netherlands, despite an official embrace of multiculturalism, the racial ethnic hierarchy has coincided with changes in the targets of racist agitation: from Surinamese and Antilleans in the mid 1970s, to Turks and Moroccans in the 1980s, to an obsession with Antillean criminality in the 1990s, and more recently to a racialization of Muslims in the aftermath of the assassination of the artist Theo Van Gogh and the

<sup>3</sup> In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon (1967:103) specifically discussed how the existence of the colonial Empire stimulates racial hatred between Jews and Arabs or between Arabs and blacks. One can question the extent to which this is still happening today as the explosive issue of the Middle East and imperial designs in the region are imported differentially into the streets of major urban agglomerations such as Paris, Brussels, and Amsterdam.

death treats against *Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie* (VVD) members of parliament (Buruma 2006). Yet Dutch social science research rarely acknowledges the existence and/or impact of racism on these immigrants, let alone its centrality in their subjugation and exploitation, which only reflects the general Dutch taboo towards discussing the significance of 'everyday racism' in their society (Essed 1991).

As one may recall, Modernization Theory argues that every migration process comes with problems that have to be dealt with and barriers that have to be (can be and will be) overcome, just like those experienced by 19<sup>th</sup> century peasants when they moved from the countryside to urban centers. It is claimed that the adaptation (and integration) of immigrants into their new community is never a smooth process but rather takes time, and excessive pessimism is not warranted; the catching up in the housing and labor markets and in education is already under way and patience is necessary (e.g., Vermeulen & Penninx 1995). Not surprisingly, most Dutch studies on migration and immigrants present themselves as a theoretically as IMF recommendations to third world countries. But the complicity of the bureaucrats who transform themselves into academics (and subsequently legitimize the public policies of politicians who will later order the next series of technical studies from them) should not be underestimated as they have enabled Modernization Theory and its structural functionalist variants to 'colonize' the entire field (Martiniello 1993). Not coincidentally, the critical voices that emanate from ethnic minorities (e.g., Philomena Essed, Ruben Gowricharn) are suppressed when they do not conform to the prevailing orthodoxy (e.g., El Fers & Nibbering 1998:92-99) and frequently relegated to minor and obscure alternative presses (e.g., Eddaoudi 1998; Helder & Gravenberch 1998), effectively delegitimizing those dissenting voices.

Modernization Theory, for many decades embraced by Dutch politicians, social scientists and the media alike, tries to sing a soothing tune by pointing out how second generation immigrants are more attuned to the Western consumer oriented society than their parents. Given that they tend to appreciate Western culture, film and music, their cultural identity is said to be more 'liberal' than that of their parents (Buijs & Nelissen 1995: 189). For example, second generation Surinamese, especially those from mixed marriages, consider themselves 'Dutch' (van Heelsum 1997). This display of ethnic cultural identity, which confirms Modernization Theory's hopeful song of steady 'integration' and reorientation towards more 'open minded' (i.e., Dutch) values, has, until recently, dismissed pessimistic points of view. But even if the second generation feels Dutch, has the same aspirations as the native Dutch, and is completely oriented towards Dutch society, it does not automatically imply that the native Dutch (known as "*autochtones*") perceive these second generation immigrants as Dutch. While some minorities want to be seen as Dutch among the Dutch, it remains to be seen whether this is even possible. Meanwhile, the ruling right wing conservative party, the VVD, have incorporated some of the rhetoric of the far right, and the intellectual heirs of Pim Fortuyn (the politician who won the Dutch 2002 elections) have been promoting a more restrictive policy regarding political refugees and asylum seekers, as well as taking a more assimilationist position.

In Belgium, due to its particular linguistic divisions, another hybrid has emerged.

There, the process of 'pillarization' has historically been more significant than in the Netherlands and it continues to have an impact on the identity of natives as well as immigrants. Traditionally, people have organized themselves socially and politically around socialist, Christian, or liberal par-

ties, unions, health care providers (“*mutualities*”) and affiliate cultural organizations. Pillarization (“*Verzuiling*”) was a means to pacify a fragmented political, linguistic, and social landscape and it allowed the creation of enduring identities in Belgium based on parallel networks, organizations and institutions in which Christian Flemish speaking peasants organized themselves next to, for example, French speaking socialist atheists. Immigrants, however, were de facto excluded access to these vital networks, which provided information, jobs, support and various forms of social capital.<sup>4</sup> In many ways, Turkish and Moroccan immigrants have had a hard time being accepted in any pillar or, in the alternative, creating their own pillar. Though characterized by patronizing natives as ‘merely Muslims,’ the reality is that Moroccan Berber and Turkish immigrants and a wide variety of refugees from the Middle East and Africa are too heterogeneous to create their own minor pillar (see Mielants 2006).

Despite an ‘official’ embrace of multiculturalism, Belgian public opinion against ethnic minorities has hardened considerably, as in the Netherlands. The escalating linguistic squabbles between Flemish and French speaking communities in the post 1970 period prevented one specific ‘integration model’ from taking root. In the meantime, tensions escalated between native Belgians and minority populations. On May 11, 1991, riots broke out in Vorst and St. Gillis between Moroccan youngsters and the police. This was followed by more riots in Molenbeek in 1995, in the Brussels community of Anderlecht in November 1997 after police shot and killed a Moroccan immigrant, in St. Joost in 1998, and in

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<sup>4</sup> As narrated to the author, some Muslim immigrants saw their applications to Christian organizations denied as they were not deemed ‘Christian,’ and turned away by Socialist and Liberal ones who preferred candidates with an explicit ‘non religious’ profile.

