NOT FORGETTING THE MAIMED:
BARBARISM AND CIVILISATION

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There is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another.

Walter Benjamin, "Thesis on the Philosophy of History", *Illuminations*, 1992

Walter Benjamin's remark is a reminder of the foolishness of celebrating culture and cultural artifacts in a historical vacuum, while ignoring the institutional roots of their production." Yet over the past decade in Britain this is precisely this sort of folly that has become fashionable in discussions on culture as they relate to the status of racial minorities and their *rights*. This folly plays out across a range of public discourses, especially around issues of cultural production. Looking through these documents it is possible to detect a pattern regarding questions of culture, immigration and rights. One can trace iterations of ideas that are not so different from previous articulations. This latest re-iteration may not fit neatly into what Etienne Balibar describes as neo-racism[1] but *sans* the familiar manifestation, the methods adopted by both are similar. As Balibar suggests, all the new hypotheses concerning culture, immigration and rights in Britain have been formulated "on the basis of an internal critique of theories, of discourses tending to legitimate policies of exclusion in terms of anthropology or the philosophy of history."[2] Thus in the British context, the discourse of *rights* for racial minorities, especially as this discourse circulates in government policy has in recent years shifted from the pliable 'equal opportunities' emphasis to the giddy phenomenon that in the UK is called 'multiculturalism'. If the first iteration of the policy was a formulaic technocratic construct to keep accusations of racism at arm's length, the second has resulted in a benign celebration of inequality and a dispersal of the blame for people's inability to climb out of the racial stereotypes. This is the way the thorny issue of 'equality of opportunity' has been recast. But inequality is no more resolved today than it was in 1917, when the conservative British writer, W.H. Mallock, noted that if democracy was realised and social conditions were equalised, 'there would be no such thing as opportunity, equal or unequal for anybody ...'[3] Yet if one considers the critiques of multiculturalism today, none of the critics seem troubled by the fundamental obfuscations of its founding principles. Their major concern would appear to be the unintended but clearly visible elevation of entitlement rights for racial minorities in recent legislation and how the entitlement is deployed in policies that have grown out of the legislation. Unsurprisingly, much of this has become part of the race and nation complex.

In the liberal circle at least, the supposed crisis arising from the elevation of entitlement rights for racial minority was voiced in a February 2004 article in *Prospect,* a celebrated British journal that takes a liberal stance on most topics. In the article, *Too Diverse?*, the editor and journal founder, David Goodhart, pointed at what he called the "progressive dilemma", which he sees as arising from the meeting of two utopian ideals—solidarity and diversity.[4] Goodhart argues that too much diversity leads to the erosion of solidarity on the basis that those who are 'diverse' in the context of his article were those with 'significant religious or ethnic divisions,' as if there were no other types of diversity. Although based on a number of false dichotomies, such as the alleged incompatibility between racial diversity and solidarity, the article suggests that in the face of diversity, the notion of citizenship as 'equal legal, political and social rights (and duties) for people inhabiting a given national space' becomes inadequate. Implied, but not stated in the essay, is the need to displace the *jus solis* (law of the soil) concept of citizenship that adorns English law and which has been adopted across much of the English–speaking world in favour of the

1 See "Is There a 'Neo-Racism'?", in Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein (1991), *Race, Nation, Class Ambiguous Identities*, London: Verso Books, pp17-28

2 Ibid, p.17

3 Quoted in Williams, R. (1963) p168

4 "Too Diverse?", in David Goodhart, ed, Thinking Allowed: The Best of Prospect 1995-2005, pp187-202

law of the blood or *jus sanguinis*, as is found under German legal system. Thus, the real significance of the essay lies in its contra reading of the concept of citizenship and the use of that reading to reassert the false anthropological definitions of culture (possessing unchangeable cultural traits that define behaviour and intellectual capacity) on which much of the objections to multiculturalism are based.

