

Melancholia and multiculturalism

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In the first of a series tracing “the strange career of multiculturalism”, Paul Gilroy – leading thinker on race and racism, and currently chair of African American studies at Yale University – surveys the current debate in Britain, and calls for an end its entrapment by “the problem of assimilation”.

Contemporary discussions of multiculturalism, such as the recent debate in Britain triggered by editor of *Prospect* magazine David Goodhart, have been horribly distorted by one legacy of the “war on terror”: the dissemination of civilisationist common sense, the revivification of the idea that some cultures are civilised and some are not.

This fantasy has been projected ever more widely and authoritatively since the twin towers fell. The hardline culturalism, the assumption that cultures are things which can be cleanly divided from each other, which underpins civilisational common sense, had, of course, been building for a while before 11 September 2001, for example through the debates over Pim Fortuyn and citizenship tests, terror mosques and the post-industrial riots in the north of England in 2001, where dwelling and labour markets carry the imprint of informal but rigid segregation.

The intensity of discussions of multiculturalism, not least in the United Kingdom, has seemed to grow in proportion to the collapsing certainties as to what the

core content of British culture should now be: Should it be “sexed up” or “dumbed down”? Who defines it? Endemol (producers of *Big Brother*) or Rupert Murdoch? Streetwise white rapper Mike Skinner or dapper *Daily Mail* editor Paul Dacre? Royal Ascot or binge drinking?

The left gets tough

Whether the contentious arguments over assimilation, culture and belonging originated in discussions of mistaken multiculturalism and political correctness in Scandinavia or the United States, they found lots of space in the august pages of *Prospect* magazine.

The journal chose this ground as a way to establish a reputation for rigour, seriousness and taboo-busting relevance. Its treatment of this hot topic was always dominated by the political problems supposedly introduced by unassimilable mass immigration, by intrusive refugees and, most importantly, by a conflict rooted in the stubborn adherence of settler-descendants to the original cultures of their parents and grandparents. Wherever they found themselves,

the perverse attachment of these “second and third generation immigrants” to those supposedly dangerous ethnic legacies has been deemed inappropriate to their happy new circumstances.

The idea that racism and systematic marginalisation could have played significant roles in creating the environment where ready-mix pseudo-politics based on a reified idea of British culture and a defensive desire for the compensations that only brittle identity can confer, was never considered. Instead, *Prospect* spearheaded the adaptation and updating of those well-worn Enoch Powellite themes: immigration as invasion, war, culturally-based conflict and fundamental incompatibility.

The only vague novelty of the *Prospect* exchange lay in folding those motifs into a nominally “left” discourse. The A-team of fearless grandees, heavy hitters like the *Financial Times*’s John Lloyd, Cambridge economist Bob Rowthorn and Harvard’s Michael Ignatieff queued up to vent against the special privileges that would accrue to immigrants if the (in their view) misguided cues from the Macpherson report – which investigated the bungled police investigation into the murder of black teenager Steven Lawrence which emphasised institutional racism and called for a strengthening of the Race Relations Act – were wrongly applied.

They went on to lament the lack of attention to the plight of “poor whites” and then proceeded to expand the definition of an immigrant hyperbolically so that it could gobble up three or even four generations of culturally lost souls adrift between being the aliens they ought to be and the Britons they were unlikely ever to become. (With the release of Michael Collins’s book *The Likes of Us*, which picks up the narrative from the point of view of the white working class, ignores racism where it doesn’t defend it, and lays the blame for social disintegration at the door of “liberal middle class journalists” promoting an unworkable multiculturalism, the debate comes full circle.)

The torrent of lamentation is spiced by the fact that the “joined-up” obligation to be tough on immigrants meant that these commentators felt that their own liberalism was being painfully taken away from them by their noble commitment to make sense of these intractable problems. Their howls of resentment at this precious loss compounded the characteristic

melancholia and the embarrassing dislike of blacks, Muslims, illegal immigrants and asylum-seekers in equal proportion.

They could not imagine that Britain’s post-colonial settlers and the various sanctuary and hospitality-seeking peoples who have succeeded them, had been caught up in economic, cultural and historical problems that were not of their making. It was the misfortune of these immigrants to try and settle or seek hospitality in Britain amidst de-industrialisation, the destruction of the welfare state, privatisation, marketisation and immiseration.

The strangers and aliens could not be held responsible for the fact that their marginal lives came to symbolise national decline and loss even when they did not themselves actually cause the quarrels with which their presence became bound up. Perhaps it’s just easier to go along with the traditional script that makes Britain’s perennial, organic crisis primarily intelligible as a matter of race and nation.

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Post-colonial melancholia

Many of the recent contributions to the British debate suggest melancholia’s signature combination of manic elation with misery, self-loathing and ambivalence, as analysed by Sigmund Freud. Where this has taken hold, hostility to the proposition that racist violence and institutional indifference are normal and recurrent features of British social and political life gets regularly intermingled with absolute surprise at the nastiness of racism and the extent of the anger and resentment that it can cause amongst those on its sharp end.

Antipathy towards asylum-seekers and refugees cannot, of course, be concealed, but the idea that it has anything to do with racism or ultra-nationalism remains shocking to the anxious left and induces yet more guilt. The resulting confusion and disorientation arise from a situation in which melancholic Britain can quietly concede that it doesn’t much like blacks, foreigners, Muslims and other interlopers and wants to get rid of them, but then becomes uncomfortable because it doesn’t like the things it learns about itself when it gives vent to feelings of hostility and hatred.