Antwerp in 2002. Throughout the 1990s, more far right politicians were elected and demanded that immigrants be returned to their country of origin, while only a small minority spoke out in favor of giving the *sans papiers* amnesty and the right to vote. Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt’s compromise was legislation that made it easier for immigrants to obtain Belgian citizenship. Alas, a change in citizenship does not provide protection against racial discrimination.

The number of Muslims in Belgium has grown rapidly (numbering almost 400,000 at present). Yet the religious engagement of the Belgian state—as opposed to the secular model in France—has not been put into effect for Muslim worshippers who, unlike Roman Catholics, have been blocked from creating a network of Islamic schools. In addition, there is very negative coverage of Islam in the media (including openly racist letters to the editor that are published by major newspapers); conflicts in schools (e.g., concerning the head scarf, as in France); and many other forms of ‘everyday racism’ such as denying people entry to dances and gyms. Yet all of this is against people who are third generation immigrants, who speak a much more raw Antwerp Flemish dialect than the white natives. These third generation immigrants, who only know Morocco or Turkey as exotic, brief holiday destinations to visit distant family members, are expected to return to their ‘countries of origin,’ and are segregated in inner city public trade schools and blamed for not ‘integrating themselves.’

This ‘everyday racism’ coincidentally results in something different for every linguistic and municipal community in the country. To somewhat paraphrase Fanon, when these minorities are hired it is in spite of their color or their religion, but when they are disliked it is because of their color or what their religion represents. Nonetheless, it is ‘they’ who are studied, classified, problematized and believed to be in urgent

need of reorientation. When will the first Belgian of Moroccan descent write an anthropological study about the white native population? The Belgian Congolese scholar Bambi Ceuppens (2003) made a major effort in that direction, but as religion becomes the new signifier, something which Fanon did not foresee, we need to analyze Christian fundamentalism as much as orthodox secularism, and not just raise questions about what went wrong with Islam.

### THE CHALLENGES AHEAD

What all three of these countries share, but more so in France than in Belgium and the Netherlands, is a genuine separation between *'le pays legal'* and *'le pays reel.'* In theory, everyone is equal under the law, but in practice, Muslims are, more often than not, racialized and discriminated against because they are perceived as 'others.' This shift translates itself symbolically—with consequences in the real world—in the fact that these 'others' are significantly underrepresented in the political field. In North America's largest cities, a large portion of the inhabitants are foreign born (e.g., 60% of the inhabitants in Miami, as well as over half of the population in Toronto). Similar processes manifest themselves in Western Europe's major cities: the Dutch 'Randstad,' consisting of the cities of Rotterdam, Amsterdam, Utrecht, and The Hague, comprises more non whites than whites. What should be noted however is that in Europe more so than in North America, in particular in all three of the countries discussed above, the collective 'we'—the imagined community of what constitutes 'France' or 'Belgium,' or 'the Netherlands'—does not include its segregated minorities. The 'we' is no longer the 'we' it used to be, or perhaps ever imagined to be, but that very fact eludes the schoolbooks or TV networks that impact the conceptualization of one's

society, as well as a reading of one's own history: the presence of Muslims is not 'new' to Europe, does not constitute a military threat or potential invasion to Charles Martel and his underlings, and Europe's cultural, technological and economic exchanges with 'Muslims' from a wide variety of countries has been significant from the Middle Ages throughout World War II, as the movie *'Indigenes'* (2006) recently pointed out to an incredulous audience.<sup>5</sup>

It is only when 'we' become aware of these facts and no longer conceptualize 'others' on the basis of their religious features as (primarily) a security threat or a potential 'fifth' column, that ghettoization can be genuinely problematized and that, in turn, collective issues such as poverty, precariousness, unemployment—and given the challenges of globalization, a lack of upward social mobility—can be adequately addressed by public policy. Stepping away from scrutinizing the 'other' and defining social problems in terms of various 'integration models' may be just the step we all need to avoid an 'Islamization' of social issues (such as the endless debates about the merit of wearing a headscarf), which only reinforces an 'us' versus 'them' rhetoric without addressing urgent social problems that contribute to an increase in fundamentalism and rejection of the 'other' by both natives and immigrants alike.

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<sup>5</sup> The movie, financed mainly by Morocco, has been released in North America under the 'neutral' title *'Days of Glory'* and was nominated for the best foreign film award at the 2006 Oscars. It highlights the contributions of 134,000 Algerians, 73,000 Moroccans, 26,000 Tunisians and about 92,000 troops from other African colonies that served in the French armed forces during World War II. About 80,000 veterans, older than 65, of which 40,000 live in Algeria and Morocco and about 15,000 in Senegal and Chad, still have their military pensions frozen at the same level from 1959. After seeing the motion picture, French president Jacques Chirac announced in the Fall of 2006 that the French government henceforth would attempt to undo this history of inequity.



## TENTATIVE CONCLUSIONS

Methods of judicial or political action/resistance to effectively counter discrimination and overtly racist electoral campaigns after 1945 are more in need than ever, especially in light of the greater intolerance towards immigrants and ethnic minorities, ever increasing flows of migration, and a potential resurrection of guest workers programs in Europe (Castles 2006). One can argue that the social sciences and existing paradigms in Belgium, France, and the Netherlands will urgently need to be decolonized in tandem with such activism, i.e., grass roots developments on the ground to alter the existing political landscape. One of the ways to further this goal is to link the intellectual and political heritage of Frantz Fanon with post colonial studies broadly conceived with an appreciation of critical political economy and historical comparative social science. This is a task that academics should embrace in full cooperation with, and with respect for, civil society at large.

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