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Anti-racism: totem and taboo – a review article

Anti-racism is under attack – again. Portrayed as an ideological relic, unsuited to an age where racism has largely withered away, it is being undermined. Depicted as meddlesome, pilloried for creating animosity where none would otherwise exist, held up as ubiquitous, it is once more being derided – both in itself and as an appendage of a much grander project – to enforce a particular social order.

In the 1980s, when anti-anti-racism, led by a phalanx of Thatcherite New Rightists had its heyday, there was a strong anti-racist current both at the grassroots and in key institutions such as schools, unions, social work to attack (see Jenny Bourne's accompanying article). Today the context is different. With the Macpherson Report of 1999 tucked under its belt, government has gone about diminishing the power of equalities bodies and conflating anti-racist initiatives, cutting funding to grassroots groups and taming 'official' anti-racism. What has prepared the path for the new onslaught is, in fact, something different: the mainstreaming across western Europe of the notion (in the light of significant EU migration) that multiculturalism has gone too far, that (in the light of the war on terror) our values are under threat; that being against immigration is disconnected from racism.

This sea-change has been brought about by the existential uncertainties created by globalisation, the impact of austerity measures, the inability of the state to actually provide basic welfare, education and healthcare, a supine Left which has decided it cannot fight the neoliberal project and the rise of particular forms of nationalism to fill the vacuum. It is an ideological (or moral) sea-change reflected not only in David Cameron's invective against 'the state doctrine of multiculturalism' and Angela Merkel's claim that the 'multikulti' concept does not work;[1] but also in the books and thinktanks that have become influential in changing the parameters of the debate and the common sense around the morality of racism and anti-racism. Writers such as David Goodhart, who claims to be a leftist who has finally seen sense, argue that immigration undermines solidarity and ultimately the levels of trust needed to sustain a welfare state.[2] Writers such as American social scientist Robert Putnam emphasise an inevitable trade-off between 'diversity' and social capital.[3] Notions which used to belong to the fringes of the Tory party are now both accepted and acceptable. And it is from the security of that change in national discourse that anti-anti-racists got a new lease of life, some now crowing how history has proved them right.[4]

It is odd that the Right pillories anti-racism while the 'Left' does not speak of anti-racism as a concept at all. In fact, in the 1980s, A. Sivanandan pointed out that there is 'no body of thought called anti-racism, no orthodoxy or dogma, no manual of strategy and tactics, no demonology'.[5]The term 'anti-racism' has no singular meaning. It is historically and geographically situated. It is not static. It moves. As Sivanandan explained back then, anti-racism is a 'portmanteau word meant to carry … differing ideas and ways of combating racism'.[6] But those engaged in today's assault essentialise anti-racism, locking it within singular, unchanging paths, in order to fit it within pre-determined narratives of their own making.

The attackers of anti-racism have always been a diverse group of thinkers – some from the economic liberalism schools of Friedrich Von Hayek and Milton Friedman, others such as John Vincent and Roger Scruton inspired by Conservative figures like Edmund Burke.[7] Some want to cultivate cultural conservatism and an exclusionary nativism, others want to construct a libertarianism rooted in freedom and non-interference. But all seem to argue that anti-racism (or the accusation of racism) now acts as an impediment to the rational management of 'race' in the UK. Most draw parallels – implicitly or explicitly – with the hellish dystopia of George Orwell's *1984*, suggesting that anti-racism has become a twenty-first century method of policing behaviour and, more crucially, thought. Many resent the impact of the Macpherson Report in 1999, arguing that it has established a bridge-head from which anti-racism has invaded all spheres of public life. And anti-racism, many agree, is to be reined in and rendered impotent in the face of a set of deeply authoritarian aims. If this is not possible, it is to be destroyed.

