

Paula Ioanide. (2015). *The Emotional Politics of Racism: How Feelings Trump Facts in an Era of Colorblindness*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press. 289 p.

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If you are a Romanian/European reader, you probably never heard about Paula Ioanide, but you surely think you know who Donald Trump is. Well, this book is written by Ioanide, but it is not explicitly and exclusively about Trump, despite the verb on the cover. However, it might help to understand who he really is.

Paula Ioanide is a Romanian-born American sociologist and historian of consciousness. She left Romania, together with her family, in 1988. She is the daughter of Cristian Ioanide (1943-2008), a Romanian Times editor, and granddaughter of the Romanian poet Costache Ioanide (1912-1987). I only specified that because the author dedicated the book to her "Tati" and she wrote: "My family in Romania... remind me to always keep my sights beyond the United States. They remind me to stay grounded in spiritual cosmologies that are mostly illegible here in the United States and to keep our transnational flows connected" (p. XII-XIII). Nowadays, Paula Ioanide is an associate professor at the Center for the Study of Culture, Race & Ethnicity, Ithaca College. She is also a declared antiracist feminist. I think this is great about America: as a scholar, you may openly advocate political views and even further political projects without neutrality hypocrisy. Ioanide seems anti-neoliberal and anti-conservative, but she is not very gentle, not even with liberals. She blames many times a "general liberal and conservative consensus" (p. 104, see also p. 7, 33, 123)

What is this book all about? "The color-blind racism" of the "dominant Americans". What does "color-blind racism" mean? It is the "racism without racists" (10), the fact that people consciously or

unconsciously act racist while saying that racism is bad and they do not care about race, colour, sex etc. They do that by replacing the old racial terms with a new “coded lingua franca”: “criminals”, “terrorists”, “gangsters”, “urban underclass”, “taxpayer burdens” etc. (9-10). As we may easily see from this short list, the author analyzes the situation focusing on two main aspects: the public security and the welfare. She talks about the “military-carceral expansion” and the “social wage retrenchment”, with two case studies for each one: the NYPD’s brutality against a Haiti immigrant (1997) and the Abu Ghraib scandal (2004); the situation of New Orleans’s Black residents after the Hurricane Katrina (2005) and the anti-Latino policies in California (especially the “Escondido housing ordinance”, 2006).

Who are “the dominant Americans” or the “dominant U.S. publics”? They were those “being presumed to belong to America” and having “much greater access to resources, jobs, and legal rights” (8). “Dominant” does not necessarily mean “white”. On the one hand, because “some poor whites are certainly not affectively assumed to belong to the normative ideals of the United States” (p. 9). On the other hand, we have the “majority-identified minorities” (p. 36), “immigrants, people of colour, religious minorities, people with linguistic accent...” who aspirationally identify with “the rights, resources, economic logics, cultural values, and racial restrictions embedded in current normative definitions of American-ness” (9) (e.g., Black people stigmatizing “public assistance and other social services”, p. 119). “American-ness” is not so much a fact as an “ideological worldview” and a “value system” (p. 9).

Here comes the important part. This “ideological worldview” works simultaneously with a “criminalization of racial struggles” and a “racialization of ‘crime’” (p. 31). In other words, people think/say that racial discrimination is a crime, but they also associate crime with some racial groups. It sounds familiar; we have the same problem in Romania with the attitude towards the gipsy minority. Paula Ioanide identified two types of “colour-blind racists”. First, there are the “merely liars”, those who are not actually “blind”. The second and the most important group is that of those who “support institutionalized oppression in unconscious and unintended ways” (p. 11). They have emotion-based attitudes. The “colour-blind racism” originates from “public feelings rather than facts”, and the emotions “function much like economies; they have mechanisms of circulation, accumulation, expression and exchange that give them social currency, cultural legibility, and political power” (p. 2). The

“dominant Americans” are dominant mainly not because facts, but because those shared feelings that “possess the unique ability to trump facts” (p. 15). They make them anxious (see p. 27), sometimes they make them act against their own economic interests and, what is probably the most important, they make them resistant to contrary evidence: “People rarely change their racist, nativist, or imperialist beliefs simply because they are made aware of their complicity in systemic forms of oppression” (p. 11). They actually refuse to know anything that might bother their beliefs. They prefer a somehow “political amnesia” (see p. 51). The feelings and that kind of selective knowledge grow necessarily into an ideological scenario. The author uses Slavoj Žižek’s expression, “ideological fantasy”. In my opinion, any ideology is actually an “ideological fantasy” but I do not want to hijack discussion. It is certain that feelings create an “ideological fantasy”, and that fantasy helps them to withstand assaults. The author rightly associates the “the emotional economies of military-carceral expansion” with the “ideological fantasy of law and order or U.S. exceptionalism” and the “emotional economies of social wage retrenchment” with the “ideological fantasy of economic self-reliance”.

