

## **Workshop at York University**

**November 6 2009**

### **The meaning of social justice in a multicultural society**

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The idea of multiculturalism has been under constant attack for some years. Jack Straw, then Home Secretary, established the McPherson Inquiry in 1997 into the death of Stephen Lawrence which led to the subsequent Race Relations Amendment Act 2000; this appeared to establish, through the requirement for public authorities to promote race equality, a new era in opening up economic and social opportunities for minority ethnic groups. Within a few years these gains have been obliterated by the political responses to, first the 11/9 attacks in the USA and then the bombings in London in July 2007. Community Cohesion is now the only ethnic relations game in town, shadowed by the peculiarly unpleasant counter-terrorist Prevent Agenda. In the wake of the 11/9 attacks and particularly since July 2007, the incidence of racist attacks on Muslims in particular (although that definition appears to extend to anyone wearing unusual clothing such as Sikhs) has increased substantially, and public figures and organisations have fallen over themselves both to row back from the modest gains for minorities achieved through the multiculturalist policies of the 1980s and 1990s.

In many cases, of course, public bodies – including many not fifty miles from this building - had not taken the requirements of the RRAA seriously, but the changed mood of the country now legitimises their inertia. In this they have been tacitly supported by pronouncements from leading politicians which has allowed them, despite a plethora of evidence to the contrary, to argue that institutional racism and discrimination, was not really an issue. That same Jack Straw, having vigorously attacked Bhikhu Parekh's defence of multiculturalism, argued that Muslim women should be unveiled when consulting him as an MP as he wishes to see their face; and engages with the BNP on BBCTV as if they were just any other democratically elected political force. Underpinning this whole arena of discourse is the assumption that the 'race' agenda is accomplished in the sense that minorities are able to achieve their rights and access their opportunities on the same basis as everyone else. The new Equalities and Human Rights Commission has, in the view of most serious commentators, given further credence to this view by substantially downgrading the explicit 'race' agenda of the former Commission for Racial Equality.

This is not an isolated British phenomenon or course. In France, the wearing of the veil and other religious symbols has been forbidden at public schools; and in Canada, the Province of Ontario, having proposed a degree of autonomy to Muslims in the exercise of sharia law have backtracked on that position under political pressure. The Dutch government has introduced a series of new policies which spell 'the end of multiculturalism'. In some quarters, (see e.g. *Guardian*, January 29 2007) it has even been argued that multiculturalism has been responsible for the creation of suicide bombers.

This wide-ranging attack raises two important issues. One is that we need to recall that most national polities are now multicultural societies, (some having been so for hundreds of years)<sup>1</sup>, that is, they have within their populations (a generally increasing number of) people whose national origins lie outside their present country of settlement and who bring differing cultural norms to the latter. A growing proportion of these people however have been born and bred in these countries of settlement (43 per cent in the case of the UK) with – in theory at least – the same rights of those of their national majority peers. As Parekh reminds us, whether people like it or not (and most politicians, most right wing media and a body of public opinion apparently do not), multicultural societies are a fact of life and cannot be wished away – other than by the violence of ethnic cleansing. This fact of life, however, has yet to translate into truly multiculturalist policy frameworks.

The second, linked, issue is that the increasing number of those who now argue that multiculturalism has failed demonstrate little understanding of what a multiculturalist policy framework is trying to achieve. Currently, debates in the UK (and elsewhere) increasingly wind the clock back to what was known in the 1950s as an assimilationist policy; those immigrating to the UK were expected to leave their cultural baggage behind them as they arrived at the port of entry and become effectively Black or Brown Britons. Those arguing against multiculturalism now suggest that there can be little compromise between cultures within specific national political frameworks or, more extravagantly, in Huntington's words, that the world now witnesses a clash of civilisations. Some, such as Barry, set up straw men, requiring of multiculturalism outcomes which it was never intended to achieve. Those arguing in favour of multiculturalist policy, however, generally do so on the basis that it is possible to incorporate people from a range of different cultural origins, respecting the dimensions of difference and diversity in most aspects of culture – dress, food, religion and so on – providing it is done within an overarching acceptance of basic human rights, as for example, laid out in the UN Charter of Human Rights. If multiculturalism has failed, it does so therefore not in the sense that it has failed to convert those from other countries to the joys of white Anglo-Saxon Protestantism, but because policy and politics have failed to ensure that they have the basic rights enjoyed by their longer-settled co-citizens. The failure lies thus with the British and other settled states and not with those minorities subjected to its policies.