It is in this context that three new themes emerge in the resurgent attack on anti-racism: that it predominantly harms the (white) working class, that it is part of a larger conspiracy engineered by a liberal elite, and that it is linked to a definition of multiculturalism which undermines western (Christian) culture. Elements of these are epitomised in two recent books: *The Diversity Illusion: what we got wrong about immigration and how to set it right* by Ed West (deputy editor of the *Catholic Herald*, blogger for the *Spectator*, former columnist for the *Daily Telegraph* and the author of several books) and *How to be a Conservative*, by philosopher Roger Scruton, long associated with the New Right, the author of over thirty books and a regular contributor to national newspapers. And to one side we find *Exodus: immigration and multiculturalism in the 21ˢᵗ Century*, by Paul Collier, Professor of Economics and Public Policy at the University of Oxford, the author of several books, academic and newspaper articles on development in Africa, the former

director of research and development at the World Bank and currently an adviser to the IMF.

Only *The Diversity Illusion* has dedicated sections conceptualising anti-racism as such, with a demand for the 'oxygen supply' to be cut off from those whom the author sees as having a 'vested interest in seeing racism everywhere' and with a series of recommendations on national identity, immigration control, Britishness and culture. *How to be a Conservative* attacks the manner in which the accusation of racism is (purportedly) levelled against those who fail to conform to a dogmatic multicultural line embedded in liberal intellectual thought, basing this critique within a much broader appeal for Conservative philosophy. And *Exodus*, arguing for a 'rational' policy agenda around immigration and integration, does not attack anti-racism but maintains that it is the spectre or fear of racism, in part, that prevents this agenda being realised.

Breaking 'taboos'

Attackers of anti-racism often pose as brave iconoclasts shattering orthodoxies and breaking taboos. They maintain that it exists to prevent a critique of the destructive impact of immigration. 'Every society needs taboos' says Ed West. '[B]ut as a result [of the supposed 'taboo' on immigration] we have become terrified of expressing opposition to enormous, dubious change in case we are classed as morally abnormal.' For him and his ilk, anti-racism is a monolith stifling debate and forcing a particular way of life on beleaguered citizens.

According to Paul Collier, it was Powell's infamous Rivers of Blood speech that led to this taboo. When, in April 1968, conservative politician Enoch Powell warned how the 'indigenous' people of Britain were becoming 'strangers in their own land', that soon the 'black man [would] have the whip hand over the white man', for he was 'watching a nation busily engaged in heaping up its own funeral pyre' and, most famously of all, that 'Like the Roman, I seem to see "the River Tiber foaming with much blood"', he not only had dockers marching in his defence, but also closed down the possibility of discussion over immigration for the next four decades. For Powell was seen as so overtly racist that it was impossible to disentangle racism from immigration so as to have a debate. And it only became possible when, in 2010, former Prime Minister Gordon Brown, not realising that a mike was picking up his every word, described a member of the public in Rochdale who had attacked him on immigration as a 'bigoted woman'. Brown's comments were a boon

to the Conservative Right, which berated him for being out of touch and condescending towards the public; years later, Labour apologised for being 'wrong' on immigration – for Collier a historical turning point. 'At last', he writes, 'it may have become possible in Britain to discuss immigration without connotations of racism'.

This notion, that debate is being silenced by fear of being branded racist by a politically correct lobby, is central to writers opposing anti-racism. And it is an argument that is given credence by an emerging strain of liberal, 'rational' thought. Collier claims that breaking taboos over immigration carries risks, as 'fundamentalist guardians of orthodoxies stand ready with their fatwas'. This he calls 'the long shadow of Enoch Powell'. The shadow preoccupies Ed West, too: 'From Enoch Powell to historian David Starkey, who in 2011 told *Newsnight* that the London riots were a product of a black sub-culture, proponents of diversity have silenced opposition not with debate but with the claim that what they say is offensive or dangerous.'

