COMMENTARY

England, whose England?

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By their fear you shall know them. The USA responded to al-Qaeda's September 2001 attacks with a proliferation of flags reaffirming national pride and widespread support for the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, confirmed by George W. Bush's 2004 re-election. Spain reacted to the Madrid train explosions of March 2003 with silent vigils that shut down the country, and by replacing José María Aznar's Partido Popular government with a Socialist Party that would withdraw Spanish troops from Iraq. By July 2005, the UK had already given Tony Blair a third term, albeit with a reduced majority and despite general anti-war sentiment. Rather than patriotism or protest, London's tube and bus bombings inspired anguish and self-mockery: anguished analyses of British-born 'bombers from suburbia'; self-mocking websites such as www. iamfuckingterrified.com. Others, however, were less anguished and only accidentally self-parodic: 'Bombers Are All Spongeing Asylum Seekers' declared the *Daily Express*. Meanwhile, arsonists attacked a mosque on the Wirral, and hate crimes rose sixfold in the weeks following the 7 July bombings.

Whereas the US and Spanish responses to terror were fairly coherent, their alchemy of affect into politics more or less straightforward, the effect of the London attacks has been more confused. An overhyped stoicism, bolstered by folk-memory narratives of the Blitz or IRA mainland campaigns but leavened by understandable twitchiness, has combined with various forms of hysteria, whether liberal hand-wringing, illiberal violence or libertarian excess ('beer not afraid'), and it has been distanced through irony. The bombs did not particularly play into New Labour's rhetoric of security at home and belligerence abroad, but at the same time Blair is riding higher in the polls than ever before, apparently on the principle that the person who caused the mess is best placed to clear it up.

For Paul Gilroy, the mess that is Britain's overseas entanglement and the messiness of its reactions to terror on the tube are both best referred to deeper, post-imperial roots.[*] British attitudes to race and to geopolitics alike are conditioned by the ambivalence of 'postcolonial melancholia', on the one hand, and an emergent 'unruly and unplanned multiculture', on the other. The country's melancholic mood derives from its refusal to face up to the loss of an empire which had structured its political institutions and given a sense of coherence to its culture. Rather than working through this loss, Britain acts it out in the 'racist violence [that] provides an easy means to 'purify' and rehomogenize the nation', which is then followed by 'shame-faced tides of self-scrutiny and self-loathing' and interspersed with 'outbursts of manic euphoria'. But Gilroy also

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[*] Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Multiculture or Postcolonial Melancholia*, Routledge, London, 2004; published in the USA as *Postcolonial Melancholia*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2005; Paul Gilroy and Herman Ouseley, 'Race and Faith Post 7/7', *Guardian*, 30 July 2005. Quotations are from *After Empire/Postcolonial Melancholia*, unless otherwise indicated.

detects a 'spontaneous tolerance and openness evident in the underworld of Britain's convivial culture'. He argued in a recent dialogue in the *Guardian* that 'wounded London's response' to the July attacks, such as 'the shrine at King's Cross and the crowd at Stockwell station', showed 'vividly' that British history 'offers valuable lessons about how to get along convivially in a multicultural polity'.
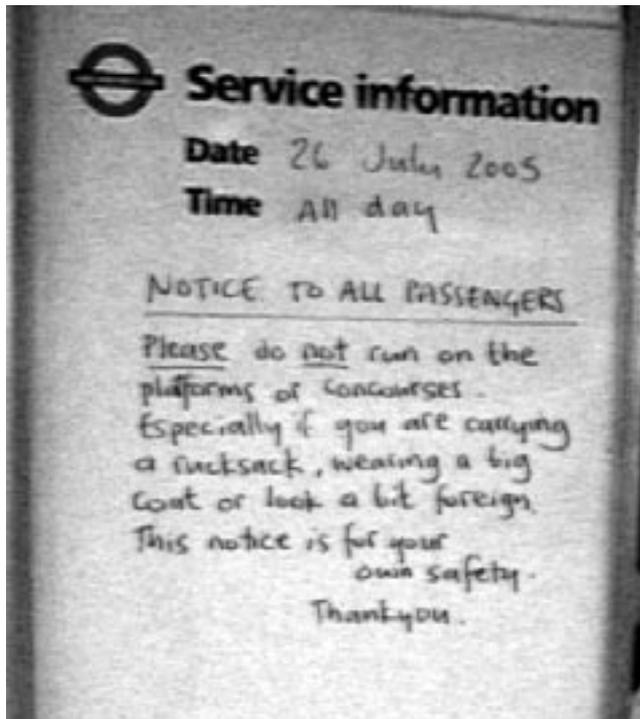
The country's predicament offers opportunities as well as pitfalls. If we could only identify and analyse the central role that colonialism and race thinking played in the constitution of the modern state, and then also defend and explain the countervailing trend towards conviviality, Britain might stand firm against 'US models that are identified with an inevitable future of racial conflict'. Indeed, the 'rebirth of English tolerance and generosity' might even 'one day teach the rest of Europe something about what will have to be done in order to live peacefully with difference'.