In this Goodhart provides an example of what Etienne Balibar describes as misrecognition, a strategy that makes the violence of racism tolerable to those who engage in it.[5] Goodhart's analysis is also an illustration of another of Balibar's concepts, that of 'academic racism' which relies on a process of theory-building that attempts to 'mimic scientific discursivity by basing themselves on 'visible evidence'… [making them] immediately intelligible to the masses'.[6] Such theory-building poses not only a dilemma for those wishing to discuss citizenship on the basis of primary rights (and duties), but also aims at justifying the denial of such rights in the state's everyday relationship with racial minorities. Ironically, Goodhart himself criticizes this type of grand theory-building when, almost counter-intuitively to his own argument he states that '…the progressive dilemma lurks beneath many aspects of current politics: national tax and redistribution policies; the asylum and immigration debate; development aid budgets; European Union integration and spending on the poorer southern and east European states; and even the tensions between America (built on political ideals and mass immigration) and Europe (based on nation-states with core ethnic-linguistic solidarities)."[7] So it would be too simplistic and outrightly absurd to accuse Goodhart, as some did at the time, of playing to the far-right. That multiculturalism or any of its derivatives such as cultural diversity and latterly, interculturalism, poses real problems for the conception of a *homogenous*, *singular* national identity or citizenship goes without saying. Yet, apart from the fact that Goodhart's instinct was seemingly to catastrophise at a time when policy fissures looked the norm in the economic arena as well as with respect to welfare, the power elite, already in thrall to neoliberalism, appeared exhausted on the subject of rights and liberties, the question of national identity remains an interesting subject in post-imperial Britain.

I think there are two things to say about multiculturalism in this context. The first and perhaps the most significant is that it is the culmination of the struggles dating back to the 1960s, if not earlier, for the recognition of the rights of the racial minorities. It is therefore a tribute to those either killed or maimed in past anti-racism struggles who are too often forgotten. It is possible to in fact measure the achievements of decades of anti-racist struggles, though it is also possible to measure the "corruption" of the original aims and visions of these struggles over the years. The second observation is that notwithstanding those anti-racist struggles in the British context, multiculturalism has become something of an albatross for those interested in progressive politics and a boon for reactionaries everywhere.

Seen against the background of Britain's long-running conciliation to its demise as an imperial power, it is no accident that the *identikit* obsession has become heightened at a time when the only political alternative seems to be based on the intensification of market fundamentalism by the state. Goodhart's claims that solidarity could only function meaningfully when it has an autochthonic basis (such as race or core ethnic-linguistic associations) is in fact indicative of the frustration of a political clerisy who is losing influence. It is also a less intelligent rationale than it sounds; it

5 Balibar, op cit, p.19

6 Balibar, Ibid.

7 Ibid, p.188

ignores the struggles for social justice by oppressed minorities elsewhere in the world. Moreover, it plays to a bourgeois fantasy that calls up the spectre of fascism, calling for it to be opposed while conveniently failing to recognise its antidote is a pure class-based economic solidarity unsullied by the divisive national sentimentality in which they indulge. The return of the far right to the mainstream of UK and European politics, is to the contrary, not exemplified in the mobilization of minority rights but rather in the vicious attacks against vulnerable minorities and the poor. In addition the supposedly 'post-fascist' governance in Italy, should be seen as signaling the costs of what, unfortunately, became a profoundly social democratic fantasy too.

In Britain, social and economic progress, including better relations with Europe, may have occurred since the Second World War, however, the questions around citizenship for non-white immigrants many of whom are from former colonies, remain essentially unresolved. One can only suggest that this is so because the forging of the British State, as Linda Colley admirably makes clear in *Forging the Nation*[8], was far from the plain sailing narrative propounded by Goodhart. And while the power of the British Empire may appear to be in the distant past, it remains a major intellectual and social factor in the making of British identity, whether defined narrowly as the autochthonic gathering of pure white folks à la Goodhart or as a long history of dissolutions and remakes of pursuits and interests spanning religious, commerce, adventurism, politics and ideology and which also have been the foundations of 'transnational alliances' as Colley and other progressive historians have identified. Indeed, it is impossible to discuss the identity question in Britain without the Empire.