The idea that issues of 'race' have been kept from public discussion, is, of course, delusional. The main political parties habitually compete over which can control or cap immigration best, polls are continually being held on public attitudes to race, there is a relentless media focus on immigration, asylum and Islam, as well as continuous 'exposés' of extremism in Muslim schools and other institutions. Far from being 'off' the agenda, 'race' is rarely not on it. Yet in 'living memory barely a newspaper article, radio or television show has seriously questioned the diversity orthodoxy', according to West, 'and even in the intelligent Right-wing press scepticism has had to be couched in such a cryptic way that the paper's horoscopes are more candid'. Though he acknowledges the British media, 'judging from a newspaper stand, appears to be incredibly Right-leaning', he goes on to claim that 'tabloid newspapers, despite being able to voice anti-immigration sentiment to a large readership, have little intellectual clout or influence on ideological trends'. In this worldview – one in which Murdoch, for example, seems to have had little influence – though the Right may set the economic agenda, the *social* agenda is being set by the Left and the liberal elite.

The elite versus the white working class

Anti-racism, from this perspective, is linked to a broader project to enforce 'diversity', fundamentally altering voting patterns, class relations and the demographic make-up of the UK in the process. This diversity project is being established by a 'liberal elite' (an

'overused and slightly caricatured term, but a valid one', according to West), which has a 'habit of speaking to people with political views similar to theirs (and those who do not may not have the courage to voice their opinions)'. And it is in this context that an 'enclosed social circle can quickly evolve political views, and the concentration of Britain's intelligentsia in west and north London [have] helped to radically shift accepted ideas and prevent dissenting voices'.

In West's view, not only have the ideas of the 'anti-racist Left' created a 'race relations industry, which stretches across all areas of the state', anti-racism has further become a badge of liberal honour, a source of pride that is used to display membership of an educated, civilised class. 'Anti-racist attitudes', he suggests, 'are the modern human equivalent of the peacock's tail'. And this 'civilised' class plays out its diversity ideals at the expense of the white working class.

Incidentally, this notion, of a diversity strategy which has class snobbery and vindictiveness at its core, is not restricted to the traditional Right. Stuart Waiton, for example, a libertarian who would differ on many points with West, made the same argument in a short book, *Snobs' Law*, stating: 'In the 1970s and 1980s, sections of the old elite hated and feared black working class youth'. 'Key sections of today's cosmopolitan elite have flip-flopped and their class prejudices are now reserved for the white working class who they see as undermining our multicultural Britain.'[8] Yet whilst those such as West and Waiton correctly point out that the indifference of elites to working-class communities has led to alienation and anger, their 'support', consisting as it does of an attack on anti-racism, does not address this anger but turns a class issue into an ethnic one. When West argues that 'many in the middle-classes' view 'English working-class culture as inherently brutal, violent and drink-soaked, lazy, rude and anti-education', he is right to highlight the patronising disdain. But in West's schema white working-class communities exist as little more than victims of immigration and 'diversity'.

Presumably if those who claim to attack anti-racism out of concern for the white working class really wanted to show solidarity they would point to the political choices by elites to effectively wage a war on working-class communities, transferring wealth from manufacturing bases to a predatory finance centre, miring many communities in poverty in the process. But they don't. West accuses trade unions of acting against their own interests, not for failing to respond in any meaningful way to these processes, but for failing to speak out 'at enormous numbers of new arrivals'. His anger at the UK's

economy is not directed at the proliferation of exploitative, unprotected jobs, but at the idea that 'natives are unsuited towards low-skilled jobs, somehow too good to do the dirty work'. These class champions' concern for the white working class evaporates when it meets a reality which does not conform to rightwing or libertarian world views.