Cheap

There is, it should be evident, some irony in Gilroy's position. He suggests that Britain might become 'Great' again, forging a path separate from an embattled and incorrigible United States, and taking a lead within Europe; but the first step towards that goal would be the acknowledgement that Britain is in fact no longer Great, and the abandonment of its geopolitical pretensions. It is perhaps no wonder that the figure who most permeates this book is George Orwell. Orwell's 'authentically geo-pious Anglo patriotism' operates as a hinge between the early-twentieth-century intellectual internationalists and exiles (W.E.B. DuBois, Hannah Arendt, Sigmund Freud) who populate the first half of the book and the twenty-first-century pop culture performances (Ali G, The Streets, *The Office*) that take centre stage in the second. Orwell and his dislocated Englishness mediate the 'intuitive estrangement' of Freud and what Gilroy terms Ali G's 'daring act of patriotic love'. Orwell combines 'worldly consciousness' with 'parochial attachments to England's distinctive environment'. As indeed does Gilroy.

To recover a worldly consciousness, Gilroy would have us return to 'the cosmopolitan hopes of a generation that, like Orwell himself, in rejecting both Fascism and Stalinism, articulated larger loyalties: to humanity and to civilization'. This is the generation of modernist intellectuals from Freud and DuBois through Arendt and Jean-Paul Sartre to Frantz Fanon and Malcolm X. Their cosmopolitan humanism, Gilroy argues, is articulated during the 'special moment' between the rise of Fascism in the 1930s and African decolonization in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Its epicentre was the late 1940s, the point at which the United Nations adopted its 'Universal Declaration of Human Rights', but which also saw the partition of India, the establishment of the state of Israel, and the foundation of apartheid South Africa. In the shadow of Nazism, a 'planetary debate over 'race' and racism emerged from this phase of nation building and geopolitical realignment' that 'demanded a complete political and philosophical response to race lore'.

Gilroy suggests that modernist intellectuals embarked upon the necessary rethinking that would reveal the centrality of racism to modern politics, and also laid the ground for a cosmopolitan democracy that could succeed colonialism. That project was cut

short by the rise of culturalist theories of race that replaced the biological racism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Culturalism leads to the right-wing articulation of a 'clash of civilizations' but also to the debilitating insistence on absolute differences that, in Gilroy's eyes, renders contemporary anti-racism ineffective and even counterproductive. These are the 'cheap appeals to absolute national and ethnic difference that are currently fashionable', invoked by apologists for the war on terror and defenders of identity politics alike.

'Cheap' is one of Gilroy's favoured epithets: he rails against the 'facile notions', 'casual talk' and 'squeamish reluctance' of his opponents, but he reserves particular ire for 'cheap antihumanist positions', 'the cheapest invocations of incommensurable otherness', 'cheap patriotism', 'cheap managerialism' and 'cheap consensus'. The repetition is striking. But why, in politics as in housing, should the expensive be valorized over the affordable? After all, in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell himself had a rather more nuanced assessment of the 'cheap luxuries', from the cinema to the newly available 'cheap smart clothes', with which the poor in the 1930s mitigated the effects of unemployment. Gilroy seems to take 'cheap' to be a synonym for 'inadequate' or 'inauthentic'. But this equation of market price with political value carries overtones of exclusivity typical of modernism but surely less palatable for cultural theory today. It reeks of Orwell's famous sensitivity to the smell of working-class life, the 'villainous cheap scent' that, we are told in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 'only the proles used'.