The purpose of all this is to suggest that the question of citizenship before the advent of multiculturalism as a discursive framework was problematic. The trouble therefore did not start with multiculturalism. Yet the tangible progress in social emancipation made by social movements by changing the terms of the nation-state, now seems lost in an era when the nation-state itself faces a real struggle against what the late Brian Barry describes as an 'international economic regime [is] designed to replicate on a world scale the most abhorrent features of American society."[9] This perhaps explains the eagerness with which the New Labour administration took on the project of re-branding of the nation with the slogan, "New Labour, New Britain," in 1997. This also meant throwing open the immigration gates to a generation of highly skilled and well-educated workers, the new proletariat of globalization, to grow the economy. At the same time, the presence of these workers and in particular their 'no-alternative' willingness to accept jobs at comparatively lower wage levels than would normally accrue to their qualifications and/or individual competence, has unwittingly served to frustrate the struggle against, on the one hand, the surreptitious revocation of a number of social rights enshrined in the post-war settlement and, on the other hand, their replacement by a new arrangement of privatization. It is not clear how much of this new immigration is being encouraged on the back of Britain's long-established ties with countries that were part of its imperial domination, which differs from the ties with the likes of Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the USA. It is also far from clear how much of the new capitalism in places such as India, Malaysia, Singapore, Nigeria, South Africa, are conditioned by Britain's own approach to globalization. What was achieved under the New Britain project was in effect a political and administrative conjunction, which in retrospect was well-packaged in the vocabulary of cultural renewal.

8 Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging The Nation 1707-1837,* Yale University Press, 1992

9 Brian Barry, *Why Social Justice Matters*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005, p.216

The trouble with the government's use of culture as both a term and a concept is that it is never too far away from conventional anthropology. Indeed, when conflated with culture, it becomes difficult not to see the myth of globalisation as anything other than an instrument of appropriation and marketing by global capital. This is evident in tourism where 'identikit' marketing has become the norm. The issue then is not about flattening out differences (as in inequalities as per above) as if this would result in a genuine internationalism, but rather the anthropological and political re-articulation of the developing world (the source countries of the majority of racial minorities in Britain) essentially as places replete with *traditions*, *values*, and *religions* and as such, presumed to have no discernible historical progress, with the exception of regions that aspire to capitalism. In this formulae the West, however, represents the antithesis to culture as it is found in developing countries. The West counterposes culture with a set of verifiable historical achievements, technology, wealth creation, class struggle, social emancipation, refinement of taste through education and so on. Of course, such bifurcation is a continuity of the will to power that has dominated the relationship with the West and the developing world. It is this bifurcation and its endless repackaging that is the major cause, I believe, of what literary scholarship, when shorn of its postmodern language frills, refers to as alterity, the dissolution of difference and its simultaneous reification into 'pseudo-categories' which support parallel universes of knowledge and of knowing.

The critical achievement of Britain on multiculturalism is evident in the recognition that for some rights to be fully protected, the nature and sources of their erosion or denial must first be recognised. Thus a promising start, indeed a giant leap, was made when the race relations law was re-written in 2000 to take account of the violence played out by institutions of the state. Much of this is now sadly forgotten in the cacophonous arguments between the assorted groups who see the new legislation as privileging of outsiders, rather than addressing racial marginalizing in British society. This dehistoricising is also found among racial minorities, the supposed targets of the new benevolence, who seem to regard the shift as an isolated policy change as opposed to a more systemic change in legislation. [10] It remains true however, that a more fundamental shift in Britain's legal apparatus was made.