Philosopher Roger Scruton, for example, who writes so eloquently about love and sacrifice, sneers in condemnation when it comes to the social collateral damage from Britain's neoliberal experiment. 'Habits such as out-of-wedlock birth, malingering and hypochondria are rewarded', he states, referring to those on welfare, 'and the habits are passed from parent to child, creating a class of citizens who have never lived from their own industry and know no one else who has done so either'. For Scruton, the Conservative Party's ongoing welfare 'reforms' represent an aim to remove 'the poverty trap' and 'make the system affordable'. He makes no mention of the fact that millions are forced to rely on welfare to top-up wages that are not enough to live on; turning his wrath, instead, on attempts to measure poverty, in order to alleviate or combat it, through a focus on relative deprivation. 'Since it is inevitable, given the unequal distribution of human talent, energy and application, that there will be people with less than 60 per cent of the median income,' he says, 'this definition implies that poverty will never go away, regardless of how wealthy the poorest are.' Even the most basic attempts to measure an economy, that go beyond an Ayn Rand-style belief in the wealth-creators, are dismissed. 'The relative definition serves also to perpetuate the great socialist illusion, which is that the poor are poor because the rich are rich', Scruton writes. 'The implication is that poverty is cured only by equality, and never by wealth.'

Communism's heir and the 'culture of repudiation'

It has to be remembered when examining the attack on anti-racism that equality is always a bugbear of this strain of the Right. For Scruton, the notion of equality coincides with a concept of social justice which, through coming 'to the rescue of egalitarians', has enabled them to 'present their malice towards the successful as a kind of compassion towards the rest'. From this perspective, what may appear compassionate at first glance, on further reflection elevates resentment to a virtue. It represents a cover, embedded in socialist thought, which calls on the state to enforce a never-achievable goal. The result of which has been 'the emergence in modern politics of a wholly novel idea of justice – one that has little or nothing to do with right, desert, reward or retribution, and which is effectively detached from the actions and responsibilities of individuals'.

Ed West could not agree more. 'To call anti-racism the bastard child of Communism would be doing it a disservice; it is the favourite son and heir to Communism, and bears an uncanny resemblance to its father.' 'Diversity by its very nature brings inequality', he claims, 'and just as Communism singularly failed to produce equality of outcomes between individuals, so too its 21st-century successor has and will fail to produce equality of outcomes between groups.' In his analysis, 'it is paradoxical that those who cite the spectre of racial conflict are justifying a policy most likely to bring it about – mass immigration'. And he cites French essayist Alain Finkielkraut, who describes the 'war on racism' as turning into a 'hideously false ideology' which will 'be for the twenty-first century what Communism was for the twentieth century: a source of violence'. It is 'non-elite immigration', in particular, that West believes carries the greatest threat of this, and he argues that 'immigration and the policies of immigration and multiculturalism [have] brought levels of violence alien to English history, including an almost American-style level of gun crime'. Whilst the accepted explanation for this is that 'crime is caused by poverty, past injustice or racism, or because young men are stereotyped', that, from his perspective, is wrong. Highlighting the murder rates in the West Indies, in Jamaica, in Trinidad and Tobago and in Barbados, he argues that it 'seems unlikely that this does not have a bearing on London crime patterns today'. The creation of a 'black underclass' decades ago is discussed, and linked to historical discrimination alongside rocketing 'levels of fatherlessness'. Children have started speaking with 'black' accents, he claims, through 'insecurity and fear-driven conformity', in an attempt to 'appear more streetwise and tougher than they are'. What results are postcode killings and the imperative to arm police. The reality, he continues, is a police force cowed by the layers of bureaucracy that diversity has foisted upon it, having 'to fight both crime and tread the path of community relations…'.

None among these right-wing opponents of anti-racism would dare to posit biological difference as a cause of such conflict. But they do believe in 'cultural' hierarchy. When Scruton appeals for 'race' to be understood as distinct from 'culture', suggesting that only then would it become possible to openly acknowledge that 'not all cultures are equally admirable, and that not all cultures can exist comfortably side by side', he echoes an intellectual position which he himself has been influential in developing over a period of decades. Although dressed up as an attack on cultural relativism, it goes well beyond this. And focusing at one point on Islam in particular, whilst isolating examples of what he sees as examples of this 'culture' to fit his argument ('genital mutilation'; that 'the infidel must be destroyed when Allah commands it'), he argues that 'when suddenly they are

happening in your midst, you are apt to wake up to the truth about the culture that advocates them. You are apt to say, that is not *our* culture, and it has no business *here*.'