Vulgar

Gilroy finds himself on uncertain ground when he invokes the market, whether as metaphor or as object of analysis. But he is convincing in his discussion of the state. The premise of mid-twentieth-century modernist internationalism was, Gilroy argues, an unflinching inquiry into the racist grounds of the contemporary state. Note that it is racism, not race, that supplies these grounds: with Sartre, Gilroy insists that race is racism's product, and so a derivative rather than a generative difference. Gilroy also follows Freud in suggesting that the root of racism lies in a fundamental division within a community (again, at its core, not at its periphery) arising from 'the conflict between the social obligation to love one's fellow citizens and the unhappiness involved in the impossible attempt to do so'. Minor differences are therefore presented as intractable, absolute and natural distinctions between the human and the 'infrahuman'; the effects of this mechanism of differentiation, presented as causes, are projected by the state onto first the national territory and later, with colonialism, the planetary stage.

The state is very much the villain of the piece for Gilroy. 'Raciology', or Manichaean race thinking, is 'a product of modern political culture with special ties to its philosophies of power, government, and statecraft'. European colonialism merely extended state logic to a global scale. Public torture, for instance, never disappeared from the repertoire of European governance; it just migrated to the colonies, as is evident from histories of the Congo or the Caribbean, or the bloody suppression of the 1857 Indian mutiny. The 'practice of blasting prisoners to death by tying their bodies over the mouths of cannon', spattering 'blood and fragments of flesh' over onlookers, is surely just as spectacular and as visceral as the treatment of Damiens the regicide famously described in the opening pages of Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*. Moreover it is not as though colonial practices were somehow 'sealed off from the mainstream': metropolitan statecraft and imperial governance informed each other, the periphery serving as 'a laboratory, a location for experiment and innovation that transformed the exercise of governmental powers at home and configured the institutionalization of imperial knowledge to which the idea of 'race' was central'. Foremost among these imperial knowledges is the discipline of cultural anthropology. But political theory

and conceptions of economic progress are also marked by their colonial provenance, transforming the raciological assumption of naturalized difference into a temporal distinction between the developed regions and their developing counterparts condemned to lag behind.

If Freud's response to the pathology of civilization was 'fatalistic', Gilroy draws hope from other modernists such as DuBois and Fanon, who offered 'acts of imagination and invention that are adequate to the depth of the postcolonial predicament' that they described. And if even DuBois suggests that the 'color line' means that '"race" is a fatal, unchanging principle of political cultures', Gilroy optimistically declares that his 'refusal of that fate is what defines the approach to anti-racist agency I want to sketch out'. Gilroy wagers on the possibility of an explicitly 'civilizing' project that, in his *Guardian* piece, is also taken as 'a means of building democracy and citizenship'.

It may be true that today's war against terror, with its absolute demarcation of difference, spectacular destruction of the infrahuman, opportunistic suspension of legality, and shallow rhetoric of 'messianic civilizationalism', has deep roots in the practices of colonial governance; also that the voices of modernist cosmopolitan humanism are now discredited on the Left and the Right alike, along (Gilroy says) with the internationalist drive of mid-century feminism and socialism. Yet Gilroy still believes we can take on the challenge of 'articulating cosmopolitan hope upward from below rather than imposing it downward from on high' and so 'invent conceptions of humanity that allow for the presumption of equal value'. To take up this challenge, however, we are moved from the political philosophy of modernism to the cultural studies that finds in Orwell's work 'the source of [its] traditions of dissenting cultural reflection and analysis'. Gilroy puts his hope in 'a "vulgar" or "demotic" cosmopolitanism' whose value lies 'in its refusal of state-centeredness and in its attractive vernacular style'. The second half of *After Empire/Postcolonial Melancholia* is devoted to this.