Both the “joke” of the Conservative MP Ann Winterton about the death of eighteen Chinese cockle-pickers in north-west England in February 2004, and the

reaction against it – including the (in the event, temporary) withdrawal of the Tory whip by leader Michael Howard who called her remarks “completely unacceptable”, exemplify this cyclical pattern.

The symbolic body

Now, it is the infra-human body of the would-be immigrant rather than the body of the Sovereign which more accurately presents the discomfiting ambiguities of the British empire’s painful and shameful but nonetheless exhilarating history.

In this precarious national state, individual and group identifications converge not on the body of the leader or other iconic national object – Britannia recast in the guise of gym-trim Diana, the equally immortal Queen Mum, David Beckham’s various haircuts, or even the beaming, sweaty figure of Tony Blair himself – but in opposition to the intrusive presence of the incoming strangers who, trapped inside the local logic of race, nation and ethnic absolutism not only *represent* that vanished empire but persistently refer consciousness to the unacknowledged pain of its loss and the unsettling shame of its bloody management.

The alien wedge has entered *here* because Britain was once *out there*, being great in the world. That basic fact of global history is undeniable. And yet, its grudging recognition now provides a stimulus for further forms of hostility rooted in the realisation that, even if they are not post-colonials, today’s unwanted settlers carry all the ambivalence of that vanished empire with them. Held hostage by the idea that they too are immigrants, they inadvertently project deep and dangerous discomfort into the unhappy consciousness of their fearful and anxious hosts and neighbours. Indeed, the incomers may be unwanted and feared precisely because they are the unwitting triggers for the pain produced by memories of that vanished imperial and colonial past.

John Lloyd’s concern for “poor whites” is only one small sign of how this melancholic pattern dovetails with recent United States arguments. As far as race is concerned, the US is the only future that the Brit punditocracy can imagine for the country. Samuel Huntington, who now – in his latest book *Who Are We: the challenges to America’s national identity* – sees the flood of immigrants from Latin America as “the

single most immediate and serious challenge to America’s traditional identity”, had articulated the scary linkage between immigration and multiculturalism early on.

More than a decade ago, in language that was deeply marked by anxieties over racial degeneration recast in cultural terms that were no less absolute than their bio-logical antecedents, his *The Clash of Civilizations?* (1993) specified the urgent geopolitical problem thus:

“Multiculturalism at home threatens the United States and the West; universalism abroad threatens the West and the world. Both deny the uniqueness of western culture. The global monoculturalists want to make the world like America. The domestic multiculturalists want to make America like the world. A multi-cultural America is impossible because a non-Western America is not American. A multicultural world is unavoidable because global empire is impossible.”

Huntington’s elision of the US and the West is telling but – for the British reader anyway – it is misleading too.

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Multiculture not multiculturalism

There are many ways in which Britain’s long experience of convivial post-colonial interaction and civic life has, largely undetected by government, provided resources for a functioning, even vibrant multiculturalism; although we do not always value, use wisely or celebrate it as we should. I say multiculturalism rather than multiculturalism, for there is in fact, in the UK, no such active ideology. It died long ago with the demise of the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) and the Greater London Council (GLC) which had both tried to challenge and re-work a discourse of assimilation that been left untouched since the Labour government of the 1960s set it aside forty years ago.

To acknowledge this conviviality is not to say that racism has been dealt with. It is still there, souring things and debasing our public culture, but it is not what it was in the rivers of blood days. Its political geography is for example, very different. Tokenism has had important effects. Sport, pop, reality TV, advertising and the House of Lords are all superficially integrated.

So, in the name of that conviviality and its ordinary virtues that enrich our cities, drive our cultural

industries and enhance our struggling democracy, why not work to applaud settler and other immigrant demands for a polity that is free of racism? That benefit would be good for all of us. Why not try to identify the results of ordinary multicultural's demands for recognition in various areas of policy: health, education, social reform, arts, criminal justice? Wouldn't less racism make their institutions work better across the board?

The Highland shortcake model of multicultural

Just how easily the supposedly unbridgeable gulf between civilisations can be spanned came over very strongly in the tales that the homecoming British detainees told of their Caribbean detention in Guantanamo. Their being fed with burgers from the Guantanamo Bay base branch of McDonalds, rather than the "culturally appropriate meals" which are a much-vaunted part of the Camp's humanitarian regime, is a hint at what can be achieved.

More telling is the revelation that, in articulating their strongest desires for freedom and relief from the Camp regime, they say that what they really craved was a packet of Highland Shortbread biscuits! Jamal al-Harith, born 37 years ago in Manchester to a family with Jamaican origins, was held in the Guantanamo camp for two years before his release in March 2004.

He recounted his post-colonial life story in the *Daily Mirror* and offered a welcome rebuke to mechanistic conceptions of cultural difference. This critique lost nothing by being implicit. In between a shocking account of the stupidity, horror and hopelessness of his long ordeal, he explained how much that shortbread that mattered: "We were all obsessed with Scottish Highland Shortbread. We wanted some so much."

It is there, in that hunger, lodged in those battered and humiliated bodies that the problem of assimilation specified in the 1960s, should be laid to rest forever.

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