In this respect, two key observations are worth making. The first is that in spite of what the defenders and haters of multiculturalism say, it was not an isolated policy shift, but was part of a programmed move towards a new form of citizenship, one less rooted in the mythological homogeneity that Goodhart and his cohort believe existed as recently as the 1950s. Rather, it is the sort of citizenship that is mobile and adaptable to the cosmopolitanism of the new global bourgeoisie. Second is that this shift has also been attended by the law of unintended consequences. Here I am referring to the way that it created an interstitial space from which genuine advances could be made towards securing proper recognition for non-white minorities within the national space. How well this has been done can be seen in the various equality legislations that followed the Race Relations Amendment Act and which culminated in a unified equalities legislation in 2010. Indeed, what has emerged as a result of the shift is the potential for a proper debate between meaningful citizenship

10 This in essence was the idea behind the amendment to the Race Relations Act of 2000. I am less concerned here about the meanings or the wordings of the Act as I am about the social condition that produced it. It was in response to the findings of a commission of inquiry into the London Police's handling of the investigation into the racist murder of a Black London teenager, Stephen Lawrence, that led the government to define offences that are racist in nature and also who may be guilty of racist offences in terms of restricting racial minorities access to public services.

rights and cultural relativism.

Here is the reason for the importance of rights and equality in the discussion of culture. This is achievable only within the terms of citizenship rights which ought not to be reduced to an issue of 'equality of opportunity.' The question that arises then is how citizenship rights are reflected in matters of cultural access and participation. I argue that this has largely been through the exploitation of the interstitial openings made possible by the sudden shift in the space between politics and policy. For example, one of the remarkable achievements over the past 11 years or thereabouts is the acceptance that there is distance between state-funded cultural institutions and racial minorities—audience and workers alike. This has prompted efforts to rectify what is viewed as a failure on the part of institutions. It has lead to an unplanned renewal of interests by institutions such as the Arts Councils and the network of organisations they support in artistic exploration. That interest relies on the use and deployment of the vigour normally associated with popular culture.

This has been accomplished mostly under the themes of access and participation. Even hallowed institutions such as operas and museums have become wizened to a new idea of access and participation, albeit with an eye on increasing audience figures in most cases. Another significant gain is the quality of attention that is now given to career prospects and autonomy of practice for artists from racial minorities. Even where, in the case of autonomy, it is still possible for such artists to be asked (usually by well-meaning but uninformed bureaucrats) to 'produce work that reflects their cultural identity', it cannot be ignored that these artists have traditionally been confined to nothing more than gap-filling community projects of usually dubious value. Yet, the idea of autonomy in artistic production is appreciated as a serious issue for the artists from racial minorities. Therefore, one may live in hope, taking the liberty to corrupt the words of Bertolt Brecht, that the artists themselves will cease living in fear of production. After all, "You never know where you are with production; production is the unforeseeable. You never know what's going to come out."[11]

Artistic autonomy however does not function by itself. The organisation of the institutional/bureaucratic means by which autonomy can be defended can therefore not be ignored. If the simultaneous misrecognition of the racism faced by racial minorities, on the one hand, and the subjugation of their rights, on the other, are what loom large in much of the response to the cultural modernisation programme of the 1997-2010 Labour Government in the UK, the recent attempt by its successor, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition to relaunch the 'multiculturalism' debate is particularly noteworthy. As in the run up to the introduction of cultural modernisation agenda under New Labour, when the party used its anti-racist credentials to align itself with neoliberal theories of growth, the coalition seems intent on seizing on 'multiculturalism' as a prosaic restatement of the old animus to immigration. This time however, it is in the form of nativist Westphalia logic, designed to exonerate the British state from its wider obligations to protect the rights of minorities and in particular those now routinely referred to as non-European migrants. And under the Conservative-Liberal-Democrat coalition, given what is increasingly becoming an unprecedented roll-back of the State programmes, I will argue that what we are witnessing is also a restatement of the complex normative architecture of mobilisation for which the British political right is notoriously known. Herein lies the future challenge for the defenders of universal rights.

11 See *Aesthetics and Politics: Debates between Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukacs, Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno* (London: NLB, 1977), p.97

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