Smelly

Here, Gilroy shifts from the high culture of mid-century European and Atlantic intellectual life to the low culture of an ordinary twenty-first century. This is also a shift from 'The Planet' to the 'distinctive environment' of 'Albion'. Gilroy analyses a series of contemporary British cultural phenomena, from the blunt nationalism of football terrace chants ('Two World Wars and One World Cup') to the anxious masculinism of Nick Hornby or Tony Parsons and the complex ambivalence of *The Office*. But he is at pains to demonstrate the ambivalence at the heart even of the rowdy supporters of England football, who have to acknowledge despite themselves that the country's paltry sporting prowess is but a melancholic substitute for lost geopolitical importance. The fans, too, are victims, and Gilroy insists on recognizing 'the dignity and value of the worthy lives that motto ['Two World Wars'] has helped to lead astray or divert into the arid lands of British nationalist fantasy'. Even *Changing Rooms* and *Ground Force* are taken to harbour utopian potential in their 'liberating ordinariness that makes strangeness recede in a fog of paint fumes and sawdust'; their melancholic sorrow lies

in the assumption that such change can only be effected within the bounded plots of an Englishman's house and garden.

In the end, then, Gilroy cannot fully put his faith in the 'small triumphs' of the 'ordinary, spontaneous antiracism' that he finds in contemporary music and popular culture, however 'vibrant' or 'vital' it may be. It is all too likely that a generation could be misled either by 'manipulative political leaders' or by 'hip-hop consumer culture' and the other 'stultifying US styles and habits' in which Gilroy somewhat strangely finds few redemptive possibilities. This is where we see the depth of Gilroy's ambivalence about market processes. Why, if a demotic cosmopolitanism is self-evident and spontaneous, is it so easily veiled or seduced by pathological melancholia, state command or market mediocrity? Why, in short, do the affective regimes of ordinary, unruly, everyday life in Madrid, New York or London support or subvert political order in such different ways? I agree that the answer must lie in part in differing imperial histories, though Spain too lost an empire, perhaps even more traumatically than did the formerly Great Britain. I suspect that what is required is a more nuanced analysis of the relation between affect and politics, one that does not, by simply opposing a vibrant demos to a calcified state, repeat the very populist gestures it sets out to criticize.

Gilroy has been criticized for his 'populist modernism' before – not least by Kobena Mercer, who took him to task as long ago as 1990 for his celebration of 'black cultural practices' that have 'spontaneously arrived at insights which appear in European traditions as the exclusive results of lengthy and lofty philosophical discussions' ('Black Art and the Burden of Representation', *Third Text* 10, Spring 1990). As we see in *After Empire*/*Postcolonial Melancholia*, and as in all populisms, Gilroy wants to have his cake and eat it: both championing the spontaneous wisdom of the people and insisting on what in the *Guardian* he called the intellectual's 'fundamental' task of 'education'. Populism sets its store by the people but never fully trusts them, hence its characteristic double articulation of mobilization and demobilization. It puts its faith in the nation's ordinary common sense and sentiment, but at the same time seeks to exclude those who do not accord with its version of common sense, to mark them as somehow not fully part of that national community. Here, as so often, the rhetoric is directed primarily against political elites, specifically the New Labour government that has betrayed (Gilroy suggests) the faith accorded it by the 1997 electorate. But there is equal distrust of the cheap or petty, suburban or rural, 'small-minded Englishness' of those who are perhaps not 'vulgar' or 'ordinary' enough.

Yet surely the point of a truly Orwellian patriotism, if we really were to consider resurrecting this rather quaint project, is that you cannot pick and choose: true solidarity has to contend with the physicality and materiality of the most unpleasant of affects and habits. For Orwell, the politics of affect figured above all in the 'physical repulsion' incarnated in the notion that 'the lower classes smell'. How, Orwell asked in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, can you have 'affection for a man whose breath stinks – habitually stinks'? Consensus or hegemony are not at issue here: Orwell points out that it is irrelevant how much 'you may admire his mind and character'. The point of conviviality is not the liberal politics of agreement, but the challenge of living together despite what is indeed an almost pre-political sensation of difference. If an anti-racist patriotism has any sense at all, 'England' must belong to everyone. But of course at this point 'England' starts to fade, leaving only its increasingly marginal state apparatus – marginal despite its paroxysms of nervous violence, as in the killing of Jean Charles de Menezes at Stockwell. Yes, there will be points of historically conditioned affective intensity (melancholia or shame, nostalgia or pride, anguish or joy), tied to images or sensations that are coded as national. And a television corporation or cricket team, or even a government, might work within these codes to incite or dampen particular affective responses. But why should such overcoding also structure a politics of liberation?