Scruton, claiming that multicultural thinking has come to dominate intellectual thought, believes that the ideas embedded in the Enlightenment – the power of reason, common morality, enquiry and passion – have been turned against western civilisation. The 'virtue of our civilisation, so clearly manifest in America', he says, 'has been used precisely to repudiate that civilisation's claim on us'. Unperturbed by the extent to which these same Enlightenment 'values' have been used to justify untold death and suffering in Britain's colonial adventures, he claims a 'down with us' mentality is destroying 'old and unsustainable loyalties'. And the zenith of this, in his eyes, is a 'culture of repudiation': a nihilistic attack on old forms of cultural inheritance, with those who offer 'to endorse, to teach and to uphold the value of Western civilisation' accused of racism. It is fear of this 'charge of racism', he argues, that has led 'commentators, politicians and police forces all across the Western world to refrain from criticizing or taking action against many of the overtly criminal customs that have installed themselves in our midst – customs such as forced marriage, female circumcision and "honour" killing, and the growing intimidation from Islamists of anyone remotely critical of their faith'.

And yet the conflation of 'culturalism' with anti-racism that those on the Right find convenient does not actually fit the facts. For it was the Institute of Race Relations (anathema to this group as evidenced in Bourne's article in this issue) that first enunciated the obvious fact when critiquing multiculturalism: that the fight *for* culture was not a fight *against* racism.[9] As the journalist Chris Hedges has put it, whilst much of a sterile Left, retreating into multicultural discourse, has, indeed, 'subordinated public values to torturous textual analysis',[10] so that an apolitical concept of multiculturalism is little more than a plea with 'the corporate power structure for inclusion', what is needed is a movement for social change which challenges the economic and political structures that are disempowering the excluded and marginalised. What is necessary is a politics which threatens power and the power elite. Anti-racism, from this perspective, requires the capacity to challenge structural inequality and injustice. But this is exactly what those who are relaunching the attack on anti-racism excoriate.

Racism as attitude

In Britain, in the late 1990s, a transformation of sorts took place with a national acceptance, in the wake of the Macpherson Report, that racism was institutional and structural.[11] Yet the concept of institutional racism was undermined from the outset by the Right.[12] Scruton, a long-time critic of anti-racism, argued last year in *Forbes* magazine that the entire concept of institutional racism was a piece of 'sociological newspeak', for 'it made an accusation which could not be refuted by anyone who had the misfortune to be accused of it'.[13] West, citing Norman Dennis, compares the Stephen Lawrence inquiry to 'the Stalinist show trials of the 1930s', and says that even to question whether the murder of Stephen Lawrence was 'a purely racist crime' became 'in itself, evidence of racism'. The Macpherson Report contained seventy wide-ranging recommendations. But for those who attack anti-racism, these can be summed up as a form of modern-day McCarthyism. Concentrating solely on a small subsidiary part of Macpherson's definition of institutional racism, 'unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness', they dismiss the massive report, drawing parallels with Orwellian notions of 'thought-crime'. The 'nation's racist-hunters', West argues, 'have invented new areas to weed out sin'.

This is where the paranoid imagery of those attacking anti-racism almost always ends up. Attempts to recognise, understand and respond to racism are equated to totalitarianism. Attempts to check the ways in which racism has become woven into institutional practices are decried as injustice. According to West, it is natural to display attitudes and prejudices. Evolutionary psychologists, he writes, have provided evidence that 'racial stereotypes and preferences' are ubiquitous in children as young as three, and 'the only children who display no racial prejudice are those suffering from … a brain disorder [Williams syndrome]'. Racism, he argues, 'or what anti-racists understand as racism, is a universal part of human nature'.