In reality, multiculturalism fails because of the continuing racism within those countries which, whilst happy to accept workers from elsewhere (or from aboriginal minorities), to help fill the low-paid, dirty gaps in the labour market which majority (usually) white residents are unwilling to take on – a process very evident in this area with thousands of migrant workers doing precisely those dirty jobs which York and North Yorkshire residents will not do - are unwilling to offer the full rights and benefits of citizenship to them. In France, for example, ethnicity is not regarded as a legitimate factor in the determination of citizenship because of the 1789 Republican constitution. Minorities are effectively 'written out' of the French policy process to a large degree and from research which might describe the level and type of disadvantage that they face. The 2005 riots in the Paris *banlieues*, like those in the UK northern cities, are protests by some minorities at their continuing 'hidden' impoverishment, the result of structural racism. In Germany, *jus sanguinis*, basing citizenship on the rights of blood ties rather than on *jus solis*, of residence, has meant

that the aussiedler returning from Poland and Russia have greater rights to citizenship than, say, migrants of Turkish origin who have worked there for thirty years and have German-born children. In Malaysia, whose population is roughly divided equally between people of Malay, Chinese and Indian origin, economically successful Chinese people and academically successful Indian people find their advancement through many avenues blocked because the Malay constitution explicitly enhances the rights of Malays, discriminating in their favour.<sup>2</sup> In Botswana, the majority Setswana exclude the transient San bushpeople from the political process.

In New Zealand/Aotearoa, despite the Treaty of Waitangi, which provided some legal land rights protection for the Maori, they are still concentrated amongst the unemployed, in the prison population and in areas of social and economic deprivation. Successive waves of immigration from Europe and from Asia have simply pushed the Maori further up the ladder of disadvantage. The treatment of the aboriginal Koori people of Australia has been even more shameful as their relatively weak land rights continue to be under threat; indeed, social and economic policy towards them might be regarded as a legacy of nineteenth century ethnic cleansing, carried on by other means. Australia, having abandoned its White Australia settlement policy of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in the 1970s, has been drifting away from multiculturalist policy and adopting, as are many other 'developed' countries, far more restrictive and focused approaches to immigration. The recent Cronulla 'riots' (properly pogrom), in which the Australian state effectively legitimised racist beatings of people of 'Middle Eastern origin', displays how close such profound racism is to the surface amongst much of 'white' Australia. The Canadian federal government has at least publicly apologised to the Inuit for its oppressive treatment of them within education policy over the past hundred years although poverty, ill-health and poor social and economic conditions remain strongly racialized to the disadvantage of even long-established minorities. The same is true of minorities in the USA, although the American constitution regards them not as minorities in a multicultural society but as American citizens created through the 'melting pot'.

Until the most recent period, where tensions have arisen in recent years within multicultural societies, it has typically been where the value system of a 'foreign' culture is said to clash with majority values (though these are rarely defined), frequently over relatively low level issues of dress or food preparation, or, more critically, with values embedded in international human rights conventions (such as the protection of women from forced marriage or from what the 'West' refers to as female genital mutilation). I would argue that these tensions are not necessarily evidence that multiculturalism has failed but that the process of negotiating multiculturalism is yet to be completed and constitutes work in progress. Most tellingly, multiculturalist policy in the UK (and elsewhere) has not been linked to a framework of social justice and I want to explore with you whether social justice has been delivered to the UK's Black and minority ethnic (BME) populations in particular (although the arguments resonate with other countries' experience).

Fundamentally, however, the question of achieving social justice is not simply about redistribution. As others demonstrate, multicultural societies worldwide have begun to face the difficulties of incorporating respect and recognition for cultural diversity and difference within a framework of universal rights. Respect and recognition for minorities can be understood as ways in which equality of status, of common

citizenship, are operationalised. As we shall see, however, the very modest gains of the past few years in this direction are now unravelling in the context of ‘the war on terror’. The Community Cohesion agenda has been deconstructed by Flint and Robinson who demonstrate that a policy constructed in 2001 is already in complete crisis. The reasons for this are manifold but include a sense that people in deprived neighbourhoods – which remain the neighbourhoods where most minorities are obliged to live (which the government prefers to characterise as self-segregation) - have very different agendas from those of the government and reject its explanations for their deprivation which place the responsibility at their doors; that the government wishes to lower the profile of race within its overall policy framework – this in a context where there have been more than 120 racialised murders since the death of Stephen Lawrence; and that there is a clear understanding within minority communities that the policy and service implications of the RRAA have still not been addressed. As Flint and Robinson observe, the community cohesion agenda is at root a moralising and civilising agenda for deprived communities – and where have we heard that before – and one which ignores yet again the potential for voice and agency of such communities. Under the weight of such contradictions and tensions, it is hardly surprising that it is in crisis.

