

## #BeyondTalkingBack: Ghassan Hage: Is racism an environmental threat?

A long time ago now, I was struck by the uncanny resemblance in the language used by the Australian government when it was dealing with refugee boats heading towards the Australian coast and the language used to refer to oceanic waste. More precisely, the way the government spoke of the people smugglers who 'dumped' refugees in the ocean was very similar to the language used to speak of people illegally dumping toxic waste. What is imagined in both cases is, first, a social process happening outside Australia and producing a useless and harmful by-product, and, second, someone illegally attempting to force Australia as a nation to deal with this harmful by-product for which it has no usage, and against the national will and interest. Waste; Unrecyclable; Ungovernable; Un-incompassable; Toxic; All these classificatory names and adjectives and the images associated to them are important.

They are important for understanding the way we experience the ecological crisis generally and global warming in particular. The toxic gases and chemicals that are constitutive of our physical environment and that we consider partially responsible for the ecological crisis are primarily waste. They are also unrecyclable waste which is a category relative to a specific social arrangement and technological knowhow: what is unrecyclable today might not be tomorrow thanks to some technological innovation or within different social relations. But what constitutes the ecological crisis is not just the existence of unrecyclable waste. As important is the experience of this un-recyclable waste as something that is going out of control, as something ungovernable: we have no way of dealing with it. It is also not just ungovernable but also un-incompassable. There are things we consider ungovernable but that remain ungovernable within the frames of governability that we have set. As such they do not radically challenge our position as governmental subjects. There are however ungovernable objects that become so ungovernable in scale that they become impossible to encompass even as governmental problem: they cross governmental boundaries (such as national borders) and instead of us encompassing them they start to encompass us. This is when we move from a governmental crisis to an environmental crisis, from having an object being out of control within our milieu to that object diffusing itself in such a way such that the entire milieu in which we exist becomes experienced as out of control. Finally, toxic, that is, harmful. The ecological crisis is not only the experience of something useless (waste) from which we cannot extract any more value (unrecyclable), becoming both ungovernable and un-incompassable. Importantly this ungovernable and un-incompassable waste is also considered by us as harmful: it damages us as individuals and as collectives. It damages

our social relations and our practices. It can do so because it damages the very milieu in which these are constituted.

What is striking today is that each and every one of these classifications and their associated imaginary can be used to understand the way 'the Muslim refugee' is experienced in the West. That is, these classifications are at the very heart of what we call Islamophobia. The Muslim refugee is first and foremost perceived as waste. It is the refuse, the by-product of wars or of social transformations that uproot people from their land and their societies without these societies having the means of re-integrating them. Just as importantly, the Muslim refugee today is unrecyclable: this, in a way, is one of the crucial differences between the classification of refugees today and their classification during and immediately following WWII. In the latter case refugees were also seen as the refuse and the waste produced by war and social transformations, but, because of its expanding economies, the West looked at them largely as recyclable: it could make new usage of them. This is not the case with the refugees of today: thanks largely to its shrinking economies the West sees them as unrecyclable waste. At the same time, this unrecyclable waste is going out of control, it is perceived as unmanageable, as ungovernable, it does not stay put. More importantly, it is becoming perceived as un-incompassable. The Muslim other is experienced as a ubiquitous presence, it is everywhere. It is growing locally while also traversing and overflowing national borders. It does so in such a way that it is creating anxieties in the Western governmental subjects concerning their very capacity to be sovereign governmental subjects. Un-incompassability is perhaps more than anything else the trigger of the kind of phobic anxieties from which the Western Extreme Right feeds. It triggers fantasies of reverse colonisation: stories where the populations that have traditionally been colonised by the West are feared of becoming themselves the colonisers of Western populations. Anything, from the deadly but pathetic figure of the 'Islamic terrorist' to the non-assimilating 'Halal meat eating' Muslim, feeds the spectre of Muslim domination which takes us to the final classification: the toxicity and harmfulness of the Muslim other. It is imagined to be able to potentially destroy the Western world (conceived as anything but Muslim).

The Muslim then like Carbon Monoxide is an unrecyclable, ungovernable, un-incompassable, toxic waste. It is not an object that is just mildly polluting the modern environment but an active subject that is behind the wholesale environmental crisis.

To be clear, this classificatory similarity is not what *Is Racism an environmental Crisis?* about. Rather noting and detailing it is the starting point. The book argues that the classifications and the practices that constitute colonial racism and the practices that have generated the destruction of the natural environment are mutually self-reinforcing because they share a common root: a common mode of existence that works as their generative principle, what is referred to in the book as 'generalised domestication'. The book aims to explore this

generalised domestication in so far as it constitutes a way of inhabiting the social and natural world. It analyses the practices and classifications that constitute its elementary structure. Last but not least it explores the way this structure is articulated to and came to constitute the core of mono–realist capitalist modernity, and how it continues to propel the always patriarchal, always racist, always speciesist drive to colonise the world.

**Ghassan Hage** is a Lebanese–Australian academic serving as Future Generation Professor of Anthropology and Social Theory at the University of Melbourne, Australia. Hage works on the comparative anthropology of racism, nationalism and multiculturalism, particularly in Australia and the Middle East. He has written and conducted fieldwork on the Lebanese transnational diaspora in Australia, the US, Europe, Canada and Venezuela. He also researches and writes in social theory, particularly the work of Pierre Bourdieu.

He has been a high–profile contributor to debates on multiculturalism in Australia and has published widely on the topic. His most influential work is *White Nation*, which draws on theory from Whiteness studies, Jacques Lacan and Pierre Bourdieu to interpret ethnographic work undertaken in Australia. The book has been widely debated in Australia, with many of its themes picked up by anti–racism activists in other countries.[3] The follow–up *Against Paranoid Nationalism* is an analysis of certain themes in Australian politics that became prominent under the government of John Howard.

He has also written on the political dimensions of critical anthropology (His work in this area appears in the volume *Alter–Politics: Critical Thought and the Radical Imagination* (Melbourne University Press 2015)). His current writing is concerned with the intersection between racism and the ecological crisis. *Is Racism an Environmental Threat?* is forthcoming with Polity Press in May 2017.