Those engaged in this resurgent attack on anti-racism portray themselves as embattled warriors fighting for the soul of the nation against the barbarians who would destroy our sacred civilisation as we know it. But it would be more accurate to see them as putting all that makes us civilised at risk: by withdrawing from obligations to refugees, by cutting us off from world migration, by enforcing white majoritarianism. Their envisaged civilisation points to a future of exclusion, the eradication of dissent and ultimately dystopia.

A review article of Paul Collier, *Exodus: immigration and multiculturalism in the 21st century* (London, Allen Lane, 2013); Roger Scruton, *How to be a Conservative* (London, Bloomsbury Continuum, 2014); and Ed West, *The Diversity*

Illusion: what we got wrong about immigration and how to set it right (London, Gibson Square, 2013).

1. See Cameron David, 'PM's speech at Munich security conference – full transcript' (5 February 2011), available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pms-speech-at-munich-security-conference; and 'Merkel says German multicultural society has failed', BBC News (17 October 2010), available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-11559451. Google Scholar

2. See Goodhart David, 'Too diverse?', Prospect (Issue 95, February 2004) and Goodhart David, The British Dream: successes and failures of postwar immigration (London, Atlantic Books, 2013). Google Scholar

3. See Putnam Robert D., Bowling Alone: the collapse and revival of American community (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000). Google Scholar CrossRef

4. See, for example, the attempts to beatify figures such as Ray Honeyford and Enoch Powell by various journalists, intellectuals and politicians: Graham Georgia, 'Nigel Farage: "The basic principle" of Enoch Powell's river of blood speech is right', Daily Telegraph (5 January 2014); McTague Tom, 'Enoch Powell was RIGHT to warn against immigration, claims former Tory defence minister Gerald Howarth' (Daily Mail, 27 August 2014); Pandya Abhijit, 'Ray Honeyford was vindicated. When will we give the same recognition to Enoch Powell?' (Daily Mail, 20 February 2012); Scruton Roger, 'Let's face it – Ray Honeyford got it right on Islam and education' (Spectator, 5 July 2014). Google Scholar

5. Sivanandan A., 'Left, right and Burnage', New Statesman (27 May 1988). Google Scholar

6. Ibid.

7. See Gordon Paul, Klug Francesca, New Right, New Racism (London, Searchlight, 1985). Google Scholar

8. Waiton Stuart, Snobs' Law: criminalising football fans in an age of intolerance (Dundee, Take a Liberty, 2012), pp. 64–5. Google Scholar

9. In the 1980s, it was the Institute of Race Relations which first pointed this out when critiquing the ethnic programmes which were recommended in the wake of the Scarman Report into the 1981 Brixton riots.

10. Hedges Chris, Death of the Liberal Class (New York, Nation Books, 2010). Google Scholar

11. The Macpherson Report, an investigation into the racist murder of black teenager Stephen Lawrence and the police investigation that followed, was published in 1999. It stated that the police investigation was underpinned by 'a combination of professional incompetence, institutional racism, and a failure of leadership by senior officers'. Stephen Lawrence was killed in south London in 1993; in 2012 two people were convicted of his murder.

12. Skidelsky Robert, ed., Institutional Racism and the Police: fact or fiction (London, Institute for the Study of Civil Society, 2000) and Dennis Norman, ., Racist Murder and Pressure Group Politics (London, Institute for the Study of Civil Society, 2000). Google Scholar

13. Scruton Roger, 'Why did British police ignore Pakistani gangs abusing 1,400 children? Political correctness', Forbes (30 August 2014), available at: http://www.forbes.com/sites/rogerscruton/2014/08/30/why-did-british-police-ignore-pakistani-gangs-raping-rotherham-children-political-correctness/. Google Scholar