At an even more sinister level, however, we now witness the Prevent Agenda. I was at a workshop recently where a number of policy agencies – including Universities - were invited to collude with the Special Branch effectively in acting as spies on our minority neighbours in the interests of preventing terrorism; never mind the fact that the BNP – which, incidentally has significant hotspots of membership in Harrogate and Scarborough for example - is more realistically likely to be at the centre of violence and unrest. The Prevent Agenda claims to put respect for human rights at the centre of its response and claims also to be concerned about extreme violence and unrest of whatever kind, but, in talking solely about the threat from international terrorists, implicitly targets the Muslim community. This again effectively legitimises attacks on them. For example, one senior police officer of Asian origin was led by a series of incidents to suggest that a new offence, of ‘travelling whilst Asian’, had been covertly introduced by the police

### **Social justice and multiculturalism**

I don’t want to get in detail into current debates about the meaning of social justice here: they are discussed comprehensively in the book which I have just co-edited. However, there are particular issues within this discourse which relate to multiculturalism. Miller’s argument, for example, about the way in which need may be defined is particularly significant within multicultural societies. If the concept of need is to be validated by all relevant parties, it follows that Black and minority ethnic (BME) groups should be a party to this process of validation. Currently, they are largely excluded from the political and policy process, a fact which the token co-option of a privileged few into the mechanisms of the state (such as Asian Peers) cannot obscure. Similarly, arguments about the extent to which the market can deliver social justice must acknowledge that the inequities of market economies bear down most heavily on most BME groups. Early definitions of social justice overlooked its cultural dimensions or that it has a spatial dimension – we must think carefully about different conceptions of poverty and need in different contexts – and for different groups. The position of medical consultants of Indian origin working in

the UK's rural areas – such as North Yorkshire - provides an interesting illustration. Whilst rural areas are often portrayed as comfortable, higher income areas, as indeed North Yorkshire generally is, many Indian doctors work in them because they have faced racial barriers in accessing higher status urban teaching hospital posts, being 'directed' towards lower status positions, including in rural areas. Their higher profile in such areas – where minority populations are relatively small – then exposes them to further racism.

For Britain's BME groups, the ability to exercise cultural rights should imply the ability to be culturally different within internationally accepted human rights parameters, in a society providing the same social, civil and political rights to all. Recently, however, more questions are being asked as to what the parameters of this 'difference' are and, in particular, whether they incorporate a different value system – that is, a different conception of the fundamental meaning of social justice – or whether they are limited to relatively superficial indicators, for example in forms of dress, religious observation or dietary habits. Essentially, the key question is, what room there is for compromise when apparently different value systems compete within a national polity?

Rather than close down the debate by arguing that multiculturalism as a political project is dead, there remains – because multicultural societies exist and will not go away – a critically important theoretical and political agenda, that of exploring the nature of social justice within such societies, particularly those characterised by institutional and individual racism. The attacks on the World Trade Centre, the so-called 'war on terror', and the growth of Islamophobia have heightened this agenda's relevance rather than implying it should be swept away. To blame multiculturalism for increased national or global political tensions – as many now tend to do – is fundamentally to miss the point. As many commentators (and mass demonstrations of British and other populations) suggest, and I would also argue, these tensions have their origins elsewhere, notably in the growing imperialist policy of Western economic interests searching for greater control over the world's resources.

Following Miller then, multiculturalism poses a major challenge in widening the notion of the closed political community within which concepts such as need, rights and desert are contested. His is not an argument for "the elimination of cultural differences, that is, assimilation, but the opening up of national identities so that they become accessible to the members of many (ideally all) cultural groups within existing democratic states". The political and policy task is thus to ensure that all cultural (BME) groups are recognised and engaged in both determining and acting on the principles of social justice. Miller argues that there is little empirical evidence supporting the view that cultural differences translate into differing conceptions of social justice (an area remaining to be tested) although the multicultural 'settlement' is clearly specific to the historical and political conditions in each nation state. For example, in Australia, Canada and New Zealand, the presence of aboriginal populations, with validated legal claims on land, sea shore and natural resources, should be significant in shaping the form of this settlement. Black groups in the UK might partially legitimise their claims by reference to Britain's colonial past: "we are here because you were there"; and so on.

My own wide-ranging definition of social justice, drawing on current political discourse, is of a framework of political objectives, pursued through social, economic,

environmental and political policies, based on an acceptance of difference and diversity, and informed by values concerned with:

- achieving fairness, equality of outcomes and treatment;
- recognising the dignity and equal worth and encouraging the self-esteem of all;
- the meeting of basic needs, defined through cross-cultural consensus;
- reducing substantial inequalities in wealth, income and life chances; and
- the participation of all, including the most disadvantaged.

This goes beyond many current definitions by privileging equality of outcomes, and the effective participation of those currently disadvantaged. This is one framework against which we can test evidence as to whether Britain's minorities achieve social justice and this is the task that I would like us to address in group discussion.

(45 mins; 15 minute feedback)

What are the major areas, if any, in British society where its minority population fails to achieve social justice?

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