As I mentioned from the very beginning, Paula Ioanide is not only a researcher, but also an activist. She looks for methods “to create greater affective receptivity to historically sound knowledge and engender more desires for justice” (p. 23). At the end of the book, she repeatedly uses the word “struggle”: “We struggle because we find white supremacy intolerable. We struggle because we find U.S. warfare, mass incarceration, and immigrant detention unjustifiable” (p. 220). I find struggle necessary, but I am sceptical about finding a method. I find “the epistemologies of ethical witnessing” (see p. 23-26) just another “ideological fantasy”. To struggle means to say or to scream, if necessary. Building a method is nothing but building a new ideology/fantasy.

I like to think I am a sceptic and a pragmatic and I do not find people who struggle for justice fools or naïve. I do not laugh at them. All I want to say is that their feelings are just like any other feelings, having the same “unique ability to trump facts”. Strugglers tend sometimes to know (only) what they want to know. I chose three examples:

(1) “It is worth remembering that Reagan, who masterfully and gradually aligned public desires with law and order, was an actor before he was a politician. As such, he understood how processes of

affective and emotional identification worked in Americans; he understood what appealed to the sentiments of white majorities who were still the favoured voting blocs in U.S. elections. Reagan also understood that wars required theatrical spectacles as much as laws, policing, and incarceration tactics to preserve their legitimacy. Using his knowledge of making movies, Reagan initiated a war on drugs based much more on fabricated spectacle than empirically substantive problems” (p. 34). Isn’t this true for all the politicians since the television became the scene of the American politics? I think wars were always theatrical spectacles and presidents always used “processes of affective and emotional identification”. Why is it more important in Reagan’s case? Simply because he initiated a “successful anti-big government platform” (p. 4) and – I do not deny it – a “gendered and racial demonology” (p. 122)? As a former actor, Reagan probably played better than anybody else did the role of the American President (except for Michael Douglas, of course), but that is all. We cannot assume “his knowledge of making films” as a fundament of the Presidential communication strategy (maybe he used some of his old Hollywood bodies in his campaigns; historians must tell us). If somebody keeps assuming this, I think it is worth remembering that Reagan was a B movie actor.

(2) “Even celebrities who made their wealth and income through the commodification of the styles and cultures originating from impoverished communities of colour (e.g. hip-hop celebrities) got to keep their money and status only if their cultural products did not openly challenge the state’s violence and the validity of capitalism” (p. 36-37). The idea might be acceptable without the word “only”. Because of this word, I think it is worth remembering some political hip-hop pieces. Back in the early ’90s, Ice Cube rapped: “*With a payoff, cop gotta lay off/ FBI on my dick, stay off!/I’m not a rebel or a renegade on a quest/I’m a nigga with a ‘S’ on his chest/ So get the Kryptonite cos I’m a rip tonight/ Cos I’m scarin ya, wanted by America*” (Amerikkka’s Most Wanted, 1990). In 2007, Jay Z clearly assaulted Reagan’s legacy: “*Blame Reagan for making me into a monster/Blame Oliver North and Iran-Contra/I ran contraband that they sponsored/Before this rhymin stuff we was in concert*” (Blue Magic, 2007). Both of them are still rich and successful.

(3) “The social contracts of traditional liberal democracies are predicated on the assumption that states have a responsibility to take care of national subjects’ basic needs by offering subsidies for health care, education, affordable housing, transportation, environmental

protection, parks, libraries, and emergency services” (p. 115). Actually, this is not “traditional liberal democracies” assumption, but our author’s assumption. The political and economical history and the history of the political thought show that “liberal democracy” and “welfare state” are neither necessarily, nor closely related. It is worth remembering that the idea of “social state” is attributed to Otto von Bismarck, a stubborn opponent of liberal democracy. In addition, if we take into account Tocqueville’s writings, we may find the “traditional liberal democracy” even in the U.S, where “the safety net offered by publicly subsidized social goods is relatively new” (p. 115).

My criticisms are nitpicking. They do not intend to belittle the value (scientific and political at the same time) of Paula Ioanide’s work. On the contrary, I think it should be popularized in Europe and especially in Romania, for two main reasons: (1) we increasingly face similar problems; (2) the book is a good example of how to approach these problems. I have only one fear: this kind of approach could unintentionally feed the obsessive anti-American rhetoric.